



Latino/a Youth Activism in Higher Education: A New Materialist Analysis of the Latino Graduation Ceremony

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Abstract

In this paper, we entangle Latino/a youth activism with ritual culture in U.S. higher education. Specifically, we analyze ethnographically-generated data from Gildersleeve's (2015; 2016) study of Latino graduation ceremonies, emplacing our analyses within new materialist philosophy. We theorize the Latino graduation ceremony as assemblage (DeLanda, 2006) and produce new sensibilities about the significance of Latino/a youth activism in contemporary U.S. higher education. The purposes of this paper are two-fold. First, we hope to contribute to the knowledge-base around how Latino/a youth use/claim space in their efforts for social change. Second, we hope to contribute to the growing literature in education that draws from new materialist philosophy and develops new methods/analyses to help reveal youth experiences.

Keywords: *Latino/a youth activism; higher education; new materialism; assemblage theory; ritual culture*

Analyzing rituals enhances awareness of cultural realities and the power of the values and beliefs that shape social institutions and the lived experiences of the people affected by them (Magolda, 2016). As Latino/a participation in higher education historically has been marked by controversial policy, achievement, and opportunity outcomes, the production of celebratory rituals is indeed significant for understanding higher education's past, present, and imagined future. Latino graduation ceremonies exist alongside traditional institutional rituals of commencement. Of particular relevance here is the particularly subaltern status of the ritual. There is an inherently oppositional politic in their practice, yet they also perpetuate the neoliberal condition systemic to American higher education today (Gildersleeve, 2015). Understanding that politic and the new realities it creates when intra-secting with youth activism can provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of how Latino/a youth activism reconfigures space(s) within dominant institutions (i.e., higher education) today. Hence, we ask the question, "How might Latino/a youth activism materialize through ritual culture in higher education?"

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graphically-generated data from Gildersleeve's (2015; 2016) study of Latino graduation ceremonies, emplacing our analyses within new materialist philosophy. We theorize the Latino graduation ceremony as *assemblage* (DeLanda, 2006) and produce new sensibilities about the significance of Latino/a youth activism in contemporary U.S. higher education.

As our paper is multi-purposed and drawing explicitly from posthumanist ontologies (i.e., new materialism and assemblage theory), we depart significantly from the canonical organization of the traditional research report. Rather, we take up Coole and Frost's (2010) conclusion for the future development of materialist entanglements:

...new materialist ontologies demand a rethinking of, and renewed attention to, the dynamics of materialization...such a project demands, as a corollary, a radical reappraisal of the contours of the subject, a reassessment of the possibility and texture of ethics, an examination of new domains of power and unfamiliar frames for imagining justice, and an exploration of the sources, quality, and dimensions of agency. (p. 37)

We follow Coole and Frost's (2010) call for attention to the dynamics of materialization and organize our analysis as an excavation of the Latino graduation ceremony as *assemblage* of Latino/a youth activism in U.S. higher education. As such, our paper moves fluidly and sometimes disjointedly through the corollary suggested by Coole and Frost. We describe the contours of subjects-as-becoming-Latino/a activists. We provide our assessments of possible ethics, textured through the entangled discourses that engender such an assemblage. We examine the thresholds of power as it circulates through the assemblage and explore the sources and dimensions of agency afforded through the emerging assemblages that become Latino graduation ceremonies.

Latinos in U.S. Higher Education

Latino/a participation in higher education has been marked by controversial policy, achievement, and opportunity outcomes. Educational policy has had a profound effect on the ability to recruit and retain Latino/a students. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that federal and state policies explicitly focused on Latino/as in higher education (Brown, Santiago, & Lopez, 2003). The rollback of affirmative action policies led Texas, California, and Florida to develop percentage plans in order to broaden college access for all students. These states, combined, enroll about 60 percent of Latino/a college students (Brown et al., 2003). A shortcoming from the percentage plans was that it did not take into consider financial need, nor that they might not be academically prepared to take advantage of this benefit (Brown et al., 2003). An important piece of state legislation that has affected some Latino/a students has been the passage in-state tuition rates regardless of residency status.

The most substantial and historical federal higher education legislation that has impacted both access and success has been the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). This act created government funded programs such as TRIO and GEAR Up across the nation to facilitate increasing access to higher education for Latinos and other historically underrepresented communities (Brown, et al., 2003). The creation of access programs addressed the challenges facing Latino/as. It was not until the development of Title V-Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) that created a competitive basis for building institutional capacity (Arciniega, 2012). HSI designation was created with the reauthorization of HEA of 1965, the designation was revised in subsequent years and institutions must meet the following requirements: a non-profit accredited institution,

25% of the undergraduate body must identify as Latino/a and 50% must be low-income and first generation (Valdez, 2015). Since their inception, HSIs have double in growth from 189 to 409 (Santiago, Taylor, & Calderon Galdeano, 2016). There is an almost equal divide between two-year and four-year institutions (Santiago, et al., 2016). These institutions are more likely to be underfunded compared to other institutions (Calderon Galdeano, E., Flores, A.R., & Mode J., 2012). In 2010, HSIs received an average of \$3,466 per student compared to \$5,242 per student among all degree granting institutions (HACU, 2012).

Approximately 60% of all Latino/a college students are enrolled in HSIs; however, overall, Latino/a students disproportionately are enrolled in two-year institutions, compared to their dominant peers (Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vasquez, 2013). The appeal of community colleges is often associated with the lower cost, proximity to families, schedule flexibility, and less rigorous admission standards (Arbona & Nora, 2007). While these institutional characteristics are alluring, these same institutions often lack the ability to transfer Latino/a students to four-year institutions. Transfer rates for Latino/a students from a community college to a four-year institution are lower compared to their white counterparts, even though half of first time Latino/a community college students report aspirations to transfer (Nunez, Sparks, & Hernandez, 2011; Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). Simply put, starting at a community college decreases the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion for Latino/a students (Nunez & Elizondo, 2013).

In California, for every 100 Latino/a students who graduate from high school, only 40 enroll in higher education and of those, 30 begin at a community college, seven are admitted and enroll in the California State University system of comprehensive universities, and three in the flagship University of California system of research universities (Nora & Crisp, 2009). The case of California is representative of how Latino/a students that pursue postsecondary education are concentrated in less selective/open access institutions. Nationally, in 2013-2014, of all Latino/a undergraduate students only 12% were enrolled in selective institutions, while over 60% were enrolled in open-access institutions (Santiago, et al., 2016).

If college choice/access can be recognized as a social practice (Gildersleeve, 2010), then emplacing the condition of Latino/a postsecondary achievement, as reflected in the increasing number of Latino/a attending underfunded institutions can be understood as an expression of the broader neoliberal context of US higher education. Further, Gildersleeve, Cruz, Madriz, and Melendrez-Flores (2015) theorized a Latino educational caste in recognition of the stratified educational outcomes that ensnare Latino/a youth and the discourses of higher education institutions. In their analysis, Gildersleeve, et al. (2015), suggest that the systemic inequities in education faced by Latino/a youth become reified by postsecondary leaders' discursive productions of Latino/a college choice and build structural barriers that prevent Latino/a educational achievement outside of the Latino educational caste.

Neoliberal Higher Education

The role of American neoliberalism is to ensure that there is a constant fostering of competition (Hamann, 2009). As funding from state and federal governments continues to decline, higher education institutions have sought out different avenues to secure funding. Torres and Van Heertum (2009) argue that increased entrepreneurialism in higher education has made efforts to expand revenue or replenish state and federal revenue loss by seeking profit endeavors with busi-

nesses in research, satellite campuses, and extension programs. This disinvestment in higher education is part of the neoliberal agenda in defunding higher education as a public good. HSI policy acknowledges that Latino/a students typically enrolled in large numbers at institutions that historically have been underfunded. It is these same institutions that have benefited from supplemental funding once HSI grantee status was obtained. However, the expansion of HSIs has also made Title V grant aid more competitive. The funding associated with this status has incentivized more institutions that are seeing larger influx of Latino/a students to their campus to actually seek the designation. Despite grants only being a sliver of institutional operation budgets, they provide a flexibility to bring new programs (Santiago, et al., 2016). For HSIs the neoliberal practices of competition create a market for admissions department to target Latinos in order to increase their enrollment. Although the HSI status does not require institutions to announce their designation an institution can use this as a marketing tool.

The creation of HSI designation in 1992 did not occur in isolation to other public policies. It was and is deeply imbedded in the neoliberal doctrine of higher education particularly the importance of workforce development. Existing practices were not effectively educating Latino/as therefore innovation needed to occur. Foucault (2008) argues that

if there is innovation, that is to say; if we find new things, discover new forms of productivity, and make technological innovations, this is nothing other than the income of a certain capital, of human capital, that is to say of the set of investments we have made at the level of man himself. (p. 231).

In other words, HSIs became a new innovation that organized this particular group of students.

Students enrolled in higher education learn to become an “entrepreneur of the self” as described by Foucault. The competitive entrepreneurialism can also be closely associated with a student’s ability to succeed regardless of sociopolitical constraints. Within a neoliberal frame, Latino/as’ lower graduation rates is not the failure of an institution’s faculty and staff but rather the failure lies within Latino/a students for their inability to adapt and be successful in the competitive postsecondary environment.

Literature discussing the “entrepreneur of the self” has also been theorized outside of the United States, although not in relationship to Latino/a students. For example, Kelly (2006) argues that selfhood is dominated by a particular form of the entrepreneurial self. Rather than see at-risk youth negatively, the entrepreneurial self is viewed as a positive (i.e., productive/generative) enactment, as these youths seek other ways to gain access to capital. Intervention practices that acknowledge the shaping of different life choices are structured by the global process.

In the context of higher education, Gildersleeve (2016) argues that “the neoliberal sphere is the crisis of American higher education—temporal, spatial, environmental, economic, and personal” (p. 3). As neoliberalism continues to make certain truths possible and certain knowledge knowable, it is within these contexts that we emplace our analysis of the Latino graduation ceremony and produce plausible assemblages that render the Latino graduation ceremony as temporally-emergent assemblages of Latino/a youth activism.

Youth Activism in Higher Education

Student activism has been committed to public memory, as researchers have studied student activism in higher education since its rise in the 1960s (Dominguez, 2009). A review of the

literature on campus activism is important in order to understand the institutional context of Latino/a activism on college campuses today. Dominguez (2009) states that it is no surprise that there has been a disagreement of the nature and extent of student activism, given the multi-faceted and comparative frameworks for understanding student activism. Rhoads (1998, 2003) for example has explored campus activism in the 1990s on multiculturalism and student resistance to globalization. Another aspect of student activism has been concentrated on the role of students in the anti-sweatshops movements on college campuses. Few articles have explored the ways in which students involved in the anti-sweatshop movement has affected their activism in the neoliberal institution (Dominguez, 2009).

The study of social movements is often based on the following components; the deconstruction of collective action from the point of view of those seeking change, those that have the influence to create the change, the claims or demands, and the tactics that are used by those seeking change to advance their demands (Barnhardt, 2014). Tactics tend to resonate when they cause disruption to normative behavior; the disruption breaks the regular routine for at least a bit of time. Conventional tactics on campus often consist of disrupting public forums, holding events in free speech zones, generally in spaces that are not designed for disruption. Walker, Martin, and McCarthy (2008) describe tactics on college campuses often are aligned with more conventional tactics that build on behaviors and values of the organization.

Student movements are most successful and gain legitimacy with targets when tactical approaches are framed in familiar contexts of administrative practices, policies, and campus norms (Benford & Snow, 1992). Barnhardt (2014) argues that while campus activists choose tactics that align with conventional activities these tactics are reconfigured with new meanings that disrupt administrators' and peers' understanding of campus life and organizational practices. These conventional tactics however, should not be seen as manufactured peaceful protest rather conventional tactics are disruptive and transgress the meanings of everyday campus occurrences. While campus policies have been designed to curb large actions such as having to gain permission to assemble large gatherings, normative events on campuses have now turned into opportunities to create alternative views and assert movement claims (Barnhardt, 2014).

Despite the multiplicity of frameworks used to understand student activism, there is minimal research that has examined Latino/a student activism, particularly post-2000. Student activism on campus is typically associated with actions that take place in free speech zones or the takeover (sit in) of campus buildings. We will argue and illustrate how Latino/a activism today can materialize from the material transformation of institutional ritual. Situating Latino/a youth activism via a new materialist analysis of graduation rituals expands not only the frameworks available for understanding youth activism, but also centers Latino/a activism itself.

Studying Latino/a Youth Activism via the Latino Graduation Ceremony

This article draws analyses from Gildersleeve's broader critical ethnographic study of ritual culture and Latino/a youth in higher education, particularly his studies of Latino graduation ceremonies (2015; 2017). Gildersleeve engaged ethnographically with organizers of and participants in Latino/a graduation ceremonies across ten campuses, including two community colleges, three state comprehensive universities, and five research universities. Seven institutions were located in California and three were in Texas. Fieldwork included individual and group interviews with organizers and participants (i.e., graduates), as well as participant-observation and/or video recording of the actual ceremonies, including any receptions that were included as part of the event.

In total, 72 participants were interviewed. Whenever possible, ceremonies were recorded using either audio (n=7) or video (n=2) recording devices, and major speeches, including keynote addresses and student speeches, were transcribed. In total, 26 speeches were transcribed. At stake in this article are the ethnographic descriptions that Gildersleeve produced of the ceremonies, as well as various interview data and the transcribed speeches by various keynotes, guests, and graduates. (For a more complete and in-depth description of the broader research design, see Gildersleeve, 2015.)

Post-qualitative Analysis

While the broader project was situated in a critical ethnographic tradition (Madison, 2005; Gildersleeve, 2010), the analyses we present herein depart radically from the ontological assumptions of traditional and critical ethnography. In effect, we transpose Gildersleeve's broader study from the ethnographic to the post-qualitative, wherein the ontological foundations become de/territorialized from a humanist perspective to a post-humanist and new materialist view of reality. Reality in this view is characterized by decentered subjects, difference, and sense, in contrast to the autonomous anthropocentricity and interpretive meaning-making assumed by the historic ethnographic traditions (Gildersleeve & Sifuentez, 2016; Masny, 2016). Our goal in doing so is to transgress ethnographic description of the world as it is (traditional ethnography) and/or the world as it could be (critical ethnography) and produce new assemblages of possible realities co-existing in their becoming-qualities with the dominant contemporaneous narratives of reality common to the research literature about youth activism in higher education.

Multiple techniques have been generated to engage in post-qualitative analysis. Jackson (2013) put to work Pickering's notions of *the mangle* in order to make sense of the discursive-material entanglements produced through temporally emergent practices in relation to resistant blocks. Jackson asserted: "the point in analyzing mangled practices is not what they are but what they do" (p. 746). Masny (2016) suggested that *palpating data* could produce rhizoanalysis in seeking to understand how reading multiple literacies in language learning could be useful in asking new questions, posing different problems, and creating new concepts—using theory *as* practice. Masny's palpation resists doing interpretation of data, but rather seeks to do with data the very theory-building and concept creation called for by Gilles Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1990). Each of these analytic methods privilege the materiality of their respective project's inquiry engagements. We provide our rhizoanalysis of the dynamic and at times competing assemblages that constitute the Latino graduation ceremony, as Gildersleeve's becoming-inquiry sought to make sense of it. We both mangle practices and palpate Gildersleeve's data in order to learn what the Latino graduation ceremony can *do*, as well as produce newly possible concepts of Latinx youth activism in US higher education.

New Materialism and Assemblage Theory

The collection of movements that identify with new materialist thought generally share an interest in re-thinking the relationships between discursive and material productions of knowledge (Connolly, 2013). New materialism abandons old dichotomous understandings of human/non-human and subject/object in favor of more radically diverse and dynamic processes and flows of vital forces. Further, it works from non-anthropocentric ontological assumptions, wherein the "human"

is reconfigured as a produced situation in relationship to broader processes of materialization. Assemblage theory recognizes that there are unknown antecedents to any operative discourse and the intra-secting collection of such discourses produce what it is that becomes an experience (DeLanda, 2006). Such a notion of reality emphasizes the historicity and dynamism of any given experience (or ritual). Thus, the action of dynamic sets of actants (human/non-human; discursive/material) must be traced in order to cultivate new understandings and forms or tactics of power.

Assemblage Theory

Assemblage theory operates from a monist ontology that transcends the classic dualisms of structure/agency, human/non-human, subject/object. According to DeLanda (2006), assemblage theory has three relational features that are in relationship with each other. The first signifies a system and the ways that elements function as both content and forms of expression. For instance, communication is not just an expression but also constitutes realities (Fox & Alldred, 2015). The second feature acknowledges the forces of deterritorialization/reterritorialization; any situation is never static and always draws towards something else as its components are emerging into new becomings (Beighton, 2013). The territories of dominant discourse are therefore moveable, malleable, changeable, yet remain knowable in stabilizing ways, even as new assemblages de-stabilize their power to protect the population of the given territory. Here, territory is not necessarily physical, but rather ephemeral, social, discursive, and material.

The third feature is the assemblage of *materiality*; insights and impressions are material components that should be understood as significant parts. Bodies are no longer seen as occupying demarcated spaces, but rather all bodies and other materials are relational, meaning that they have ontological status, but that they are produced through their relationships with other bodies, things, and ideas (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Assemblages occur around different action and events that are often chaotic networks of connections that are always in flux, which means they are reassembled in different ways (Potts, 2004). These assemblages occur on a variety of different and differential social levels.

In assemblage theory a “subject” does not exist, but rather it is an affect of *becoming*, which expresses the changes and capacities of an entity. The change can be physical, psychosocial, emotional, or social (Fox & Alldred, 2015). A becoming can alter more than one capacity, representing a social production that is non-linear, but rather a production of multiplicities. Additionally, assemblages can function as territories that have been produced by the affects between relations (Fox & Alldred, 2015). Assemblage theory challenges binaries by explicitly stating that results can have parallel outcomes making contradictory events equally possible. For example, the social institution of higher education can serve to mitigate social inequality while also serving to exacerbate it. Rather than having to “choose” to support or resist, assemblage theory problematizes such a choice by acknowledging the tensions and the multiple dimensions of any produced situation. Since assemblages are constantly changing and being reconfigured, the use of territories can be a representation of how lives, societies, and history continue along processes of becoming.

Assemblage one, in which the Latino Graduation Committee transforms the student union into el salón. The student union’s banquet hall was prepared with a couple of hours to spare before any guests arrived. Students from the *Latino Graduation Committee* had pulled favors from the custodians they had come to know and appreciate during after-hours conversations

when the students were holding their meetings in the student union and the custodians were performing their regular duties. The custodians often did double-duty as event staff at *Pacifica University*, and since they grew fond of the *LGC* students—the only students in the union that spoke to them like they were equals, more than equals rather, elders—they offered to staff the end of year ceremony without charging extra for set-up and take-down. They expressed a desire to work for free for this particular event, but the union would not allow it, which the students understood, as their activism was also rooted in supporting custodians during labor contracts and the fight for a living wage.

The banquet hall was filled with a combination of 10-person round tables and long 16-person rectangular tables. Each was covered in brightly colored tablecloths with a flower arrangement in the center and individual programs placed in the center of each place setting. There were enough to seat 250 guests comfortably. Only two tables were reserved, placed at the very front of the room, but off to the side, almost hidden from the main view of the room. Against one wall was a stage setup as a wide proscenium with two lecterns about one-third of the way from each side. A screen was set-up in the center of the stage. A slide was projected onto it from the room's A/V system. The slide included an image of the university's seal, the *LGC* logo, and text reading, "¡Bienvenidos!" A set of steps marked the center of the stage. Two other sets of steps could be found on either end of the stage. There was a broad open space in front of the proscenium.

Two of the long rectangular tables were set up to serve a buffet dinner of Southwestern, Mexican, Central American, and South American foods, including multiple versions of tamales, rolled tacos, enchiladas, rice, beans, salad, and various pastries for desserts. Outside the banquet hall, food trucks from local vendors who had supplied the buffet were stationed around in case anyone got hungry throughout the event. As the food truck caterers worked to set up the buffet, the *LGC* volunteers and the custodians worked to put final touches on the tables, stage, and a small reception stand by the banquet hall doors.

Cartography of the Latino Graduation Ceremony Assemblage

The Latino Graduation Ceremony, as a ritual practice for some Latino/a youth in U.S. higher education, materializes from months of planning, fundraising, and designing. At some institutions, students elect an executive board in the preceding academic year so that early-fall term activities get off to an immediate start. At some campuses, the fall term is spent recruiting planning committee members, fundraising from local businesses, and making facilities reservations as early as possible in order to confirm a date, time, and space for the ritual event. There is a litany of tasks to complete over the traditional nine-month academic year in preparation for the ceremony, and many student groups seem to breeze through these preparations, with or without institutional support from their university. Indeed, at some campuses, the Latino Graduation Committee is well-respected as one of the most well-run student organizations.

The design element builds upon generations of prior Latino graduation ceremonies, as well as ancestral cultural practices and artifacts. While it is simple enough to connect the food choices to the cultural and national communities represented in the ceremony, the choice to use local vendors and to display their participation/sponsorship in the program, on the tables, or with signs outside, brings to the fore the intentionality of making this ceremony part of *Latinidad*, part of *la raza*, part of something that historically has been systematically relegated outside of American academe—Latino/a college graduates (Gildersleeve, 2015). A relational feature of assemblage theory acknowledges that elements function as both content and forms of expression; the designed

elements are captured in this way. Thus, it becomes imperative that this ritual ceremony materialize as an expression of not just students' achievement, but the struggle of *la raza* in the face—and on the grounds—of the institutions that have been used to relegated them to subaltern status. The design choices bring cultural flows of heritage into contact with institutional flows of neoliberal bureaucracy and transform, temporally and materially, institutional spaces into revolutionary places.

Assemblage two, in which padres y madres y estudiantes become graduados. The drumming became more intense as the Aztec dancers entered the ballroom. The spring of their steps and the chimes of their costumes drew the crowd's attention as they arranged themselves into formation in the center of the open space at the base of the stage. The conch shell was blown in the four directions, and the dance resumed. It was an invocation of the ancestors and a call to ceremony for all who were there that evening.

The crowd was filled with *abuelas y abuelos* (grandparents), *hermanos* (siblings), *primos* (cousins), *tias y tios* (aunts & uncles), *vecinos* (neighbors), *admiradores* (admirers), *y mentores* (and mentors). These crowds varied from a single father waiting anxiously to see and support his daughter to extended *familia* numbering 10, 12, 15, or higher. Also in the crowd were a scattering of university professors and administrators, students/friends, and the custodians who helped set-up and were waiting to take down the event. Most of whom were Latino/as. Spanish language flowed freely throughout the hall, sometimes intermixed with English, sometimes not.

As the Aztec dancers concluded and danced their way out of the ballroom, the music of their drums and chimes slowly gave way to the speaker system fading in with *Pomp and Circumstance*, the traditional graduation processional music. All eyes turned to the back corner of the hall where the first of the graduates was beginning her march into *el salón*. She wore the traditional graduate's gown and mortarboard. It was accented with a stole made in the *serape* pattern, a nod to Latino heritage. She was accompanied, not by any academic marshal, but by her parents. Arm in arm, the three of them lead the march into the hall, through the audience, across the stage, and down into the seats reserved for the graduates. For the next ten minutes, the chain of *madres y padres y estudiantes* made its way through the room, blurring the distinction between supporter and graduate. This procession centered on *la familia*, rather than *la Universidad* (Gildersleeve, 2015).

Possible Becoming-Ethics

Latino graduation ceremonies deterritorialize/reterritorialize the cultural effects of traditional commencement ceremonies. Latino graduation ceremonies occupy physical and temporal space historically inculcated with dualisms. For example, when one is admitted there is an expectation that you will also graduate: admissions/graduation. The traditional commencement's processional is hyper-individuated yet produced on an economic scale of the population. That is, each graduate enters alone, but as part of the graduating class, which stands alone as one kind of thing, one kind of graduate. Graduation ceremonies are often static rituals that highlight a linear and efficient process of higher education: a student enters, learns, then leaves with a degree. However, Latino graduation ceremonies are not a space of linear form. Rather they are assemblages that emplace all participants in relationship to one another, while speaking back to the dominant institution (i.e., the college/university) that historically subjugates Latino communities. It is here when/where the becoming-activist attempts to reterritorialize/deterritorialize the dominant discourse of Latino in neoliberal higher education.

The Latino graduation ceremony itself is a de-territorializing/re-territorializing of both the physical space of the student union banquet hall, as well as the linear process of postsecondary education. It ruptures the university's ethics of rabid individualism and competition by making the ceremony reflect a more collective and familial experience. The format of the ceremony itself does this. For example, the procession into the ceremony does not occur as a collection of lone individual graduates, but rather the graduating student processes alongside her parents.

This design choice within the Latino graduation ceremony is not merely a cultural dimension of difference. Rather, the design of the procession produces other affects within the assemblage. While it is fair to make sense of the parent-inclusive-procession as a gesture to students' support systems (i.e., parents), it also effectively produces the act of graduation as a three-member party, rather than an individual achievement. The design choice of the procession produces the becoming-graduate as constituted by not only the student but her parents as well. They become integral components the assemblage of the becoming-Latino/a graduate.

Assemblage three, part a, in which consejos de activism entangle consejos de neoliberalism. The two student emcees shared the microphone and responsibility for translating back and forth across one another. “¡Bienvenidos!” “Welcome!” An administrative representative from the university who had worked closely with the Latino Graduation Committee offered her own greeting:

I want to welcome you to your graduation. Because this is not your child's, your brothers, your sister, your nieces, your nephews, your *hijada*, your *sobrino*, *su abuela*, *su nieta*, *su viseabuela*, *su companera de vida*, *su companero de vida*. This is all of your graduation because it represents years of struggle, of sacrifices, of love and kindness, of sending gifts, of sending money, of sending prayers and of many tears shed. Tears when they say good-bye, when they first leave for campus, tears when they come home because you realize that they begin to change. And tears when they leave again and tonight there will be many tears but tears of joy.

After further obligatory welcoming remarks, the first keynote speaker was introduced, again in Spanish followed by English. Highlights of her words of wisdom included:

Estamos enfrentado que un día ya no exista la clase media solamente existen los multi millonarios y los que día a día estamos esforzando para sobrevivir. Le reto de ustedes es reflejar este país a la normalidad a que sea un país de esperanza, un país de donde los sueños que se convertían en realidad. (We are confronting a day that the middle class no longer exists, only multimillionaires and those who live day to day. The problems you face reflect the norm of this country. A country of hope, where your dream can be converted to a reality.)

Aunque sus diplomas no son solamente de ustedes. Son ustedes los que pueden y deben aprovecharlos. Por lo tanto les pido que se quieren dar reconocimiento a todos aquellos que hicieron posible su graduación que levanten su mano. And I'm going to say that in English too. Graduates if you want to recognize all of those that have made possible your graduation tonight, please raise your hand. *Y ahora les pido que si estan listos para poner su diploma al servicio de nuestras comunidades Latinas, por favor pónganse de pie.* If you are ready to put your diploma to the service of our Latino communities please stand.

Mi querida gente Latina a que esta nuestras comunidades y de nuestra raza por favor un fuerte aplauso.

The crowd erupted in applause. They were clearly motivated and moved by the speech. It was, after all, impressive to see and hear a Latino member of the community from such a high station. The success story was compelling and aspirational for many of the first-generation migrant families in the room. For many, she represented what they hoped this achievement—a college degree—was making possible for their children. The adversity commonly faced by *la gente de Latinidad* (the people of Latin American descent) was a shared understanding across the room. The words of the keynote speaker spoke back to such adversity, challenged the dominant narratives that many had come to expect of the University in its dealings with Latino communities.

Contours of Becoming-Latino/a Activists

Speakers' expressions of hope and commandments to recognize the unique positionality of Latino academic achievement (i.e., struggle/sacrifice) provide an outline for the historical significance shaping the Latino/a graduates participating in the Latino graduation ceremony. These two discourses, hope and struggle/sacrifice, establish the sense-making flows for Latino/a youth to emplace their celebration within a sociopolitical context. These discourses open up options for students to emplace themselves in an oppositional politic to the dominant discourses of society, colleges and universities, and Latino/a youth.

Yet, these discourses perpetuate dominant structures as well. They rely explicitly on the economy as an authorizing and validating function of higher education's purpose and value. These discourses also dangerously reify the notion that Latino families *must* make sacrifices in order to achieve academically. Such discourse is made concomitantly palatable, because of the neoliberal conditions produced and reflected by contemporary US higher education. The power produced through the Latino graduation ceremony, as called forth and exercised by these professional speakers, brings into contact the tensions between the neoliberal condition and the symbolic, corporeal, and designed resistances of the ceremony to that condition. These dueling discourses circulate through the spoken texts and proliferate throughout the space materializing in the broader assemblage of the Latino graduation ceremony.

Assemblage three, part b: in which consejos de activism entangle consejos de neoliberalism, continued. Next, the graduates were introduced one by one by a couple of Latino/a faculty members from the Pacifica University. As each graduate stood up and walked to the stage, they paused at one of the lecterns and shared a few words of their own. Each had an opportunity to express what this occasion meant to them, who made this night possible in their lives, what they hoped to do with the responsibility of this achievement, or simply to acknowledge the gravity of the transition they suddenly found themselves in ... no longer a student, not yet a professional, a heightened awareness of their own becoming.

Students connected their family and this achievement to their futures:

Les quiero agradecer a toda mi familia, cada miembro de me familia. A mi mamá y papá los quiero tanto, tanto, tanto, y esto solo es un principio del éxito que viene. Gracias. (I would like to thank my whole family, every single member. To my mom and dad, I love you so much and this is only the beginning of the success that will come. Thank you.)

Family is omnipresent across these brief remarks. One graduate shared:

Knowledge is truly power and now that we embark on the next stages of our lives we remember from our *familia* here today that actions speak louder than words. Continually allow our rich culture that streams through our veins and to the passion and dedication that has brought us here today. With our hearts in our hands and our hands in the soil remember that our *raza* has the power to unite, educate, and liberate. This is dedicated to my resilient mother and father and my *abuelito* who passed away this year.

Further Contours of Becoming-Latino/a Activists

The Latino graduation ceremony, built by and for Latino/a youth, materializes an opportunity for Latino/a activists to re-constitute the social practice of college graduation—perhaps even higher education generally. Rather than an individual, competitive, and market-driven achievement, the Latino graduation ceremony, as an expression of Latino/a youth activism, allows students to materially emplace their achievement in a collectivist orientation and the historical context of Latino struggles for opportunity and equity. As previously mentioned tactics used by student activism typically build on the values and behaviors of the organization. Yet the assemblages of the Latino graduation allow for the activist to impose upon the institution a collectivist orientation. Students then can lay claim to a subject posture as a becoming-Latino/a graduate, which simultaneously engages the US higher education materialization of college graduates (i.e., they earn a degree from a US institution), yet also speaks back to the systemic inequity that US higher education can perpetuate.

Assemblage three, part c: in which consejos de activism entangle consejos de neoliberalism, continued. Some family members were present without even being in the room:

Um, I never thought I would be up here. *No más quiero dar las gracias a mi familia que estar aquí conmigo. Y en especialmente a mi madre quien no está presente en cuerpo pero está en los cielos está muy orgullosa de mi y celebrando...* (Just want to thank my family for being here with me. Especially my mom, who physically isn't present but is in heaven, who is very proud of me, and celebrating.)

The last graduate to walk across the stage chooses not to speak, but to sing her remarks. She begins to sing Juan Gabriel's *Amor Eterno: Tú eres la tristeza de mis ojos* (You are the sadness of my eyes). And with that first stanza, the banquet hall becomes *la cocina/la sala/la parranda* (the kitchen, the living room, the party). Known to most people in the room, it seems everyone begins to sing the song underneath their breath. Once the chorus begins, a groundswell of emotion emerges: *Como quisiera ayy que tu vivieras, que tus ojitos jamas se hubieran cerrado nunca y estar mirandolos* (How much I wish that you were still alive, that those eyes have never closed and I could see them.) The ceremony is ending with a similar invocation as it began, an invocation of the struggles of the past in order to honor the achievement of the present and prepare for the struggles of the future. Everyone comes together, celebrating those they wish could be there at this moment. With this homage, the song ends and the crowd ruptures in applause and cheering. During the song for a brief moment *el salón* is overtaken with emotions of love and loss. Tears fall slowly down cheeks, yet as the song comes to an end, smiles emerge, and the celebration continues.

Thresholds of Power in Latino/a Youth Activism in U.S. Higher Education

Conceptualizing the Latino graduation ceremony as contemporary Latino/a youth activism allows for a new becoming-Latino/a youth activist posture, one that incorporates the heritage of the past, the material realities of the present, and focuses the Latino/a youth activist on a collectivist future that remains economically-driven. Such a posture fractures the institutional rendering of Latino/a youth, which, as noted earlier, positions them into the Latino educational caste theorized by Gildersleeve, et al (2015). The ceremony itself materializes as a tactical refutation and reconstitution of the institutional posture afforded Latino/a youth.

Yet, the ceremony does not—perhaps cannot—disrupt nor fracture the neoliberal imperative produced and reflected through US higher education. Specifically, the ceremony does not divorce the Latino/a youth possible subject posture from economic means of production. It is the economy of Latino/a academic achievement, reflected in the corporeal and material design choices of the Latino graduation ceremony, that holds tightly to the becoming-Latino/a youth activist and promotes the connectivity to the institution. The threshold of power to resist or reconceptualize Latino/a youth activism via the Latino graduation ceremony is the connective tissue with the institution of higher education. For, even while the student union's banquet hall becomes *el salón*, and even while *madres y padres* become part of *el graduado/a* within the liminal spaces created by the Latino graduation ceremony, each hinges on the institutional degree/diploma that will only be provided by the college or university itself. The Latino graduation ceremony allows for the reconceptualization of the ritual event to focus beyond the graduate. Such assemblage provides a compelling contribution for scholarship as it interrogates and expands the idea of who participates in higher education and how. The Latino/a graduate is not the alone in generating a relationship with the institution. As Latinx parents become part of *el graduado* they also co-constitute a becoming-relationship with the institution.

Further, there are fractures of the collectivist becoming-Latino/a college graduate/youth activist within the Latino graduation ceremony. Keynote speakers' commitment to economic discourses (e.g., multimillionaires, sending money, making money, doing better than one's parents) is rife with neoliberal commitments to the marketization and commodification of knowledge (see Slaughter & Rhoades, 1997). The design choices to use local vendors for food and decorations explicitly supports Latinx businesses, which implicates the ceremony as a market-driven, or at least market-complicit, expression of achievement. The Latino graduation ceremony extends along ontologically productive flows that can turn toward neoliberal higher education just as easily as Latino/a educational liberation.

This paper has sought to render the Latino graduation ceremony as a ritual practice that emerges from the oppositional politic and tensions between Latino/a youth activism and broader institutional discourses of US higher education. By emplacing the Latino graduation ceremony within the neoliberal context of contemporary higher education and using new materialism as a philosophical foundation for our post-qualitative analyses, we described the materialization of Latino/a youth activism as assemblage that deterritorialized/reterritorialized the production of the Latino/a youth activist and the Latino/a college graduate. New materialism, and assemblage theory in particular, provides useful tools for such analyses. By focusing on what the materialization of the Latino graduation ceremony *does*, rather than seeking to interpret what the design choices, the collection and distribution of things, and the meanings made by participants, all of which constitute the ceremony, we are able to produce possible and plausible sense of the Latino graduation ceremony as a contemporary exercise of Latino/a youth activism, one that follows within Barnhardt's

(2014) suggestion that tactics of activism can include normative events (even if subaltern in expression), and need not necessitate the disruption of institutional activities in order to promote an oppositional politic.

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