

Article

Torchbearers Forging Indigenous Pathways: Transcending the Forces of Wétiko

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Abstract: Wétiko is a Cree term whose literal translation is cannibalism, an act of violent aggression. This term encapsulates the divisive forces that have infected the Americas for over 500 years, resulting in generational cultural trauma, and dehumanization of all who are subjected to its modern manifestations. It is analogous to an oppressive pandemic whose symptoms include racism, xenophobia, self-hatred, and despair. Despite the persistent forces of Wétiko that marginalize descendants of American Indigenous people, Xicanx are emerging in educational leadership roles and in professional positions that require the highest educational degree, the doctorate. The perseverance of these forerunners, which is fueled by a desire to promote equity, testifies to their will to overcome historically grounded subjugating forces. These forces include identity labels in which the Indigenous culture has been erased and extinguished, but is now reclaimed within the identity of the term Xicanx. Xicanx Torchbearer voices provide insight to the challenges they face as they enter, occupy, and engage within spaces in which they were previously excluded. Evident in the narratives of these Xicanx professionals who now hold highly regarded credentials is the resurgence of Indigenous orientations that counter the violence and aggression of Wétiko.

Keywords: Wétiko; Torchbearers; Indigeneity; Transcendence; equity; Community Cultural Wealth; Xicanx principals

1. An Indigenous Elder's Instruction

Upon completion of my doctorate degree from the University of San Francisco in 2002, I, the senior co-author, was told by the spiritual leader and elder of our community, Angelbertha Cobb, that my role and my purpose with this recently conferred degree was to “open doors for others” (personal communication, Spring 2002). This Elder, affectionately known as “Mama Cobb” by those who have the highest regard for her also know that her *real name*, the one given to her at birth, is Cozamayotl Xihuatlalli, which means Rainbow Woman of the Earth. Her birth name is in her native tongue, Nahuatl, an Indigenous language of the Americas and a language still spoken today. In fact, many words spoken in the United States and in Spanish speaking countries throughout the Americas are derivatives of the Nahuatl language ([Weatherford 1988](#)).

Born on 1 October 1932 in the hills above Puebla, Mexico, Mama Cobb is of the Mexica Tribe, a tribe also known by others as Aztec. I heed the words of the woman who at the local tribal college conducted my daughter's rites of passage ceremony, the Xilonen or Changing Woman Ceremony, and who officiated my twenty-five-year wedding anniversary renewal vows. I, Dr. Rose Borunda, whose ancestry is derived from the Purepecha tribe on my father's side and mestiza on my mother's, have taken to heart the directive of how I employ my education. Ensuring that more people from marginalized communities pass through the doors of higher education has been my mission as a professor and agent of change. I am a woman, a woman of color, an Indigenously identified woman,

and the first in my extended family to acquire a doctoral degree. This accomplishment is in a nation where our numbers are disproportionate to our representation in greater society.

Recognizing this reality, it is important to understand how marginalizing structures work in tandem to exclude people of color while providing others with privilege and opportunities. When navigating through highly racialized structures such as the public education system and the professional workplace, labels and terms become important symbolic representations. As such, labels create a narrative which convey indirect messages, metaphors, and coercive imagery (Stone 2012). Given that labels tell a story, *which* story and *who the protagonists* of the story are is what matters.

The term Xicanx is an attempt to alter the historical labels and names that have been used to erase and subjugate Indigeneity. While the identifier Xicanx can encompass and envelope other identifiers, such as Latinx, Latino/a, Latin@, Chicax, Chican@, Chicano/a, Hispanic, and many others, Xicanx intentionally moves away from Euro-centric classifications; instead, it seeks to acknowledge the Indigeneity that was almost extinguished by the European invasion of the Americas and subsequent culturicide (Cuauhtin 2019). The term Xicanx “accentuate[s] Indigenous connections amongst these historically minoritized groups that are often categorized through the Eurocentric ancestral lens” (Gutierrez 2020, p. 2). Xicanx connects to Mexica ancestry and, in doing so, acknowledges and embraces Indigenous roots. By connecting to the Mezoamerican Indigenous cultures, the word Xicanx seeks to acknowledge the generations of Indigenous cultures that were erased through colonization. Xicanx is an attempt to promote inclusivity, and has been employed by many Xicanx scholars as a decolonizing strategy while reclaiming Indigeneity (Cuauhtin 2019). Additionally, the term Xicanx moves away from masculine and feminine binaries that impede gender inclusivity (Gutierrez 2020).

It is acknowledged that not all people within the Xicanx community choose to identify themselves as such. For instance, in a recent study by Gutierrez (2020), over 60 Xicanx public school administrators in California identified with a variety of diverse labels ranging from Hispanic to Xicanx. The top identifiers that participants most aligned with were Latino/a (30%), Mexican American (21%), and Chicano/a (16%). Only 4% of participants self-identified with the term Hispanic. Other terms which participants aligned with that were not on the survey included Mexican and Raza. The term Latinx accounted for 10% of participants while Xicanx and Latin@ accounted for only 4% each. Despite the vast range of identifiers within the Xicanx community, the authors of this article stipulate that the term Xicanx is as inclusive as all other identifiers used within the community. In applying this term, we are clear that this is not necessarily the label that has always been historically applied or that some would apply to themselves. We need to acknowledge this is not a term that is used universally and cannot encompass all Indigenous cultures, as the term Latinx cannot encompass all Latin-language-based peoples. However, Xicanx takes the first steps to decolonization.

Since 1492 Europe and the Americas have exchanged more than just ideas and customs; biological exchanges have also impacted the lives of people on both sides. This is often referred to as the Columbian Exchange (Crosby 2003). As a result of this exchange, the Indigenous population of North and South America have been systematically and perpetually exterminated through genocide and culturicide. Another result of the Columbian Exchange is the subsequent transfer of trauma from Europe to the Indigenous population. Menakem (2017) found that trauma stemming from medieval European violence, oppression, hardships, and wars were internalized by European colonizers. The effect of colonization on Indigenous peoples in the Americas has created historical trauma that is handed down from generation to generation (Menakem 2017). The racialized and historical trauma inflicted on the Indigenous populations has itself become internalized. The authors of this article conscientiously use the term Xicanx to refer to all other identifiers such as Latinx, as a form of decolonization to acknowledge the Indigenous cultures that have been expunged. By choosing to use the term Xicanx, the authors acknowledge and connect to the Mesoamerican ancestors, as opposed to Latinx, which acknowledges only the Eurocentric connection, which further deletes and omits Indigeneity.

In 2019, Xicanx accounted for approximately 18.5% of the population in the United States, of which 50% of that population were Xicanx women (U.S. Census Bureau 2019). In the United States, 2% of the

population hold doctorate degrees but Xicanx comprise only 0.6% of that population (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a). Of the 2%, women hold 53% of those doctorate degrees; however, Xicanx women hold 7.3% of those degrees as illustrated in Figure 1 despite being the largest minoritized group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 2018b; National Center for Education Statistics 2016; Statista 2018). The disproportionality evident in these statistics underscores the reason why those Xicanx who secure advanced degrees, and who achieve merited positions, also endeavor to fulfill a greater mission beyond themselves.

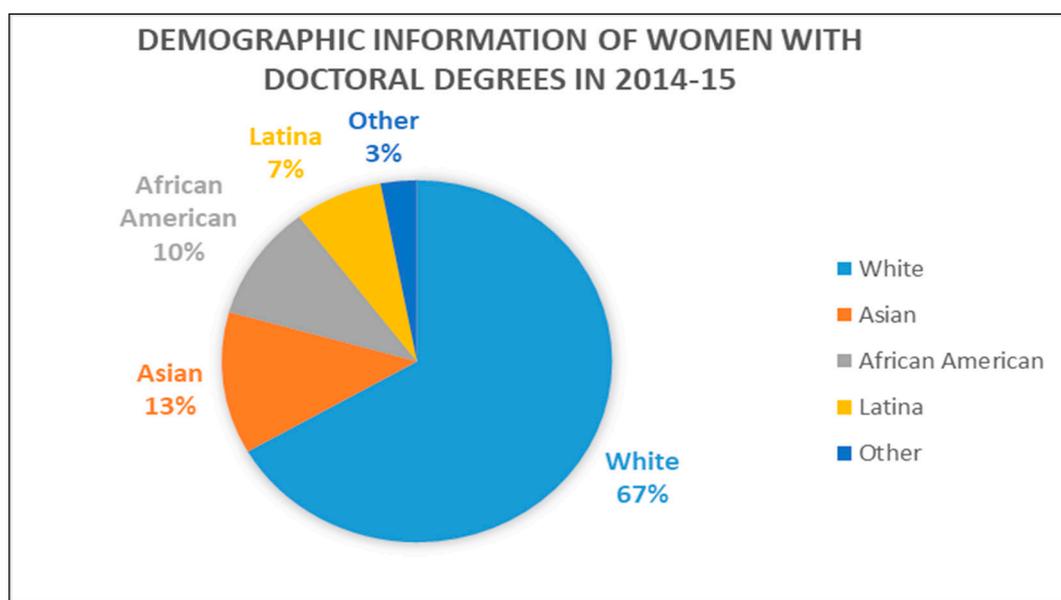


Figure 1. Demographic data of women with doctoral degrees in the United States in 2014–2015. Source: National Center for Education Statistics (2016) as cited in Acosta (2020).

The co-authors of this article, who are of Xicanx and European ancestry, are all educators in the United States (U.S.) who administer and teach either in Kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) U.S. American public school classrooms or in the graduate education of counselors, teachers, and administrators. As education scholars, we recognize the embedded nature of White supremacy in the United States and how practices, policies, and curriculum perpetually undermine the success of historically marginalized communities. We are alarmed by these disparities, which underscore the reason why merely opening doors of opportunity for the students who pass through our classrooms, whether elementary, undergraduate, or doctoral level, is not sufficient. As a result, this article examines the experiences of and well-being of Xicanx school leaders as well as Xicanx women with their doctorate degrees who step onto the landscape of leading change in our educational and professional communities. Those Xicanx individuals, with ancestry rooted in Indigenous America, make their way on an educational path that prepares them for positions of leadership in educational and academic settings, earning credentials and degrees after years of preparation. These individuals, who act as elders, are referred to as “Torchbearers” (Gutierrez 2020). Throughout this article, the voice and lens of history is given back to Xicanx Torchbearers with the purpose of hearing them tell their story.

The title of Torchbearer is used to identify those individuals from minoritized communities who have gained knowledge and influence for the purpose of safeguarding others through highly oppressive and historically systemized racialized structures. Often, Torchbearers are the first-generation underdogs who beat the system by succeeding against all odds. These individuals have often been referred to as pioneers, trailblazers, or pathfinders, yet such titles are archetypes with whispers of Westward Expansion and Manifest Destiny motifs (Gutierrez 2020). The term Torchbearer defects from explorer and conquistador archetypes that perpetuate the rhetoric of colonization and subjugation.

The Xicanx Torchbearers who have earned the highest academic degrees step into a landscape that has heretofore been largely absent of their worldview and voice. For this reason, we explore their experiences in order to ascertain how they maintain their well-being. In doing so, rather than observing from the position of holding the door open, we shift our focus to examine the reality of the Xicanx who pass through the doors of academia to engage in a landscape that has been historically, structurally, and socially constructed to exclude and block their presence.

In general, Torchbearers are not individuals who possess Cultural Capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), which is obtained through formal education, assets, and resources that are obtained by living a privileged life. Many Xicanx Torchbearers are first-generation college graduates who did not have the cultural capital that is inherited from being born into a privileged family. However, these Torchbearers do have an abundance of wealth that is inherited culturally from their families and communities, what Yosso (2005) calls Community Cultural Wealth (CCW). CCW is composed of six different capitals: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. These capitals are given to them by their parents, elders, and community members, with the hope of living a better life than the generation prior. As first-generation college students/graduates, Torchbearers are recipients of aspirational capital, the aspiration to dream, set goals, and the hope to “become someone” despite the barriers that prevent them from succeeding (Yosso 2005). Through their journey, these Torchbearers have gained social and navigational capital, resources, and social contacts needed to network and navigate systems such as the educational, employment, and legal sectors. By doing so, not only are Torchbearers reaping the work of their elders, but they are creating a new path, a new way of living, and becoming the elders for the next generations (Acosta 2020; Gutierrez 2020; Yosso 2005). In turn, they become the social and navigational capital (Yosso 2005) for the young people in their community.

The existential reality of those few Xicanx Torchbearers passing through the doors of academia is what we address. Given years of overt subjugation upon Xicanx via violence, germ warfare, cultural demonization, and oppressive laws and policy, there can be a sense of burden that withers hope, curtails potential, psychologically subjugates, and devastates their physical and mental health. The forces in our midst that must be overcome are parallel to Wétiko, which is a Cree term whose literal translation is cannibalism, or a “cult of aggression and violence” (Forbes 2008, p. xvi). This term encapsulates the divisive forces that have infected the Americas for over 500 years, resulting in generational cultural trauma, and dehumanization of all who are subjected to it. It is analogous to an oppressive pandemic whose symptoms include racism, xenophobia, self-hatred, and despair. In its modern manifestations, Wétiko attempts to undermine advancement for those Xicanx Torchbearers who pass through the doors of the university and then attain school leadership as well as other professional roles. This article exposes and names the prevalent oppressive forces they face, while providing testimony to the re-emergence of life-generating practices and worldviews that emanate from Indigenous orientations and promote service to and inclusion of others.

Before exploring the behaviors of Torchbearers who ultimately reach and enter an inhospitable landscape, the landscape itself must be thoroughly examined. In identifying the disease that pollutes Torchbearer reality and the landscape into which they enter, it is then possible to determine and appreciate Torchbearer cultural assets, navigational strategies, and aspirational motivations as they move forward.

2. Naming the Disease

Wétiko took root in the Americas upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 (Forbes 2008). His intrusive arrival spurred the subsequent Euro-American diaspora which has adversely impacted the Americas for over 500 years, causing irreversible losses. Wétiko is so lethal that many of our relations on this earth are now extinct and many others threatened by its proliferation. While we acknowledge that so many Europeans were dislocated from their own homelands due to factors such as disease and famine (Alexander 2010), we must consider ways to bolster the capacity of future generations so that all people not only survive but thrive in the face of Wétiko. An expanded definition

of Wétiko means “consuming of other creatures’ lives and possessions . . . a psychosis, the greatest epidemic sickness known to man” (Forbes 2008, p. xvi). Further cultural application of this term cautions us as to the pervasive nature of this illness:

The rape of a woman, the rape of a land, and the rape of a people, they are all the same. And they are the same as the rape of the earth, the rape of the rivers, the rape of the forest, the rape of the air, the rape of the animals. Brutality knows no boundaries. Greed knows no limits. Perversion knows no borders. Arrogance knows no frontiers. Deceit knows no edges. These characteristics all tend to push towards an extreme, always moving forward once the initial infection sets in (Forbes 2008, p. xvi).

Many who have genealogy rooted in America’s Original Nations have survived the full brunt of the forces that emanated from across the Atlantic, yet the descendants of those who survived enslavement, exploitation, and eradication have paid a price. Left in existential distress, many Original Nations, up and down this continent, have attempted to regain cultural, economic, and spiritual footing (Duran 2006). The impact of colonization on American Indigenous people has been apparent in the aftermath of their positionality within the various nation states of the Americas. Furthermore, it is without question that the Euro-American descendants of those who arrived in the Americas, often fleeing the Wétiko in their own ancestral lands, are in need of psycho-social integration (Alexander 2010). Now, as individuals from across the oceans live together with and amongst us, it is timely and appropriate to discuss how to collectively address, contain, and eradicate the cancerous force of Wétiko, because the quality and harmonious existence of all life forms depend on active, collective, and mindful action.

3. The Infestation of a Disease

Contextualized from a biopsychosocial perspective, an examination of historic events is needed in order to understand how humanity has responded to Wétiko and its impact on Xicanx. Modern-day symptoms of Wétiko, resulting from historical events, have both vertical and horizontal manifestations. Vertical manifestations are evident in structures and attitudes which maintain hierarchical oppression. Horizontal manifestations occur when marginalized communities express their internalized oppression in acts of aggression against one another (Freire 2014). Yet, by fostering positive capacities and employing thoughtful and proactive strategies, those who desire to live in harmony with respect for all may ultimately transcend Wétiko. Like trees in a forest that have overcome the adverse forces of a prolonged drought or even a raging fire, the survivors who flourish become stronger and more resilient. Torchbearers are like these trees.

In this era we have witnessed how multiple forms of Wétiko promote moral exclusion in the United States (Brown 2017). Overt dehumanization and “targeting of groups based on their identity—gender, ideology, skin color, ethnicity, religion, age—are depicted as ‘less than’ or criminal or even evil” (p. 73). Both horizontal and vertical aggression foment what is known as “The Great Othering” (Menakem 2017), which pushes those who are “othered” outside the boundaries of being treated like worthy beings. Subsequently, these “other” groups, including Xicanx, are subjected to abuses consisting of but not limited to marginalization, indifference, exploitation, rape, and murder. In contrast, Indigenous spirituality, at its basic foundation, promotes the belief that we are all related and interconnected by forces that transcend physical borders and hateful words that pollute our spiritual relationships. As we bear witness to the modern manifestation of Wétiko, educators and scholars can determine the best strategies to address the conditions fueling it while developing the dispositions needed to contain its proliferation. In this way, we may strategically and collectively endeavor to protect all forms of life on this earth.

4. Two Contrasting Worldviews

Events that have transpired on this continent since the collision of the two conflicting worldviews, one culturally inclusive and the other reeling from poverty of spirit, (Alexander 2010) provide lessons that allow us to identify Wétiko’s capacity to transform, mutate, and manifest itself into different forms.

Knowing that this illness has this ability requires that humanity ascertain the best means to not only respond to it but to prevent its spread. Although human beings are hardwired for survival, we must consider the various and most optimal ways to counter this infestation. When we reflect upon how the lessons of the past come to bear upon our present day, then we are better equipped to understand and recognize the changeable nature of this illness so that our response is not only effective in healing, but in eliminating Wétiko from the culture in which we live.

Generally, threats to the survival of any living being are met by three primary responses; fight, flight, or freeze (Kolk 2014). As we examine the nature of the landscape in which our Xicanx Torchbearers engage, the authors provide an Indigenous cultural context that illustrates how the two forces, the Indigenous orientation and the orientation brought by colonization, collide and give birth to the subsequent proliferation of Wétiko. By amplifying Xicanx cultural values that persist in the face of oppression, we begin to have a deeper understanding of the wealth (Yosso 2005) that the Torchbearers carry and draw from as they transform the landscape in which they now have a voice.

5. Indigenous Cultural Foundation and Worldview

An Indigenous epistemology grounds and positions the voices expressed in this offering. As such, an Indigenous orientation expresses that there are shared and common experiences, across generations, of communities that have suffered colonization, dislocation, and eradication, as well as ongoing attempts to suppress the unique cultural values and expressions that constitute Indigeneity. The European diaspora ultimately led to the creation of borders that now delineate nation states; however, the existence of an Indigenous philosophy that transcends borders still resides in the Xicanx people, whose values and beliefs continue to survive along with their genealogy (Cordova 2007).

Identifying Indigeneity solely by blood quantum disparages the strength of the values and belief systems that survive in the face of attempts to assimilate those who claim ancestry to tribal communities that existed on the American continent long before the European diaspora. Inclusively, recognition is due to the fact that Indigenous values and belief systems are embodied in the descendants of pre-European Indigenous people. While the connections to Indigenous ancestors, for many, may be physically and psychologically distant, one's Indigenous worldview may, nonetheless, continue to inform one's practices and beliefs, particularly in the face of the very efforts to eradicate them. By means of survivance, Xicanx Torchbearers turn to and hold onto their identity and values passed through the generations (Sabzalian 2019). This deeply rooted connection provides a thread that binds people of Indigenous genealogy and transcends the borders.

Concurrent to Indigenous survivance, the agency of Europeans fleeing the famines, fires, epidemics, wars, religious persecution, and poverty that gripped Europe and spurred their diaspora in the Americas must not be diminished (Menakem 2017). So many Euro-Americans who migrated to the Americas, and ultimately colonized here, were motivated by the desire to escape the misery of Wétiko in their own ancestral homes. The longing for a better life is universal. Invasions, intolerance, a stratified social system, and various other forms of violence motivated the diaspora of many White Europeans seeking refuge. When Europeans arrived here en masse during the colonial era, far away from their own places of origin, extended families, and historical communities, a cultural dislocation ensued. Euro-Americans, coming from various countries and often speaking different languages, experienced disconnection from their own roots.

Alexander's (2010) "Dislocation" theory (p. 58) describes the impact of disconnection and disassociation from family and community as having devastating consequences for both individual psychology and the social fabric. The social problems that result from disconnection of the self from the community—including hyper-individualism, extreme capitalism, racism, addiction, and the decimation of Indigenous cultures—have historical points of origin and implications for the present day (Alexander 2010). This is why the authors of this paper call for the re-integration of European Americans into the greater populace, both for their own well-being and the benefit of society at large. Because intergenerational effects have a powerful influence on future outcomes for all people

(Menakem 2017), it is imperative for Euro-Americans to address issues of race and discrimination. The descendants of those Europeans who arrived on what is now called America now have a choice to adopt worldviews that shed the brutality of Wétiko that spurred their ancestors' flight from their countries of origin.

The unifying and common elements of Indigenous worldview indicate that, "While there are indeed many different tribal customs, rituals and ceremonies, Indigenous peoples maintain a common understanding and spiritual belief system based on honoring of Mother Earth, natural laws, and life forces" (Vásquez 2016, p. 15). This honoring recognizes one's responsibility to that which is outside of oneself, in that the self is not separate from Mother Earth, nor of other beings that live and exist on this Earth. This sense of connectedness and sense of responsibility to the "other" is a prevalent theme of Indigenous beliefs. It accounts for the Mayan term "In Lak'ech", which conveys "you are my other me" (Valdez and Campesino 1990). The value of "we" versus "I" permeates in the teachings of ancient Indigenous cultures. It also informs the ethos of many Xicanx Torchbearers as they step into leadership roles in schools, universities, and in the workplace, acting as elders to mentor the younger generation.

The perseverance of a worldview that provides a different way of being for Europeans fleeing persecution continues to be embodied in those who live and walk amongst us on this continent. This embodied cultural value is exemplified and reflected in an assignment submitted by a graduate student, Ms. Amber Bradley, in a university educational leadership doctoral program taught by one of the authors of this paper. This assignment, for a class entitled Diversity in Complex Organizations, prompted the students to define their heritage and the values that they espouse. Ms. Bradley identifies her genealogy as Navajo, Apache, and Spanish on her mother's side and Irish on her father's. In this assignment, she quotes her maternal grandfather who told her multiple times, "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us!" (personal communication, 24 April 2020, p. 2). While Ms. Bradley reveals that she moved multiple times throughout the Southwest due to her father's military enlistment, she nonetheless refers to New Mexico as "home" and ascribes the cultural values she ascribes to as deeply rooted in New Mexico:

When I was older I learned about the Zia people, and their symbol that is placed on the New Mexico state flag. It is a circle with four lines pointing from each side. Each of those lines has meaning: the four winds, four seasons, four directions, and the four obligations. The four obligations of the Zia people are: a strong body, a clear mind, a pure spirit, and a devotion to the welfare of others. It was not until this program that I realized I have been living my life according to these obligations because of my upbringing. My parents are public servants, and their parents likewise. We have been taught that it is our responsibility to promote the welfare of others in our lives. We have all given back to our community through service in various ways over our lives. My brother joined the Navy and I became a teacher, therefore fulfilling that obligation we were taught. It is my responsibility now to always remember my purpose, and use self-reflection to ensure I am fulfilling my responsibility in my practice (personal communication, 24 April 2020).

Evident in Ms. Bradley's paper is a driven purpose. The theme is being purposeful not for the sake of self-aggrandizement and capitalistic gain but, rather, to be of service to others. Ms. Bradley was asked to reflect upon her cultural origins, her heritage, and her values; in doing so, while recognizing the reality of conquest and colonization, she revealed that the worldview of her Indigenous ancestry still survives and is embodied in the lives of her family.

Ms. Bradley's paper demonstrates generational transmission of knowledge as those who have Indigenous roots, however remote, also have the capacity to retain one's culture over time. Cordova (2007) states, "Many Native Americans, whether one wishes to believe it or not, have managed to survive the onslaughts of assimilation and outright eradication with an intact cultural identity" (p. 56). Like Ms. Bradley, Xicanx Torchbearers have engaged in the pursuit of the highest university degree, the doctorate, and are in positions of emergent leadership. The idea that their presence may inform the landscape and ultimately reshape the way members of diverse communities perceive one another because of the influence and modeling of the Torchbearers is thus explored. The notion of professionals,

Indigenously identified and informed, arriving at positions of influence is summarily framed by [Cordova \(2007\)](#) who indicates, “There is no advantage to allowing more and more people into the ‘higher circles’ if they must all speak with the same voice. The value of survival is being able to recognize yourself after you’ve managed to survive” (p. 45). With this foundation we proceed to discuss whether the Torchbearers still recognize themselves upon arrival at coveted positions within “higher circles”.

6. Defining the Landscape

Within the last 10 years, the Xicanx population in the United States has increased exponentially, especially in the states of California, Texas, and Florida, accounting for over half of the population growth in the country ([Pew Hispanic Research Center 2020](#)). This exponential growth has propelled the Xicanx population as one of the country’s largest cultural groups in the United States. In California, since 2017, almost 40% of the population is Xicanx ([U.S. Census Bureau 2018b](#)). This sharp population growth indicates a large potential source in the labor markets. However, most Americans agree that the Xicanx population largely work in jobs most people do not want to do and for pay most people would not accept ([Pew Hispanic Research Center 2020](#)). In 2017, Xicanx are strongly represented in the blue-collar service sector ([Lean In 2018](#)). Not only are they overrepresented in the service industry, they are also overrepresented in incarceration rates, in high school drop-out rates, and in school disciplinary sanctions ([Acosta 2020](#)). Conversely, Xicanx are underrepresented in degree attainment, in professional white-collar positions, and more specifically in managerial positions ([Lean In 2018](#)). This poses a problem since it is estimated that by 2030, 1.1 million jobs will require a college degree in California alone ([Gao and Johnson 2017](#)). Given the lack of opportunities Xicanx communities are faced with, and their high population growth, the Xicanx community risks being left out of the livable-wage job market. This issue should be a focus and an area of concern for the public school system.

Unfortunately, the current educational system in the United States is rooted in a Eurocentric Model that is not inclusive of diverse cultures and races, causing Xicanx and students of color to continuously resist efforts to have access to an equitable and inclusive education ([Acosta 2020](#)). For example, in California’s preschool through 12th grade (P-12) public school system, 55% of students have been identified as Xicanx ([California Department of Education 2020](#); [Pew Hispanic Research Center 2018](#)), surpassing the White student population. Despite being the largest population in the state, when comparing the performance of Xicanx students to White students on college entrance examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, college enrollment rates, high school graduation rates, and other college and career readiness indicators, Xicanx students are underperforming in comparison to their White counterparts ([Bahr et al. 2019](#); [Kurlander et al. 2018](#); [Perez Huber et al. 2015](#); [Warren 2018](#)).

The data indicate that the American education system is undeserving Xicanx and other minoritized students of color. Although democracy is predicated on public education as the great equalizer, the United States school system was not created for Xicanx students to be academically, socially, and economically successful. Subsequently, the school system is working as intended, to produce failing minoritized students of color ([Duncan-Andrade and Morrell 2008](#); [Gutierrez 2020](#)) and therefore fortifies the social hierarchies in which the white dominant group continues to reap benefits such as education and wealth ([Acosta 2020](#); [Sidanius and Pratto 1999](#)). Those failing students turn into the adult population that works in lower wage jobs, thus reproducing social disadvantages such as attaining a minimal education and continuing the cycle of poverty ([Acosta 2020](#); [Sidanius and Pratto 1999](#)). The oppression of Xicanx in the American education systems is most visible in the P-12 public school discipline rates, where Xicanx and other minoritized students are overrepresented in disciplinary sanctions and out of school suspensions ([Gregory and Thompson 2010](#); [Khalifa 2018](#); [Skiba et al. 2011](#)). Applying a critical lens, it is possible to see patterns in student discipline data, a pattern which reflects a deficit- and bias-based perspective in our public educational system.

In contrast to the debilitating forces of racism that many Xicanx students and professionals face, [Gutierrez 2020](#) proposes affirming the concept of *Nepantla*, a word derived from Nahuatl culture.

Nepantla frames “all things in the universe as existing in motion and centering and transitioning” (Gutierrez 2020) and it may be applied to describe the experiences of many in the Xicanx community. Embracing this concept means understanding the way that Xicanx Torchbearers often live in two worlds. Nepantla stands in opposition to a worldview based on rigid, fundamentalist, or “fixed” beliefs; it upholds the possibility of transformation. In fact, being open to the possibility of change for the future is a necessary precondition for changing the deficit perspective that hinders possibilities of advancement for Xicanx people.

The existential condition of the Xicanx community affirms their Nepantla—which is the being of perpetual middle-ness (Gutierrez 2020; Sanchez 2020). This middle-ness is the betweenitude of being and nothing, of existing in two worlds and belonging to neither, of not being “*ni de aquí, ni de aya*” (Sanchez 2020). Thus emerges an existential crisis, of subsisting between an infinite nepantla and the *zozobra*, the despair of trying to be two things and yet not even fully able to be one. *Zozobra* is a rootless state of being in anxiety or anguish, a sense of uneasiness, lacking grounding or certainty (Sanchez 2020). Over time, such burdens begin to absorb one’s spiritual and physical energy, consuming the body, mind, and spirit and manifesting in physiological, emotional, and mental maladies. Over time, much like Wétiko, these maladies create intergenerational trauma: “When trauma continues from generation to generation, it is termed historical trauma. Historical trauma has been likened to a bomb going off, over and over again” (Menakem 2017, p. 39).

Clearly, further action is required in order to obtain permanent and durable change in order to support Xicanx and other minoritized students of color in the process of degree attainment and beyond. Figure 2 illustrates Xicanx degree attainment in our school system. In addition, Xicanx and other minorities of color face more than academic strife within the higher education system. This is why we focus this article on the critical role of Torchbearers as role models who serve as community leaders despite the struggles they often endure. As the Aztec spiritual elder Angelbertha “Mama” Cobb has suggested, it is a cultural imperative for Torchbearers to do so.

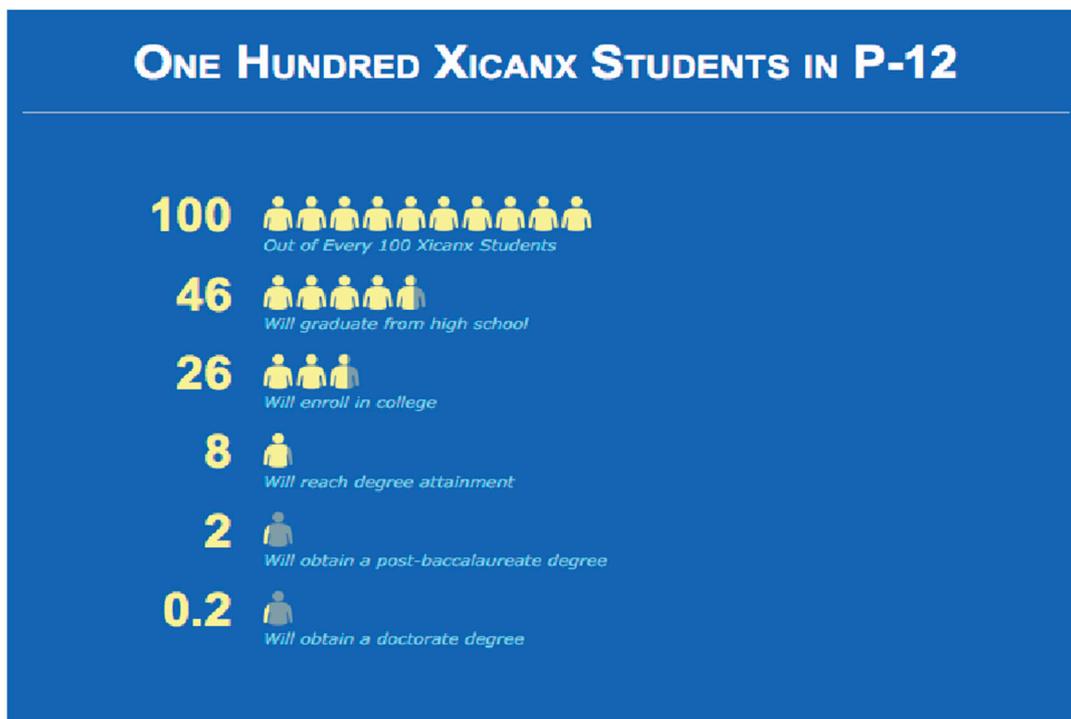


Figure 2. A visual representation of the disproportionality of Xicanx students who achieve degree attainment and beyond per every 100 Xicanx elementary students across the nation. Source: Yosso and Solarzano (2006).

7. The Existential Reality of Xicanx Torchbearers

Recently, the University of California (UC) system accepted the highest rate of Xicanx students, which was an intentional move in dismantling a cog in the oppressive college admissions system (Watanabe 2020). The decision to admit more Xicanx and other minoritized students of color to the UC system required overlooking racialized exclusionary mechanisms, including SAT and American College Test (ACT) college-entrance examination scores, which have been weighed heavily against students of color and of low socioeconomic background, and beginning to use alternative college readiness indicators (Bahr et al. 2019; Gao and Johnson 2017; Kurlaender et al. 2018; Warren 2018). Despite the fact that 36% of the students accepted into the UC system in the 2020–2021 school year were Xicanx (Watanabe 2020), degree attainment for Xicanx students has been consistently low (Murphy 2020). Especially in a post-Covid era, where there will likely be more virtual learning than before, research indicates that Asian and White students consistently perform better than Xicanx and other minority students of color in online courses. In addition, Xicanx male students perform lower than female Xicanx students in virtual learning (Murphy 2020). This is concerning because out of every 100 Xicanx elementary students nationwide, only 46 will graduate from high school. Of those, 26 will enroll in college (17 in community college and 9 in a four-year institution), and only 8 will reach degree attainment. Of those eight, two will move on to obtain a post-baccalaureate degree, and a mere 0.2 of those will obtain a doctoral degree, without transformation in the nature of schooling (Yosso and Solorzano 2006).

Despite the intentional drive to recruit and admit Xicanx students to higher education systems, such efforts do not guarantee that the academic system is prepared to: (1) retain those students, and (2) provide them with the adequate mental health care to treat the physical and psychological trauma caused in their higher education programs. Xicanx women in higher education, specifically in Masters and Doctoral programs, experience more than just the overwhelming task of applying and being accepted to a program. They also face physical and psychological trauma while attempting to obtain a higher educational degree attainment and beyond (Acosta 2020). Research on Xicanx women in higher education identifies that these women face isolated and intersected racial and gender inequalities, including racial/ethnic and gender microaggressions, as well as prejudice from peers and faculty (Achor and Morales 1990; Acosta 2020; Gildersleeve et al. 2011; Gonzalez 2006; Gonzalez et al. 2001, 2002; Solórzano 1998; Solorzano and Yosso 2001). Acosta's (2020) mixed methods concurrent nested study focused on Latina professional women who have achieved a doctorate degree and their experience with the Impostor Phenomenon (IP) and microaggressions in the workplace.

IP is a term created to describe women who excelled in the professional world but who could not attribute their intelligence and abilities to their success. Subsequently, this causes them to have internalized feelings of being a “phony” in their professional role despite their success in academia or in life (Clance 1985; Clance and Imes 1978). This study's mixed-methods approach employed a quantitative survey, conducted qualitative interviews, and analyzed both sets of data to further build and give depth to the research. In this study, 202 quantitative participants took a 57-question survey consisting of two pre-existing surveys and five demographic questions. The two pre-existing surveys were the Racial Microaggression Scale (Torres-Harding et al. 2012) and the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (Clance 1985). Out of the 202 participants, 7 were randomly selected to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. The quantitative data produced outcomes from a large population and the qualitative data brought insight to the lived experiences of the participants. Unfortunately, the racist attitudes Latina professional women often encounter are sometimes internalized as a by-product of historical, cultural, political influences that extend beyond the university into the professional realm and infiltrate personal psychology (Acosta 2020). Consequently, the women have pervasive experiences of internal and external doubt about their worthiness despite their educational achievements. Powerful forces of racism and sexism, combined with conditions in the present-day workplace, often create a state of insecurity that manifests as Impostor Phenomenon (IP). Acosta (2020) explains that 75.7% of the 202 Latina women in her research experienced feelings of being misperceived or marginalized in

the workplace, which she links to cultural stereotyping, oppression by the dominant white culture, and sub-oppressors within the Xicanx culture.

One insidious form of microaggression that these Xicanx women experience is being treated as “less than” by their professors and/or classmates. For example, [Achor and Morales \(1990\)](#) studied 100 Xicanx women who obtained their doctoral degree in attempts to understand factors associated with their success. The research found that throughout their academic journey, 43% of participants perceived negative attitudes from their professors, 28% from their peers, and 27% from their advisor, including being perceived as an affirmative action case by peers. Such perception was an attempt to discredit the students’ intelligence, their hard work, and their legitimacy in being accepted into a doctoral program. Not only do Xicanx face racialized trauma in higher education, even those with the highest degree in the professional world continue to experience such trauma as they enter and engage in the professional landscape.

Even after obtaining a doctoral degree, Xicanx women continue to face racial and gender microaggressions, as well as prejudice and bias-based perspectives in the professional setting. One of the themes found in [Acosta’s \(2020\)](#) study was the prevalence of racial and ethnic stereotypes. A total of 85% of participants in the qualitative sample of the study faced racial/ethnic microaggressions because of their racial identification and their ethnic practices such as food, attire, work ethic, and cultural practices. They were also perceived as being sexual or aggressive. For example, one participant was told that she was given a job because she was Xicanx and she should have been able to get a group of Xicanx students organized solely on the basis of being Xicanx. Another participant was constantly perceived as “an aggressive Xicanx woman” when she had to give her white peers and subordinates directions to move forward on a project. Another participant was told by a peer faculty member that the only reason why a student did well and was able to learn in her class was because she was attractive and the student must be in love with her. The stories of these women aligned with the quantitative data, in which 75.7% of the 202 participants identified on a Racial Microaggression Scale ([Torres-Harding et al. 2012](#)) that they experienced moderate to frequent feelings of being perceived as low-achievable/undesirable culture and being treated as if anyone from a racial/ethnic background is the same and can be interchangeable ([Acosta 2020](#)). Xicanx are systematically marginalized when they are not recognized as worthy individuals, and when negative stereotypes about their racial identity are perpetuated by the dominant culture.

In addition to the stereotypes, 53% of the 202 participants in the quantitative portion of the study experienced moderate to frequent feelings of being treated as if they are of lower status, devalued, or dismissed ([Acosta 2020](#)). All of the qualitative participants experienced disrespect in their professional workplace, which was attributed to the intersectionality of the characteristics that construct their identity. For example, one of the participants, who is a professor, indicated that her students would call her by her first name and would purposely not address her as “Doctor”. For another professor, a peer faculty member would try to “mansplain” everything to her, which came across as insulting her intelligence. For another participant, a peer researcher took the data that she had spent months collecting, wrote a manuscript drawing from her data, and then made himself the first author. He never thought to ask her for permission to use the data or invite her to participate in writing the manuscript ([Acosta 2020](#)). Despite having achieved the highest degree attainable, these Xicanx women continue to live in a world in which no matter who they are or what they do, they are stereotyped and treated as less than. This leaves them not only fighting their inner doubts, but feeling it through the words and doubts of others every single day. They are simultaneously highly visible and yet invisible: “The notion of being hyper-visible and invisible at the same time—hyper-visible because they are a Latina in a White dominant setting, but also invisible because, despite their presence in this setting, their identity is not respected—means they are not always treated as equals” ([Acosta 2020](#), p. 119).

The women in [Acosta’s \(2020\)](#) study could not understand what it was about their identity that bothered others to the extent that they would find the need to have to make them feel less than. They expressed how their mere presence was perceived as offensive and threatening. In reflection,

it appeared that the intersectionality of their identity seemed to prompt others to enact various efforts to tear them down (Acosta 2020). Yet, despite experiencing racism, microaggressions, and IP in their professional roles, the women represent the critical role of the female Xicanx Torchbearers. Despite extant pressures, the women have “purpose” (p. 122); they are often motivated to transcend Wétiko for the betterment of their children. From the Xicanx perspective, it is necessary in order for the next generation of children to survive. Gutierrez’s (2020) mixed method study focused on school administrators, specifically principals, of Xicanx descent in the state of California. The study used a transformative mixed method which collected both qualitative and quantitative data from over 60 Xicanx P-12 public school administrators in California, through a survey that combined the Professional Quality of Life 5 (ProQOL 5, 2010) and the Mindfulness and Self-Care Scale (MSCS, 2015). The qualitative data were collected through the interviews of 10 Xicanx California P-12 public school principals, who are classic examples of Torchbearers because they have infiltrated white spaces not designed for them. His study highlights the disproportionality between the low numbers of Xicanx administrators versus the high numbers of Xicanx students across the state. Gutierrez (2020) argues that it is not surprising that so few Xicanx principals are represented in school leadership roles, given that the traditional, academic conceptualizations of leadership tend to be Euro-centric and/or colorblind, as schools mirror the values of white culture in our society (Freire 2014). His research indicates that Torchbearer Xicanx principals are often exposed to high levels of *Cargas* (burdens) of racialized trauma, microaggressions, and fatigue. For example, one of the participants, Dr. Frida, who is one of the few female Xicanx high school principals in California, talked about her experience with physical and psychological impacts stemming from racialized trauma:

So, in my last job, the last, I say five years, is where I really ratcheted up and began to oppose, just be explicit, call it like it is. And it was hell, it got really bad. There were some that wanted me fired . . . And then I got to the point that I could not do it. Because I got too many macro aggressions, people coming in, attacking me. So, I had to have, as I call it, I had to have white people check white people. So those that were allies and knowing that what we were trying to create, a more just school. I told them, “I can’t do it anymore.” Because what happened is I started getting harmed, and then my family got harmed, and either personal or professional attacks. (Gutierrez 2020, p. XX)

Dr. Frida experienced high levels of stress, macro- and microaggressions, and attacks on her and her family because she was seeking equity in her school. While not all Torchbearer principals are so overtly attacked, many are subject to neglect and color-blinded perspectives which can cause them to be overlooked, ignored, or undervalued.

Racialized trauma materializes into chronic physical, mental, psychological, and emotional health problems that significantly diminishes the wellbeing of Xicanx Torchbearers (McGee and Stovall 2015). Surviving in a highly oppressive environment stemming from historical racism, White privilege, and biased-based-deficit perspectives not only marginalizes Xicanx Torchbearers, it deteriorates their health (Gutierrez 2020; McGee and Stovall 2015; Menakem 2017). Historic and racialized trauma is passed down from generation to generation like a contagion, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of victimization and oppression (Menakem 2017).

Racial/ethnic stress, prejudice, and racism have detrimental consequences, manifesting both physically or psychologically (Sue 2010). Medical conditions such as elevated heart rates, depression, high blood pressure, respiratory issues, and anxiety have been associated with perceived discrimination and racial microaggression stress that is inflicted on people of color (Brondolo et al. 2008; Carter 2007; Clark et al. 1999; Finch et al. 2000; James et al. 1994; Solórzano et al. 2000; Sue 2010; Utsey and Hook 2007). Acosta’s (2020) study found that the qualitative research participants faced physical and psychological trauma due to the perceived discrimination that they endured throughout their lives. Three of the seven participants of this study were eventually diagnosed with clinical depression, one suffered from anxiety, and for the other three, it manifested itself in the form of an illness such as asthma. All of the years of being treated as less than or feeling that they did not belong had taken a physical,

psychological, and emotional toll on their bodies. Thus, it is important for Xicanx Torchbearers to understand the importance of self-care in order to continue to survive and thrive in white spaces.

8. Navigational Strategies and Aspirational Motivations

Given that Xicanx people have been historically marginalized by White supremacist culture, they are currently underrepresented in leadership roles. Coupled with the population growth in the numbers of Xicanx students, the outcome of this disproportionality is cultural mismatch in many public arenas, especially in the field of education. The dominant White culture of schooling has, since its inception, de-valued the various forms of cultural capital represented by the Xicanx student body, often by taking a Bourdieu-esque view of Xicanx students as “lacking” social capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Yet, negative and subtractive views of cultural capital ignore the multiple funds of knowledge from which Xicanx people draw strength.

Despite this existential reality, including laws, policies, histories, and contemporary realities, many Xicanx employ navigational strategies in order to serve as Torchbearers. Recent scholarship such as Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) model asserts that various forms of capital (i.e., aspirational, navigational, linguistic capital) are indeed powerful aspects of the Xicanx culture. Yet, these funds of knowledge have long been recognized by the Xicanx themselves as legitimate, powerful sources of strength in the fight against Wétiko. Community cultural wealth contributes to Xicanx survival, persistence, longevity, and ultimately the success of the next generation. Expanding on Yosso’s (2005) work, Gutierrez 2020 suggests the value of drawing upon multiple forms of capital, including ancestral, language, and aspirational capital. The value of ancestral capital, specifically, is parallel to ongoing efforts by many Native American activists and scholars to support Indigenous cultural awareness (Stanton et al. 2019). Xicanx Torchbearers, as connected by Indigenous roots, are part of the larger landscape of broader national efforts to promote appreciation and respect for Indigenous cultures across the country. Specifically, efforts to promote Native American studies and ethnic studies, which are gaining momentum in initiatives across the country, hold the promise of affirmation; serving as a way of saying “We are still here” (Benally 2019, p. 8) and that the voices and perspectives of Indigenous people of the Americas are here as well.

Drawing on ancestral capital as a means of Xicanx self-affirmation provides a psychological buffer against the onslaught of various forms of fatigue, including equity fatigue, diversity fatigue, and racial battle fatigue (Acosta 2020). Arguably, these forms of fatigue serve to break down defenses against Wétiko and feed its proliferation. Xicanx and Indigenous ancestral capital may also be accessed through reclaiming narratives, traditions, and practices (Borunda and Murray 2019). The importance of the narrative tradition, specifically, is underscored by qualitative methodology employed in Acosta’s (2020) and Gutierrez’s (2020) studies as well as the findings. As Xicanx Torchbearers cited in these studies speak aloud their personal stories of transcending Wétiko, they continue the ancient cultural practices of the oral tradition and reverence for the arc of connection between the generations. In doing so, the Torchbearers affirm Xicanx identity, genealogy, and Indigeneity. Indigenous cultural practices such as danza, reverence for place in the natural world, and connections to ancestors are also way to shine a light against the darkness of Wétiko while ensuring that future generations are fully enfranchised in the community (Borunda and Murray 2019), thus affirming cultural wealth (Yosso 2005).

In addition to ancestral capital, Torchbearers also have access to several other forms of valuable capital, including linguistic capital. Linguistic capital encompasses all forms of both linguistic and nonlinguistic forms of communication derived, propagated, and proliferated from the Xicanx and other minoritized communities of color (Cuauhtin 2019; Gutierrez 2020; Yosso 2005). Linguistic capital creates communal connections employed by minoritized communities to transmit and receive knowledge in order to survive in and navigate through racialized structures (Gutierrez 2020).

At this time, there is some evidence that the Euro-centric, deficit-based school model is evolving to support Xicanx students by valuing a diversity of linguistic capital. It is the aim of the Global California 2030 initiative to enrich California P-12 public school students with a global perspective that

is inclusive of other cultures, languages, and ideas (California Department of Education 2018). The Global California 2030 initiative seeks to encourage multilingualism rather than language decimation so that Xicanx students' native languages are seen as an asset and not a deficit (Gutierrez 2020; California Department of Education 2020). Global California 2030 builds upon a 2016 California initiative known as Proposition 58, which allowed non-English languages to be taught in P-12 public schools. Proposition 58 was passed by over 70% of California voters, and it effectively reversed older English-only mandates, such as Proposition 227, a controversial law banning most bilingual education that passed in 1998 on the coattails of public anti-immigrant sentiment. In contrast, the Global California 2030 initiative uses the power of linguistic capital to embrace multiculturalism rather than acculturation. Global California 2030 allows for the bilingual and multilingual education programs to expand, magnify, and thrive. By applying decades of research on multilingual education, California Department of Education's Global California Initiative provides guidance, resources, funding, and professional networks to stimulate language programs across the state, with the goal that all students are to be enriched through the social, linguistic, and academic benefits of multiculturalism and in this way develop Californians who can compete in an increasingly global economy (California Department of Education 2020). It is an inclusive and strengths-based approach which amplifies not only the Spanish language but also the social and cultural capital of Xicanx.

From an Indigenous Xicanx perspective, tapping into capital to advance one's success is a strategy that advances not only the individual's own self-preservation but that also increases the wealth of the community. Social capital, joining with others in the community to form networks with others, and familial capital are wellsprings to draw strength from (Yosso 2005). For some Xicanx leaders, for instance, membership in Xicanx professional organizations supports career aspirations by opening doors for others; this social support is a counter-force against the onslaught of Wétiko, as it builds community. The importance of aspirational capital—the desire to transcend beyond circumstance—is made manifest by the Torchbearers (Gutierrez 2020). Gutierrez (2020) further suggests that it is the arrogance of western culture that has contributed to historically de-valuing Xicanx capital, and that the current sociopolitical landscape of the United States further upholds systemic barriers that hinder Xicanx people. Unfortunately, an array of formal American systems—including schools, courts, criminal justice, and immigration—are functioning as intended, as a means of oppression for Xicanx while sustaining a system of White supremacy (Acosta 2020; Gutierrez 2020). Fortunately, Xicanx Torchbearers in a range of professional fields are actively changing the landscape of the United States and, in doing so, the existential reality of Xicanx people for generations yet to come. By earning more advanced degrees, Xicanx are challenging the constructs of the dominant White culture while pressuring it to yield to take a more inclusive shape. Yet, recent research illuminates that the effort involved with this achievement comes at a cost for many in the marginalized culture; those in the dominant culture may be unaware of or dismissive of the price of endurance labor (Acosta 2020). Endurance labor pain is a phenomenon borne of the inherent difficulties of leading deep or meaningful cultural change (Muhammad 2009).

9. Torchbearers Succeeding in the Landscape

Those Xicanx who are able to use their *nepantla-zozobra* struggles, who channel the duality and uncertainty to accelerate into places of success and try to help others on their way are Torchbearers. Torchbearers are stewards of the fire and the light; thus they are able to see through the darkness. Thus, they have been entrusted with the light and act as elders who shine the way for others. In Acosta's (2020) study, the seven participants in the qualitative study were asked why they continued to thrive despite the internal struggle of feeling like an impostor and the racial and gender microaggressions by others that they faced every day. Their answer was they had something to give and tell to future Xicanx women who would also make the journey of becoming an educated professional. They discussed their genealogy and what it meant to be the Torchbearers for others. They wanted to be a positive role model and inspiration to the future generation. They wanted to tell them that they belonged in the higher

education and professional spaces. To assure the future generations that, even though they did not have any cultural capital (as it would be defined by Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) to help them navigate these spaces, they would make sure that they would *become* the cultural capital for them along their journey. In order to become those Torchbearers, these women had to ignite a fire within themselves to resist the oppressive system. They found the *ganas* they needed to push forward and make their success happen. Their aspiration drove them to unapologetically make room for themselves in spaces that never were intended for them to thrive and create an inheritance of social capital for those Xicanx who are following suit (Acosta 2020). However, getting to that transcendent state of Torchbearer is not easy; at times, it is a lonely journey and a heavy burden.

Being a Torchbearer, holding the light for others, makes the Xicanx leader highly visible, which can make them stand out as targets by those who are threatened by their light. This adds *Cargas* (burdens) to the journey by making the torch harder to bear. The longer Torchbearers hold the torch, the heavier it gets. Often, they have had to navigate the system alone, which can lead to isolation, alienation, and stress. The fact that they are *Pocos* (few) can make Torchbearers feel disconnected and unaccepted. Yet, all 10 of the Xicanx California public school principals in Gutierrez's (2020) study were driven by resiliency, gained by navigating racialized obstacles inherent in the system. One of these Torchbearers, Magdalena Farris, is an experienced elder principal of a school in a large suburban school district, explains:

Magdalena Farris: So, if you go to my school district there is not one leader that's a person of color and this district has 21 schools and there's not one person in leadership that is of color except for my superintendent. But again, he doesn't speak Spanish. And I don't know that he was brought up in a culture where it's spoken: Spanish. So, I know that he values me and everything, but I feel like sometimes again perspective is perspective [*sic*].

Magdalena Farris expresses feeling like her perspective and her culture are not being reflected in her district leadership. This reflects a form of *Cargas* (burdens) called *Ceguedad* (Blindness) (Gutierrez 2020). *Ceguedad* represents a color-blind perspective that overlooks Torchbearers from minoritized communities through biased-based perspectives (Crawford and Fuller 2017; Gooden 2012; Gutierrez 2020; McGee and Stovall 2015).

Since the Torchbearers expose themselves to a system that is built to oppress them and keep them down, they are visible targets for criticisms and double standards. Xicanx and people of color can see Torchbearers as a sign of hope; others with privilege can see Torchbearers as targets, or even worse, not see them at all. Torchbearers are often in a position where they have to do more than others in order to be equal to their white counterparts. This is another *Carga* identified as *Dos Por Uno* (two for one), having to do more than others just to be equal to others (Gutierrez 2020). This concept is explained by Dr. Socorro, a Xicanx principal with both high school and elementary experience in a large urban district. Dr. Socorro explains:

Dr. Socorro: There is a perceived value in principals having and sharing the same ideologies, lifestyle, language as their students. I'm not seeing it now at higher levels of administration at the district level. That's where I'm now experiencing that plight, that fight for, "Look at me. I'm capable." I see others being able to jump through these hoops and break the glass ceiling, if you will, quickly. There's not even a ceiling for them. They just go and they just get these jobs. It feels as though I can't get past whatever it is that is on paper or in an interview.

Dr. Socorro expresses her frustration in being passed over for advancement to other colleagues who are not bilingual, who do not have her experience, or her education level. She feels for the moment she is pigeon-holed because of her intersectionality of both gender and ethnicity (Fuller et al. 2019; Méndez-Morse et al. 2015; Murakami and Tornsen 2017). Thus, the experience of *Dos Por Uno* creates a condition in which Torchbearers have to work harder than others increasing their stress, fatigue, and anxiety, their *zozobra* of wanting to be two things at once, being both Xicanx and an administrator.

Xicanx Torchbearers can be a source of positivity for minoritized communities of color as they serve as role models who model aspirational capital for others to emulate (Khalifa 2018; Gutierrez

2020; Santamaría and Santamaría 2015; Shah 2009; Yosso 2005). Jesus is a fifth-year Xicanx principal in a suburban school in California. He understood that in his position, he was going to be highly visible and thus needs to use it to his advantage so that he can garner support and influence to help his school.

Principal Jesus: I'd say I've been very upfront with my first year on the job and kind of just told everyone that I'm an immigrant from El Salvador and migrated out here and I'm a naturalized citizen. Tied even further into that, I ended up in a Latino newspaper, they want to do an article on me so I'm like, "yeah, come on down". So, I did a lot of PR work in the areas of just to the Latino community and then a lot of PR work in the local community. So, I went and just embedded myself in various local events that are happening. Some of them would be government officials, mayors and city council members and also foundations. And I did a 15-min intake with all of my staff just to kind of get a glimpse of who they are and also to give them a glimpse of who I am.

Jesus explains that in his first year as a principal, he needed to embed himself in the Xicanx community and make himself known. Using linguistic capital, and other tenets of Yosso's (2005) CCW model, Jesus began creating networks and partnerships to uplift his community.

Xicanx Torchbearers in the education system, such as Principal Jesus for example, are used to beating the odds as they break statistics. They are the ones who not only graduate from high school, but then enroll in college, and then gain graduate degrees, and then attain post-degree achievement. Another example comes from Dr. Ivan, who is an experienced high school principal in a heavily populated urban school. Dr. Ivan describes how his experiences drove him to get more education to attain a doctoral degree. Dr. Ivan writes:

Dr. Ivan: I think that it's been more of an inner self, like a personal drive. The fact that I grew up in poverty, that we received government assistance, that we were now in terms of the definition of homeless living with multiple families in an apartment would consider me to have been homeless the majority of my childhood, even though I didn't see it that way because it was always with family. But those were the things that built resiliency. Now, in terms of what allowed me to pursue an education further than others, it's a little bit of believing others when they said if you get an education, you can have a better future.

Dr. Ivan demonstrates the drive to better oneself through education and being influenced by others to continue his education, break the cycle of poverty, and transcend Wétiko. Other Xicanx Torchbearers reported feeling like it was their calling to serve, as they were "*Convocados*" or summoned (Gutierrez 2020). Torchbearers are sought after either by their community, their coworkers, supervisors, or are motivated by a quest for purpose, a cause, or cultural perspective. Yet another example of the role of elders can be identified in Dr. Frida. Dr. Frida is one of the few Xicanx female principals who has a doctorate degree and she has over 16 years of principal experience. She serves in a rural school district in California. Dr. Frida explains:

Dr. Frida: I just graduated from a UC, in political science in Spanish literature. And even before that, I was always a public servant when I was in grade school, middle school, and high school, and I got enjoyment out of serving others. My mother and father were always public servants, helping others. Especially immigrant families or immigrant community... Families, right, that was coming over from Mexico. But very young, at a very young age, I was tutoring students who cannot speak English and only spoke Spanish.

From a young age, Dr. Frida felt drawn to helping others. Her parents modeled the commitment to their community and to serve others. Xicanx Torchbearers are advocates for the communities they serve, but also have secondary effects on society as a whole (Gutierrez 2020; Shah 2009). This can be demonstrated through the narrative of Dr. Paloma, an experienced elder Xicanx principal of an elementary school in an urban school. Dr. Paloma explains:

Dr. Paloma They have to see us as more than just the janitor and the secretary, and not that those aren't good things, those are all good things. But they also have to see us at every level, calling us Dr. Paloma, all of that is so powerful, not just for our students of color, but even for the white students, for all the students. They have to know us in these roles so that we're normalizing that reality for them.

Dr. Paloma knows that all students and communities benefit from her position and her culture. Diversity in the principal position “normalizes” the idea that Xicanx people can be highly educated professionals and scholars. Xicanx Torchbearers create these positive externalities when they are placed in leadership positions.

10. Maintaining Well-Being, Overcoming Wétiko

Not only are Torchbearers responsible for lighting the way for the future generations, in that journey they must consistently self-assess the mind, body, and spirit. [Gutierrez \(2020\)](#) indicated that mindful awareness, supportive structures, and supportive relationships had the highest negative correlation to burnout. The study also revealed cultural self-care practices such as visiting their native country, communing with ancestors (living or dead) and creating culture-specific networks also amplified and strengthened Xicanx principals’ connection to cultural capitals described by the [Yosso \(2005\)](#) CCW model. In turn, Torchbearer Xicanx principals then would increase the value of CCW at their school sites through increased diversity in staffing, decreasing suspensions and student disciplinary sanctions, and being positive role models for all students ([Crawford and Fuller 2017](#); [Fuller et al. 2019](#); [Gutierrez 2020](#); [Khalifa 2018](#); [Shah 2009](#)). Self-care practices ensure that Xicanx Torchbearers can resist Wétiko and continue to exist in white spaces. Xicanx principals and administrators have identified self-care practices that they have employed: “The practices most cited included mindful awareness, spiritual care, physical care, supportive structure, supportive relationship, and creative multisensory outlets (mindful relaxation)” ([Gutierrez 2020](#), p. 174). Supportive structures refer to having routines, practices, and mechanisms in place to protect their time and structure their work. Supportive relationships involve accessing networks, mentors, and colleagues that provide professional and or personal support. Mindful awareness is having knowledge of self-care practices as well as having self-awareness to help navigate levels of fatigue and stress. These three self-care practices combined have the highest negative correlation to burnout and fatigue. When Torchbearers access self-care, they upgrade their cultural capital to existential persistence, sustainability, and self-preservation ([Gutierrez 2020](#)). Thus, it is imperative that self-care becomes a major practice for all educator preparation programs.

Both [Acosta \(2020\)](#) and [Gutierrez \(2020\)](#) describe how cultural, political, and personal forces intersect in the life experiences of the Torchbearers. Their work indicates a multitude of reasons why the current landscape of American culture and schools are ripe for reform, while questioning cultural operating systems that undergird structural racism. Their studies illuminate the critically important role of contemporary Torchbearers while arguing for Xicanx to reclaim Indigeneity. From their studies, we gain insight about how to transcend Wétiko by incorporating Xicanx perspectives that emphasize “we” rather than “I” in their respective positions. Indigenous perspectives, rooted in a sense of community and regard for the next generation, from children to doctoral students, are at the heart of their research findings.

11. Conclusion: La Ultima Palabra, the Last Word

One of the research participants, Victoria, is a 34-year-old Xicanx woman with her Juris doctorate degree, who despite facing microaggressions from peers at work because of her race and gender and her frequent feelings of Impostor phenomenon, found her purpose in the world ([Acosta 2020](#)). Like the other Torchbearers, she understands she occupies a space where she can make a difference. For Victoria, that difference starts at home. She says:

I think I don’t give up because I have a child that turned 12 in January and I don’t want her to give up. I want her to see that her mother never gave up no matter what. I think that’s what keeps me motivated. I need to be a good role model for her. If it wasn’t for her, it’d probably be really easy to give up. Yeah, I would have to say my only motivation is my child. Just so she doesn’t give up when she has her own struggles when she grows up.

Victoria recognizes that she continues to persist and does what she does for those who follow her. She understands that her choices now will have an impact on future generations and will ultimately

open a path for her daughter and her daughter's daughter. The vision of impacting future generations fuels her endurance to bear the torch in the face of multiple challenges. This provides testament to how Torchbearers will ultimately change the landscape.

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