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by

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***Cultura Within: Designing Workshops and Transitional Objects that  
Empower Young Latina Women to Persevere in Higher Education***

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***Cultura Within: Designing Workshops and Transitional Objects that  
Empower Young Latina Women to Persevere in Higher Education***

**by**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my mother, Ana Consuelo Diaz, to whom I owe my entire life, career and success—my mother has been the most influential person in my life. She has been a driver, a go-getter, and my rock.

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## Abstract

### ***Cultura Within: Designing Workshops and Transitional Objects that Empower Young Latina Women to Persevere in Higher Education***

Ana Angelica Sibrian, MFA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Carma Gorman

Co-Supervisor: Kate Catterall

Latinos are one of the fastest-growing ethnic minority groups in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Yet they have the lowest college graduation rate of any racial or ethnic group in the United States.<sup>2</sup> This report documents self-reflective, participatory processes I used, based on my personal experience as a Latina in higher education, to design engaging workshops and transitional objects to support the Latina community at the University of Texas at Austin. I propose that workshops promoting awareness of structural barriers, coaching in self-reflective techniques, and the co-creation of totemic objects that serve as transitional objects and *aides-mémoires* can empower young Latina women to persevere in higher education. The workshops were designed to use group storytelling, self-reflection and sharing methods to educate and empower young Latinas to create an on-going sense of agency and build stronger communities within higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2010. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, 2014. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/24/more-hispanics-blacks-enrolling-in-college-but-lag-in-bachelors-degrees/>

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the 2010 Census, there are 50.5 million Latinos in the United States, making up 16.3% of the total population. The nation's Latino population, which was 35.3 million in 2000, grew 43% in the decade from 2000 to 2010.<sup>3</sup> The Hispanic population also accounted for over half of the nation's growth from 2000 to 2010.<sup>4</sup> However, the number of Latinos graduating from high school has not seen a proportionate gain. Graduation rates from four-year colleges are similarly flat, leaving the Latino community with the lowest tertiary level graduation rate of all ethnic groups in the United States.

College graduation is directly tied to earning potential, so unless college graduation rates for Latina/o students increase, poverty rates will continue to rise for this community. In Texas, for example, it is projected that by 2030 the average Latino household will be US \$4,000 poorer than in 1990 (in constant dollars), increasing the poverty rate nearly 3%.<sup>5</sup>

These statistics raised several questions in my mind: What socio-economic and educational barriers do Latina/os face prior to entering higher education? What kinds of barriers do Latina/os face during their higher education experience? What can Latina/os do to improve success rates in higher education? What kinds of support systems and tools might educational institutions provide to increase graduation rates of young Latina/o students?

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, 2. <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> President's Advisory Commission, 2002.

[http://www.hacu.net/images/hacu/OPAI/H3ERC/2012\\_papers/Nora%20crisp%20-%20hispanics%20and%20he%20overview%20of%20research\\_theory\\_practice%20-%20published%202009.pdf](http://www.hacu.net/images/hacu/OPAI/H3ERC/2012_papers/Nora%20crisp%20-%20hispanics%20and%20he%20overview%20of%20research_theory_practice%20-%20published%202009.pdf)

My thesis project, *Cultura Within*, focuses specifically on young Latina women in higher education, who must overcome not only racial/ethnic barriers, but also sexism and regressive attitudes towards women and/or Latina/os that are pervasive both inside and outside of their community. *Cultura Within* focused on aiding young Latinas to persevere in the face of these barriers by offering workshops that asked participants to understand academic success, or lack thereof, as a structural as well as personal issue. It encouraged them to think about and articulate their personal values and motivations to identify and establish support systems for overcoming barriers within a university structure in order to build stronger communities. The workshops also included a transitional object-making portion, in which participants were prompted to select an unfinished pendant for a necklace and to explain their reasons for selecting that particular shape, a first step in identifying with and imbuing the artifact with self-awareness. They were then invited to use hand tools to burnish the pendants from a rough form to a polished state, during which time they discussed some of the structural barriers Latinas face while pursuing an education. The participants then took the finished pendants home with them, where they served as transitional objects (in the Winnicottian sense<sup>6</sup>) to help them remember what they learned or realized during the workshop.<sup>7</sup>

During this portion of the workshop, I drew on methods from education, psychology and design to initiate dialogue about identity, culture, gender and class. The value of these workshops was not simply tied to the objects created during the workshops; rather, the primary value was in the discussion of structural barriers and the

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<sup>6</sup> See D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena, a Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* XXXIV, 1953.

<sup>7</sup> See Reales, José Manuel, "Implicit and Explicit Memory for Visual and Haptic Objects: Cross-modal Priming Depends on Structural Descriptions," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory, and Cognition* 25, 1999.

introduction of self-reflective and self-awareness practices that can increase motivation through engagement and participation.<sup>8</sup> The objects created during the workshops were intended to function as transitional objects (personal talisman) or *aides-mémoires* (totemic symbols to establish community), reinforcing insights from the workshop that could be accessed later in moments of need and connecting wearers across campus. The pendants were designed to extend the impact of the workshops beyond that day and continue its functionality, enabling an on-going process of self-awareness, education, empowerment and agency for the Latina women who participated. Over time, the workshops and pendants were intended to construct a more cohesive Latina community network in each higher education establishment and minimize the sense of isolation experienced by this group of women, creating a much needed social support for minorities, necessary if they are to thrive and the Latina degree completion rates are to increase.

This report will a) present some historical facts about barriers to Latina/os' educational success; b) describe and analyze the IRB-approved survey I undertook and the ethnographic methods I used to gather data about Latinas' experiences in higher education; c) describe the participatory workshops I created for the Latina community; d) discuss the use of transitional objects as a key part of these workshops, and finally, e) assess participants' initial responses to both the workshops and transitional objects in order to determine whether knowing more about structural barriers and cultivating mindfulness and self-awareness helped these Latina women reframe their place in higher education.

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<sup>8</sup> See Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, "The Flow of Creativity". *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. HarperPerennial, 1997.

## Chapter 2: Barriers to Latinos' Educational Success

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

“It is a human tendency to want to discard or discredit, or simply “forget” uncomfortable facts. They are, however, friends in disguise. They are clues to a deeper understanding of the problem that confronts an investigator, but it takes time to fit the stubborn pieces into the puzzle.”

--Ray Oldenburg<sup>9</sup>

As a product of the USA's educational system in the 1980s and 1990s, I was not aware of the many social and cultural factors affecting my educational experience. I did not place value on my familial or cultural wealth of knowledge. I navigated—and floundered—in a mainstream educational system designed using outdated models of pedagogy and saturated with the politics of assimilation.

I was taught that Americanization meant assimilation and becoming part of the “melting pot.” In response, I cut all ties with my culture and disappeared into mainstream America. Although the educational system always baffled me, I didn't have the knowledge or power to ask why, or to voice my doubts about it. I didn't know or understand the extent and depth of America's oppressive educational structures.

Although Latinos have suffered under discriminatory racial laws similar to those affecting the African-American community<sup>10</sup>, these laws' effects on Latino communities are less widely known and/or discussed. Furthermore, as Figure 1 demonstrates, the way in which Latinos were legally categorized in the USA affected Latinos' educational opportunities over time.

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<sup>9</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, New York: Paragon House, 1989, xiii.

<sup>10</sup> See Rubén Donato, “Legally White, Socially ‘Mexican’: The Politics of De Jure and De Facto School Segregation in the American Southwest,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82, 2012.

TABLE 1 *The changing racial categorization of Mexican Americans*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Government Entity, Ruling, or Document</i>	<i>Change in Racial Category</i>
1848	Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo	Mexicans given “White” status to gain U.S. citizenship
1897	<i>In re Rodriguez (1897)</i>	Rodriguez, a Mexican, has his citizenship application challenged because he was not seen as White
1930	U.S. Census	U.S. Census classifies Mexican Americans as the “Mexican race”
1940	U.S. Census	U.S. Census reverts to categorizing Mexican Americans as “White”
1954	<i>Hernandez v. Texas (1954)</i>	U.S. Supreme Courts claims Mexican Americans are a separate class, distinct from Whites
1970	<i>Cisneros v. Corpus Christi ISD (1970)</i>	Federal courts consider Mexican Americans to be an “identifiable minority group”

Sources: Gomez (2007, p. 83), Martinez (1997, pp. 328, 329), Salinas (1971, p. 938), Wilson (2003, pp. 152, 154).

Figure 1: Latinos in the Southwest from “Legally White, Socially Mexican.”<sup>11</sup>

In “*Legally White, Socially “Mexican”*: *The Politics of De Jure and De Facto School Segregation in the American Southwest*,” Rubén Donato notes that Mexican-Americans/Latinos experienced de jure segregation because school administrators and boards of education implemented various policies that had the intended effect of segregating Mexican-Americans/Latinos. Donato and Jarrod S. Hanson argue that although Mexican-Americans/Latinos were often legally categorized as racially “White,”<sup>12</sup> the American public, including educators and government officials, treated Mexican Americans as “colored” in schools and communities.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>12</sup> Mexican-Americans were categorized as “White” by the federal government in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the politics of education, see Rubén Donato, “Legally White, Socially ‘Mexican’: The Politics of De Jure and De Facto School Segregation in the American Southwest,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82 (2012): 202-204.

Although, segregation has been visible in certain sectors such as the real estate market,<sup>14</sup> segregation and inequity in the educational sector has been overlooked. To complicate matters further, issues of nationality and ethnicity were layered on top of biases in terms of skin color and have played a significant role in racial categorization of Latinos: “In California, government officials did not see Mexican immigrants as White. In fact, Sanchez notes that Immigration Bureau officials categorized Mexican immigrants coming to Los Angeles according to ‘racial complexion’—dark, medium, and light/fair brown. According to Immigration Bureau officials during the mid-nineteenth century most Mexican immigrants (82.9%) in Los Angeles fell under the ‘dark’ category,”<sup>15</sup> making them ineligible for citizenship. Figure 1 not only represents the backdrop of the nation before the 1970s, but also frames the struggles of Latino minorities in the United States.

These racial categories were significant, because it was difficult navigating through the legal system. If Latinos were white, they might be allowed to attend white schools, but could not substantiate claims of racial discrimination. If they were not white, they could not attend schools in white districts—and many state laws permitted school districts to segregate, affecting educational opportunities—which made it possible to argue cases of racial discrimination in the courts, but denied them access to better schools.

Two big lawsuits, one in Texas and one in California, occurred during the 1930s that impacted and linked education to race. Although these two cases had different results, neither yielded any changes and neither clarified the position of Latino students in

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<sup>14</sup> Mathew Block, Amanda Cox, and Tom Giratikanon. “Mapping Segregation,” *The New York Times*. Last modified July 8, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/07/08/us/census-race-map.html>

<sup>15</sup> See: Rubén Donato, “Legally White, Socially ‘Mexican’: The Politics of De Jure and De Facto School Segregation in the American Southwest,” *Harvard Educational Review* 82 (2012), 208.

the educational system. Texas agreed with school superintendents that segregation was not morally wrong and allowed separation of Mexican [Latina/o] children under linguistic grounds. California courts, on the other hand, ruled that school boards had no legal basis for segregating Mexican-American [Latina/o] children.<sup>16</sup> But, despite the success of the California lawsuit, the case went unnoticed for decades and was not used as a precedent to desegregate schools.

After the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), efforts were made to desegregate schools, and progress was made between the 1960s and 1970s during the Civil Rights Movement, but its (limited) success lasted only a decade. During this time a joint effort from the community, churches, leaders and the executive branch of the government were in a unique alliance to support economic justice. Unfortunately, most of the progress made in the 1960s was repealed and dismantled by the justice department, courts and education officials—this shift occurred when President Nixon ordered a shutdown of the enforcement machinery available to the education office in the early 1970s. The Justice Department coaxed the Supreme Courts to reverse the desegregation requirements, which allowed for funding to improve race relations. The Reagan administration then decided to generate theories to discredit integration by suggesting that they had failed.<sup>17</sup> In practice this meant that the federal and state courts, Congress, and executive branches did not satisfactorily enforce desegregation, effectively permitting education officials to re-segregate students, reduce resources and dismantle the once-progressive public education system. This had an especially dramatic effect on inner city schools and low-income

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<sup>16</sup> See *Independent School District v. Salvatierra*, 1930 in Texas and the 1931 *Alvarez v. Lemon Grove* in California. Additionally, look up the *Mendez v. Westminster* case, some scholars would argue that this case was what *Brown v. Board of Education* was for African-American children.

<sup>17</sup> Gary Orfield and Nora Gordon. *Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University, 2001.

communities, and especially on Latina/o children, not only because of the linguistic clause, but also because of funding cuts. Subsequent Republican administrations have continued to expand policies that effectively segregated minority children—by the 1980s data showed that Latinos became evermore isolated; even during Democratic presidencies (e.g., from 1990 to 1998) Latino children fell behind, as a result of linguistic and economic barriers. Gandara and Contreras note that “In the highest minority schools (those with 99% or more minority students in their populations), 88% of the teachers scored in the bottom quartile for quality.”<sup>18</sup> This means that students in racially segregated schools are not receiving a high quality education, making minority students less likely to be prepared for college level courses.

In *Shame of the Nation*, Jonathan Kozol describes many inequalities and injustices in our educational institution system. He discovers humiliating and unfair environments created for minority children in inner city schools across the nation. One example that stood out to me the most was an interview and discussion with a black female high school student attending Fremont High School (an inner city school in Los Angeles). She wanted to be a doctor or social worker, but was programmed to take “sewing” and “Life Skills” classes where she was taught low-level working skills—a “retarded class,” as she expressed it. These “Life Skill” courses, Kozol points out, are completely different in upper-middle class neighborhoods where students were taught progressive thinking rather than entry-level work. In Beverly Hills Los Angeles, for example, these courses actually have academic substance. A technical art course could be met by taking courses such as broadcast journalism, residential architecture, computer graphics, engineering research and design. In contrast, at Fremont High School, students were offered hair-dressing,

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras, *Rescatando Sueños — “Rescuing Dreams” in The Latino Education Crisis: The Consequences of Failed Social Policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

hair-styling and braiding courses.<sup>19</sup> These are frustrating barriers that some children cannot overcome. And because they are unable to comprehend and then articulate that frustration, some decide to quit school as early as junior high school.

My sisters and I were directly impacted by these legal and political decisions; we found ourselves in an educational warzone. We were marginalized, streamed into low-level learning classes under the pretense that we needed remedial English learning courses, denying us placement based on our intellectual capacity or knowledge in a particular subject. I, for example, was set back in my high school English courses under the pretense that I needed additional English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, although I had excelled in my regular English courses in middle school.

Now, I believe I was being streamed into the service level track, as described by Kozol. Luckily, I was able to comprehend and fight these misconceptions to move ahead. Unfortunately, many children facing similar situations become demoralized and slip into the educational void—tracked or simply ignored, they never receive a proper education or enough encouragement to graduate high school, let alone achieve a bachelor’s degree.

### **STRUCTURAL RACISM**

Another way in which educational institutions perpetuate inequality is by failing to teach students about the history of structural racism. Although I experienced discrimination directly in my early years, it was hard to recognize and understand because I was unaware of the history of discrimination against non-whites, as it was not included in the history curriculum at my high school.

I was brought up to think that the United States was the land of opportunity for those who worked hard to achieve their dreams, but that belief did not correspond with

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<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 2005): 175-179.

my surroundings—my family, friends or community. It was not until I graduated from college that I finally began to recognize that I was not advancing as quickly as others in society, not because of personal failings, but rather because of a lack of support and limited access to opportunities caused by structural racism. Not only does the American educational system fail to provide equal learning opportunities,<sup>20</sup> it also fails to teach the history of racism and other forms of oppression; leaving students naive to the impact of race and racism in America. I now believe that the schools I attended were grooming Latina/o children to become accustomed to their place in society (as servants), rather than help them understand how to transcend it.<sup>21</sup> A recent meme makes this point well:

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<sup>20</sup> See Kozol, *Shame of the Nation*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> See David G. Garcia and Tara F. Yosso, “‘Strictly in the Capacity of Servant’: The Interconnection Between Residential and School Segregation in Oxnard, California, 1934-1954.” *History of Education Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2013): 64-89.

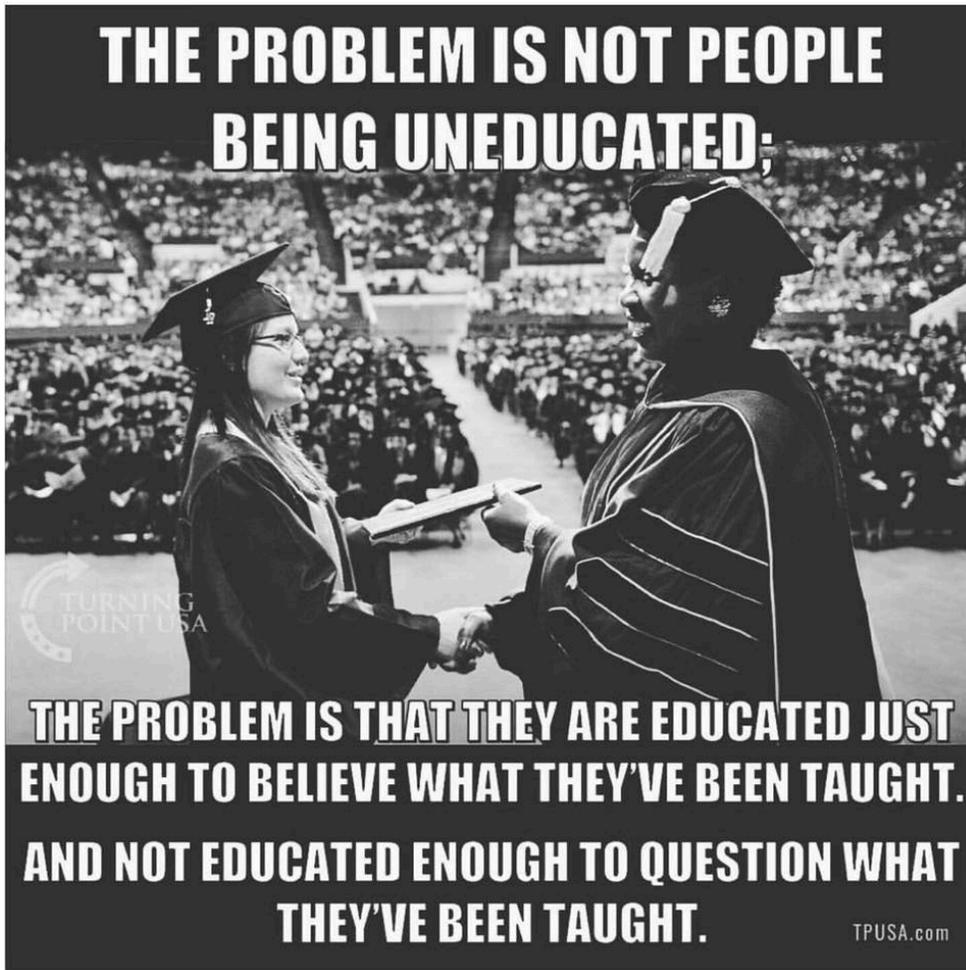


Figure 2: Meme from Turning Point USA

## **BARRIERS FOR LATINA WOMEN**

I acknowledge that there are programs to support minorities and young Latina women in higher education,<sup>22</sup> but I argue that more needs to be done. There are still a relatively small number of Latina women who receive a bachelor's degree and successfully transition from higher education into professional environments.

Latina women face not only racial and socioeconomic ones, but also culturally embedded traditions and expectations that encourage them to believe in self-sacrifice and perpetually encourage them to follow rather than lead. Latina women are expected to sacrifice their personal goals and aspirations for the benefit of their family. They are encouraged (by parents, grandparents, siblings and friends) to prioritize marriage and children rearing before all else.<sup>23</sup> These stereotypes and expectations initiate self-doubt and cause deep-rooted insecurities and perhaps begin to explain the low graduation rates for Latinas from high schools and into college. Although many Latina women want to fight these stereotypes and traditions, most do not know where to turn to for support; there is a real and perceived lack of opportunities for Latinas within higher education, caused by a lack of knowledge about financial support, hard-to-find mentorship programs, the paucity of role models in most fields, and the access to professional positions post-graduation. The truth is that many Latina women do not know about the opportunities that are available to them.

Growing up as a Latina, in a low-income household, with parents who had not attended college in the USA, I did not know about the financial aid application process, or how to go about choosing or applying to a college. My high school teachers and

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<sup>22</sup> Paul Tough, "Who Gets to Graduate?," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 15, 2014.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/magazine/who-gets-to-graduate.html?_r=0)

<sup>23</sup> See Herculía B. Corona-Ordoñez, "Experiences of Latina First Generation College Students: Exploring Resources Supporting the Balancing of Academic Pursuits and Family Life," (PhD Diss., University of Massachusetts Boston, 2013), 6.

guidance counselors were not much help; my university application list consisted of schools suggested by counselors, and sadly most of these were two-year colleges in the local area. Latina/os frequently receive poor advice due to the advisors' low-expectations for them. In summary, Latinas face the usual challenges confronting most young women in college and society, but in addition to general gender biases, they find themselves facing a pernicious form of sexism from within their own communities. This complex blend of impediments makes Latinas substantially less likely to persevere in higher education, which makes them less likely to pursue a career that would be rewarding, lucrative and break cycles of poverty.

#### **THE RESULTS OF THE IRB SURVEY AND INTERVIEWS**

My own experience and initial research bore out the idea that structural racism and sexism, especially in high schools, constitute a substantial barrier for Latinas seeking to continue their studies at the college level. I was interested to learn if the barriers and inequalities I read about in high schools were also happening in higher education, so I decided to interview and collect stories from a diverse group of Latina women, both within and outside the university setting. I received Institutional Review Board approval to conduct a survey of Latina women on and off campus.<sup>24</sup> The group comprised students, non-students and professionals. I created an anonymous online survey, and also interviewed three Latina women in person. In addition, I received qualitative information from the 12 attendees at my workshops. Out of the 70 online respondents, nine did not respond to the status (student employment) question; 34% were students, 39% were employed and the 9% that responded "other" were working students, recently graduated students and self-employed (figure 3).

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<sup>24</sup> IRB Exempt Determination for Protocol number 2015-08-0090

#	Field	Choice Count
1	A Student	34.43% 21
2	Employed for Wages	39.34% 24
3	Self-Employed	13.11% 8
4	Military	0.00% 0
5	Retired	3.28% 2
6	Other. Please specify.	9.84% 6
		61

Other. Please specify.	
Temporary substitute teacher	
Recent grad	
Working student	
Part time employee	
Freelance	

Figure 3: *IRB Status Field Responses*. Qualtrics Online Survey report.

The respondents' ages were as follows; 19% were between 18-21, 10% were 36-40, and 9% were 41-45 (figure 4).

#	Field	Choice Count
1	18-21	19.67% 12
2	22-25	8.20% 5
3	26-30	9.84% 6
4	31-35	11.48% 7
5	36-40	16.39% 10
6	41-45	14.75% 9
7	46-50	8.20% 5
8	51 and older	11.48% 7
		61

Figure 4: *IRB Age Field Responses*: Qualtrics Online Survey report.

Some of the barriers the respondents identified were predictable—financial constraints, lack of academic preparedness, familial responsibilities, but other responses were shocking. It was surprising to hear that some women were encountering overt racism, in addition to less visible forms of structural racism. And, worse, many said that they felt uncomfortable discussing these instances of racism with faculty and administrators.

For example, my online survey questions did not ask respondents about racism, but nonetheless a number of answers talked about it. The following are representative answers to the question “What did you find challenging about school? What did you learn from it? Please share a story, if you'd like”:

“The culture shock. I remember my best friend at UT telling me a sorority girl called her a "Spic" her first weekend at UT. I was shocked by the blatant racism in my freshman and sophomore years (i.e., the catch an immigrant fiasco, the Fiji incident, the affirmative action bake sale) and the lack of institutional power to stop this.” (female, student at UT Austin, sophomore, age 18-21)

“I had a hard time with the counselors. Every time I needed guidance regarding classes or transferring I got conflicting information or just wrong information. Very frustrating” (female, non-student, 2-year associate degree, age 40-45)

“I always wanted to go to college but as I got older, I stopped believing I could. I grew up in a colonia and attended one of the poorest schools in the nation. I picked the message that college wasn't really an option mostly from educators with low expectations. I ended up in college because my older sister filled out the application for me.” (female, graduate student)

As a transfer and non-traditional student at a large university, I felt overwhelmed. I learned that I should stay on track no matter how long it takes. Looking back, if I could, I would try to transfer sooner. (female, working student, age 26-30)

Time and time again, the answers seemed to repeat themselves. The IRB-survey responses affirmed everything I had learned from books, that both subtle forms of structural racism and sexism, but also, and more surprisingly, acts of overt racism were still barriers to Latina women's success in higher education.

I have shared personal stories, historical facts, and survey responses to give a better understanding of the historical fabric that framed the educational opportunities for Latina/o children in the past that have brought us to the current state of affairs. These are the facts and experiences that have driven me to rethink the way I learn, teach and navigate in educational spaces and how others might do so.

## Chapter 3: Reframing the Personal as the Political

### REFRAMING WAYS OF KNOWING

If structural racism and sexism in schools, as well as overt discrimination, is contributing to the problem of Latina/os' relatively low college graduation rates by reinforcing negative stereotypes of Latina/os, how do we enact change? If this is the current state of affairs, how, then, do we bring about a paradigm shift? According to Duncan-Andrade, there are a few key elements that could build and sustain hope in the educational institutions. I would like to draw from three key elements: *acknowledgement*, *hope* and *healing*.<sup>25</sup>

First, we as *Latinas* and *oppressed* peoples need to acknowledge—following Paulo Freire's assertion in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—that the system is not designed for everyone and that legitimate suffering does exist. We need to recognize that academic and financial success is tied not only to an individual's talents and hard work, but also to their race, sex, class, religion and other factors that shape their professional success.

Second, we need to have hope, and not just foolish hope, but actionable hope. As Freire discusses, hope alone cannot transform the world: “action undertaken in that kind of naïveté, is an excellent route to hopelessness, pessimism, and fatalism. But the attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion.”<sup>26</sup>

Third, those who are oppressed need to engage with self-reflexive techniques and have a deep and authentic understanding of the causes of oppression. That means, first, informing young Latina women about the existence of oppressive structures and

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<sup>25</sup> See Jeffrey M.R. Duncan-Andrade, “Note to Educators: Hope Required When Growing Roses in Concrete,” *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol.79 (Summer 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Paulo Freire, “Note to Educators,” *Pedagogy of Hope, Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1998): 8.

educational practices, and encouraging them to understand that their “personal struggles” are shaped at least in part by failures of the educational system. Understanding oppressive structures is the first step in overcoming them, and minimizing individual and erroneous ideas of culpability. By becoming aware of these “unnatural causes,” young Latina women can begin a self-reflexive practice, and can in turn begin to re-imagine the opportunities available to them.

### **PERSEVERANCE WITHIN**

For this project, I am working under the assumption that the American public schools and school board officials will not make radical and progressive changes any time soon—inequality will continue to stretch until there is no more fabric to pull. In the meantime, strategies that support and encourage perseverance will be key. Recognizing flaws in the system, positively reframing one’s position and role within the system, and employing individual strategies to enhance agency and perseverance can have powerful effects on both individuals and institutions. My goal is to begin at the individual level to grow stronger communities that will collectively affect the change needed for the future. I would like to assert that by teaching young Latina women self-reflexive techniques and creating strong Latina networks within institutions of higher education, long-term positive, social change can be accomplished.

## Chapter 4: Designing: Responses, Commentaries and Objects

### IDENTITY AND THE PROCESS OF BECOMING

Before describing the design solution I proposed—workshops in which participants co-created transitional objects—it is important to introduce a series of earlier designs, experiments and iterations of my work, which I now realize initiated and enabled me to fine tune my own self-reflexive practice.

In graduate school, it was really overwhelming learning about the institutionalized discrimination and societal barriers facing Latina women and to realize how these factors shaped my own subjectivity, my self-doubt, insecurities, and feelings of inadequacy. To discover that there were theories and ways of articulating these oppressive structures was empowering, and led me to explore different ways of interpreting, communicating and representing the data gathered in response to individual, institutional and societal racism.

The following work contains remnants of, and to some extent comments and critiques on, the oppression I have experienced in educational environments. This early work does suggest opportunities for socio-political engagement, but it mainly represents ways of developing identity. Making them helped me engage with, communicate, and interpret the oppressive systems I experienced, including resistant responses. My purpose in documenting these works here is to demonstrate that my early projects, self-directed as they were, served not only as coping mechanisms for me, but also as springboards for the workshop that came after. These works exemplify Csikszentmihalyi's point that *making* things can themselves be part of a therapeutic process, which is an idea I later used in the workshops.

**PROJECT: EMBODIMENT (SPRING 2015)**

*Embodiment* was a series of three necklaces (figures 5-7). It dealt with narratives of inadequacy, self-doubt and insecurities, and questioned the boundaries between artistry and artisan, art and craft. The necklaces represented the constraints and oppressive structures surrounding my educational experience. They were industrial, ugly, and yet beautiful; they embodied the personal hardships imposed by societal limitations surrounding me. *Still* (figure 5) represented the paralyzing structures surrounding my progress in life. *Factory* (figure 6) was a direct response to the “factory” education I received growing up, where Latino students are taught to think of themselves a certain way (e.g. working class) without having the opportunity to explore their potential. *Keeper* (figure 7) epitomized protective forms from oppressive social structures, yet indicated the limited knowledge I had attained at the time. They certainly did not interrupt oppressive environments and/or institutions. In short, my own protective artifacts were also constraints: limiting my ability to truly move forward.



Figure 5: *Still* (materials: steel and twine). Photo by Dat Mai



Figure 6: *Factory* (materials: metal, fasteners, and rivets). Photo by Dat Mai.



Figure 7: *Keeper* (materials: 1/8" steel rods and fabric). Photo by Dat Mai.

**PROJECT: *HEADDRESS* (SPRING 2015)**

*Headdress* (figures 8 & 9) was a speculative design project that used sensory technology to track the user's heart rate and tension levels. The garment has sharp edges extending outwardly, constructed from fabric that stretched to a rigid cardboard material to create the wings.

I wore the garment in Austin and video-documented the experience as viewers responded to me, and the artifact. Although I felt quite adventurous, even brave wearing the garment, it did not yield the results I had hoped for. The failure to initiate public discourse through a wearable garment did, however, help inform later designs.



Figures 8 & 9: *Headdress* (fabric, paper and thread). Photo by author.

**PROJECT: *THE WALL* (SUMMER 2015)**

*The Wall* (figure 10) was an installation made from concrete and red thread. The concept of the piece was to illustrate the larger societal issues that minority students have dealt with. It represented the outsider-within concept and it spoke to the Americanization-through-assimilation I had experienced; it helped me understand the contradictions in my own identity. A small concrete wall was connected to the wall of the building housing the work by a red thread that spanned across the room, about 10 feet from the wall. On the other side of the wall, a small brick clenched the red thread. This project allowed me to explore and process all the information I was learning about the American educational system. This work was not only a commentary on identity, but also on the contradiction of becoming part of the larger system. *The Wall* helped me articulate and understand that thinking in assimilationist binaries is limiting, and that there are in-between spaces of potential that need to be explored and discussed. By using a designer's thinking through making strategy, I recognized that these interstitial spaces communicate identity formation—even if they were not the familiar environments to me—they allowed me to venture into new, exciting and nuanced territories.

Although none of these explorations up to this point felt resolved, they helped me identify a fruitful territory for future exploration, and allowed me to redefine the systemic oppressive patterns I was experiencing in the process. These were defensive, reactive approaches to pressing societal issues, they articulated particular conditions, but they did not transform the situation. I had hoped that they would build my confidence, but they only seemed to reinforce oppressive belief systems. However, thinking through making helped me narrow and reframe my research so I decided to continue forward and internalize theories using form and materials.

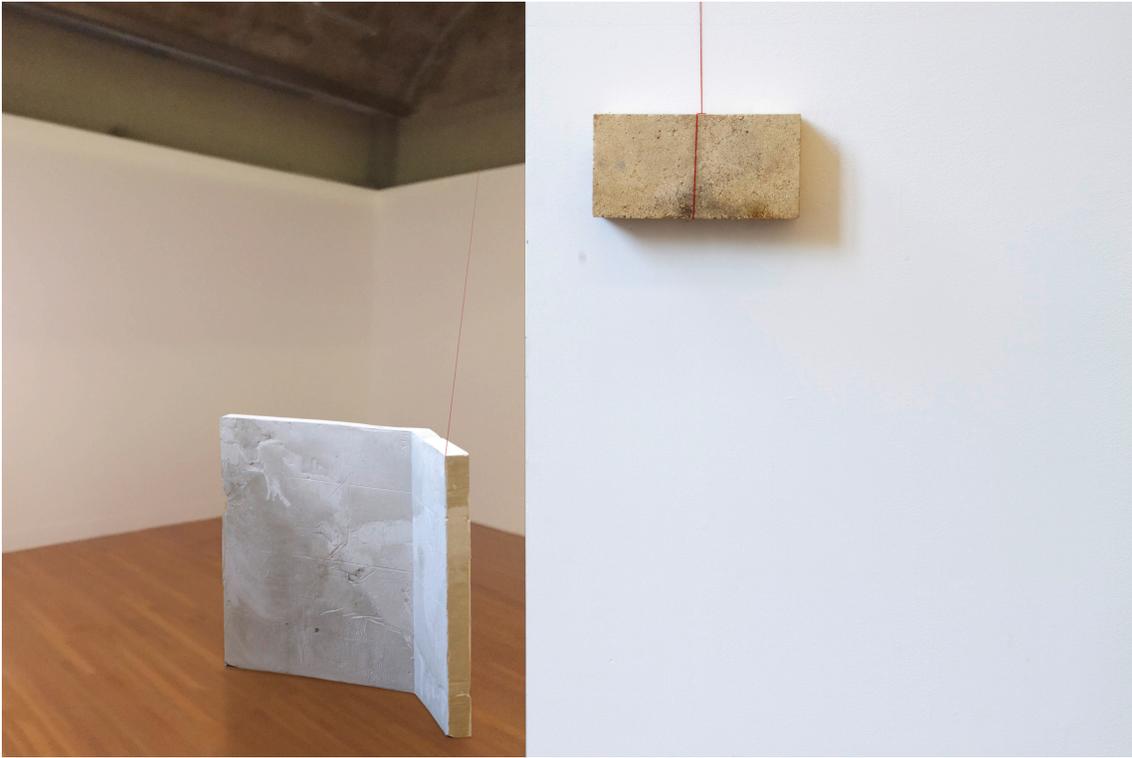


Figure 10: *The Wall* (concrete, red thread, brick). Photo by author.

**PROJECT: *RHYTHMIC LANDSCAPE* (FALL 2015)**

*Rhythmic Landscape*, my next work, was paired with an audio project called *Stories*. *Rhythmic Landscape* is the visual representation of the background music used in *Stories* and it introduces a series of counter-narratives disrupting assumptions about the typical ways of knowing and learning in the American educational system.

*Stories* (a work still in progress) collected oral histories of and for the Latina community. The project was designed to share Latina struggles and provide an alternative to the mainstream stories learned in classrooms. Historically, American society suppresses minority narratives. The stories of people of color, which have much value, have been absent in classrooms across the nation. By recording and airing these stories, I aim to establish counter-narratives that expand opportunities for other histories and

voices to be heard, creating a nuanced understanding of the Latina experience. This project, because it involved other people and their stories, was far more fulfilling than the previous ones, and represented a more fruitful path forward.

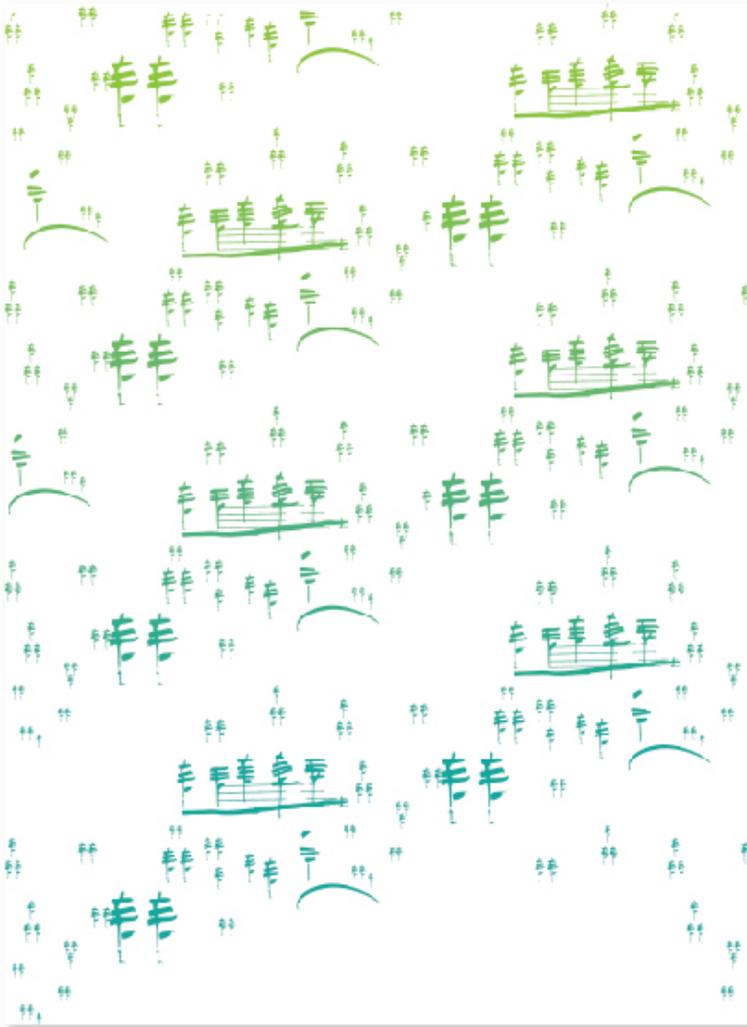


Figure 11: *Rhythmic Landscape* (screenprint). Photo by author.

## Chapter 5: Formation of the *Ola* Workshops

### BACKGROUND

Taking a series of courses over the past two years that identified and explained societal barriers confronting Latina women really overwhelmed me. Recognizing social privilege, the subjectivity inherent in our system and how societal barriers are constructed as—in some respects—a privileged Latina, I realized that I had a responsibility to share my knowledge, to open up educational spaces and to have dialogue about identity, gender, race and class. This meant going beyond the “critical design” response of making commentaries that do not actually lead to social or political change. I felt the need to design spaces conducive to learning about the “other” while embracing my own cultures and histories in order to combat oppression. I realized that it would be impossible to change the educational system in the ways I thought were necessary from the top down, so I started at the ground level and decided to undertake smaller interventions, seek smaller solutions (individual approaches rather than institutional) that could be deployed within and outside existing educational institutions. This would mean that initially I could only reach a smaller group of women, but hopefully generate a rhizome network of Latina women.

I began to think about how I might share my personal experiences and recent realizations about the systemic nature of the barriers to Latinas’ educational success in ways that might help younger Latina women recognize that some of the difficulties they faced were structural, and *not* a result of their personal failings. My decision to initiate a design workshop was inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of the *Mestiza* consciousness, which involves an outsider-within status. She describes this consciousness as “the ability to hold multiple social perspectives while simultaneously maintaining a center that

revolves around fighting against concrete material forms of oppression.”<sup>27</sup> D.W. Winnicott’s theory of Transitional Objects was also a big influence in my design of the workshop, as was Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope*, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi’s *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* and Jack Kornfield’s *Meditation for Beginners*.

The goal of the workshops I designed was to open up a space where Latinas could discuss barriers to success, and feel comfortable doing so, in the hope that recognizing their shared experiences would inspire them to keep moving forward rather than being paralyzed by self-doubt. The workshops were meant to help students realize “*it’s not me that’s inhibiting my efforts*” and to recognize the extent to which the problem also lies in larger institutional and societal systems latently, or deliberately, designed to prevent success for minorities and marginalized groups. I thought that sharing this realization with younger Latinas would help them understand that many of the struggles facing them and their families were not exceptional, but typical. The workshops were also designed to connect Latinas in higher education with others like themselves, and in turn, to the larger community. I decided to open the first workshop by sharing my own story, alongside a history of Latina women here in Austin. I thought that these stories might be directly relevant to participants and might also create a wider, critical lens through which to consider their own educational experiences.

I selected and invited the first group of participants in person. I spoke to a class in order to identify potential volunteers for the second and third workshops and then I invited participants by word of mouth and through recommendations. The only selection criteria I imposed were that participants had to be college-going Latinas of Mexican,

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<sup>27</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2007): 7.

Mexican-American, or Latin American descent. All the participants, including note-takers, were given a clear description of the workshop in advance. The first workshop, held at UT Austin, comprised of five Latina students from the Theater Department, the Art Department and the College of Liberal Arts at University of Texas. The second workshop held in the Gordon White Building, UT Austin, were invited to participate in the workshop having been recommended by participants from the first workshop. There were six Latina students, all from different departments. All the participants were given a photo/video release form, attached below.

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TEXAS  
AT AUSTIN

WHAT STARTS HERE CHANGES THE WORLD

Talent Release Form

For valuable consideration, I do hereby authorize The University of Texas, and those acting pursuant to its authority to:

- Record my participation and appearance on videotape, audiotape, film, photograph or any other medium.
- Use my name, likeness, voice and biographical material in connection with these recordings.
- Exhibit or distribute such recording in whole or in part without restrictions or limitation for any educational or promotional purpose which The University of Texas, and those acting pursuant to its authority, deem appropriate.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

If under 18: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Office of the Vice President of Legal Affairs      University Communications

Figure 12: *Photo Release Form, The University of Texas at Austin.*<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Talent Release Form, The University of Texas at Austin, [https://www.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/files/Talent\\_Release\\_form.pdf](https://www.utexas.edu/sites/default/files/files/Talent_Release_form.pdf).

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE WORKSHOP**

The objective of the workshop was to help young Latina women persevere in higher education through 1) sharing stories orally and in writing without the burden of being classified or categorized by others, 2) encouraging participants to reframe personal experiences as political ones, 3) practicing using self-reflexive and meditative techniques to combat the self-doubt caused by oppressive structures, and 4) creating jewelry that serves as transitional objects or *aides-mémoires* of the experience.

The workshop was divided into three different sections: Sharing, Listening and Reflection. Within those three sections, there were three key components:

1. Identity Development
2. Transitional Objects
3. Self-reflective, Meditative Techniques

The content of the workshops developed somewhat intuitively, growing out of readings and practices I had used successfully in my personal experiences. The workshop was designed to have an upbeat mood in the beginning, to be an active space where participants were writing, making and communicating with each other, and then to shift to a peaceful, meditative environment where reflection might take place. This was accomplished through verbal instructions, visual application and making.

Below is the template I designed and followed for all the workshops.

**OLA Workshops**  
**Catalysts for self-empowerment.**  
**Working together for progress.**  
**Live. Love. Make.**

**Objective:** To motivate young Latina women. Through self-reflective techniques, we can motivate, teach and share practices that can be useful during stressful situations. Help them find inner-strength through the art of making and meditation.

**Lesson:** Identity development: participants will write, explore and learn about the self, identity, race and gender in educational environments. Through jewelry making, students will learn to work collaboratively and individually to build a stronger community within.

**A) Introduction:**

**Prompt:** How do you feel right now? Write or draw an emotion. (or Print emotions and have them pick one.) Privately write and save.

**a. Ice-breaker:**

Tell the story of your name.

What makes you get up in the morning?

Who are your people? Your community?

**b. Facilitator's story:**

Who you are and why you're doing what you're doing?  
Share the objective of the workshop, again. Show history of women who have fought for civil rights.

Ask them what history they know about the Mexican/American/Latino immigrants in the US. Yes, it's true. Mexican Americans did not progress as fast as Euro-Americans. But there are success stories sprinkled throughout history. They did not sit, quietly—they fought for their human rights. The fact that you are here, today, shows that we have progressed.

**Play video:** <http://www.lpbp.org/programs/tv/LaTejana.html>

Pump up the music. (upbeat music to get everyone energized)

Have them select a jewelry piece.

**(B) Start Making**

- a. Give them instructions on how to finish their piece. Ask how many of them have made art, metalwork, jewelry or woodworking. Are they familiar with the following tools?

**i. Definition of tools:**

1. Dremel
2. Sanding
3. Wet Sanding

**(C) Identity Development: Metaphors**

**a. Prompt:** Look at your pendant, learn its imperfections, the odd little nooks and crannies, the shape ... it represents you. Your character. That little something that represents your personality. Send your pendant, left and then, right. Now, find your pendant.

**b. Engagement:** (as they make, ask...) What makes you happy? What are you intensely interested in? What activities make you feel alive? What do you enjoy talking about most? When do you feel like a rock star? When do you feel most like yourself?

**These questions are designed to introduce positivity.**

**(D) Deep reflection:** read a poem from Sonnets and Salsa

a. Your pendant is a reminder of the warmth, family, friends and happy emotions you felt, today. It represents the people that support you, the spark you feel inside, the confidence you feel right now. Whenever, you're having a rough day, remember ...each time the pendant touches your skin, hands and chest ... it is a symbol of empowerment. It's a reminder that there are energies surrounding you and protecting you, they might not be physically there, but the energy is there.

b. Write a paragraph about how you feel right now and the experience.

**(E) Closing notes**

- a. This workshop made me think of ...
- i. Describe it. What thoughts crossed your mind?
  - ii. Analyze it. Why did this make me feel this way?
  - iii. Reflect on it. Is this feeling something I want to keep exploring?

**Thank you! You are the Catalysts for Change.**

Figure 13: *Workshop Creativity Flow*. Photo by author.

## **NAMING THE WORKSHOP**

The name of the workshop, OLA, is a play on words. First, it sounds like the Spanish word *hola*, or hello, which is appropriate for a workshop populated by people who have not necessarily met each other previously. Second, it was inspired by the notion of small actions having ripple effects, just as a rock thrown into a lake produces a ripple or a wave (*ola* means *wave* in Spanish). Third, the name of the workshop is also an acronym that stands for Observant Latina Action; the word “observant” in the title is a reference to awareness. If we are aware of patterns and systems that form us, we can begin to identify their origins and be in a position to maybe, changing them.

## **SECTION 1 OF THE WORKSHOP: IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

The workshop started with three simple prompts: *tell me a story about your name; why do you get up in the morning?; and who is your community?*<sup>29</sup> These simple prompts were enough to get the conversation going and successfully initiate dialogue about identity and the perception of society and community. During this section of the workshop, I simply became a listener. I allowed for the conversation to flow in whichever way the young women wanted to take it. They shared anecdotes and stories about things that they had experienced and incidents their families had experienced. As the facilitator, I simply pointed out that there were a lot of similarities in everyone’s experiences.

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<sup>29</sup> [https://sites.ualberta.ca/~chernyav/Local\\_Cultureweb/Method2.htm](https://sites.ualberta.ca/~chernyav/Local_Cultureweb/Method2.htm)

## SECTION 2 OF THE WORKSHOP: JEWELRY AS TRANSITIONAL OBJECT

I decided to have participants in the workshops create a piece of jewelry, specifically a pendant. Because jewelry is a form of cultural expression that has traditionally represented human culture, status, power, religious affiliation, and affection, making it allows access to a mode of non-verbal communication in which the participant can express a personal emotion or feeling that only the individual can access during times of need. The act of making this piece *activated* the object for the individual, helping it serve effectively as an *aide-mémoire* or transitional object. I wanted the participants to develop an intimate connection to the jewelry and use it as a reminder of the discoveries made during the workshop. Additionally, I wanted the participants to carry this personal object close to them, close to the body, to be able to *activate* it, quickly, when needed. The idea is derived from D.W. Winnicott's theory on transitional objects and phenomena. For Winnicott, a transitional object works as a soothing mechanism for a child when dealing with the gap, or separation, from the mother. In a later essay, however, Winnicott argued that transitional objects could also help adults ease anxieties caused by cultural traditions and experiences.<sup>30</sup>

My initial impulse was to make the pendants using metals—aluminum, silver and/or gold—to create a sense of power where the participants could connect to a typical notions of value associated with the jewelry, but I quickly realized that metal was both too expensive and impractical for participants to shape and polish in a workshop, so I decided to use natural materials. Wood has positive connotations of truth, honesty, humility, and nature, and it was cheaper, easier, and safer for participants to work with than metals. I used walnut to represent clarity and focus, oak for strength and maple for

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<sup>30</sup> See Annette Kuhn, *Little Madnesses: Winnicott, Transitional Phenomena and Cultural Experience*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 5.

giving to benefit others. My choice to use wood was affirmed when a participant in the second workshop quickly identified and connected to a dark spot on the wood. Not only did she identify with the pendant based on the location of a mole, but she also connected to the color of the wood to her skin color. In other words, the unique colors and visual characteristics of the wood made it particularly easy to connect with. Below is a sample of the jewelry designs.



Figure 14: *3 Jewelry Pieces* (material: aluminum, wood). Photo by author.

I provided participants with three different pendant shapes. Each proposed a different mode of being, as mentioned above (figures 15-23). First was a rock, which represented the strength in a community; if we just stop and acknowledge our histories, we can begin

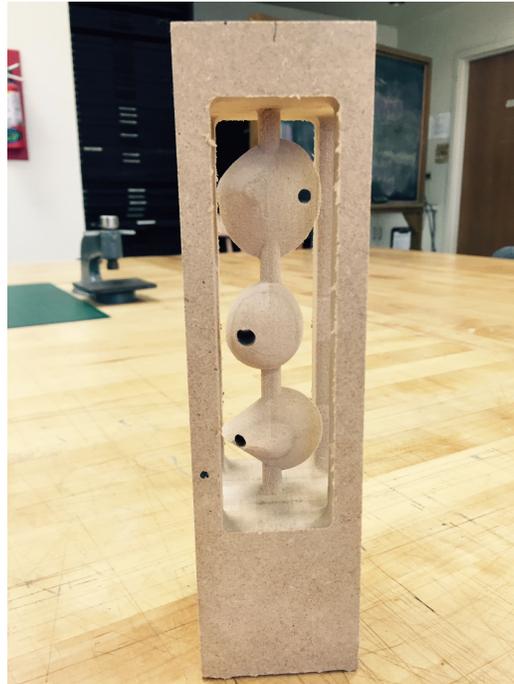
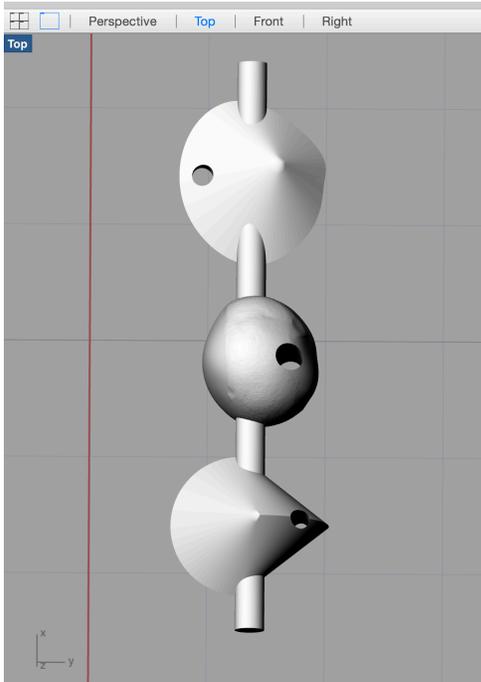
to heal and strengthen our communities. Second, was a seashell, which represented the power within; if we just stop and listen, taking a moment can give us a different perspective on our experiences and environment. Third was a Mobius shape, which represented the dualities in identities that follow the Latina experience; if we acknowledge our surroundings and know our histories, we can shift to forms that can persevere against challenges facing our communities. Two out of the three shapes were hand-made and scanned; the Mobius shape was computer-generated. The computer-generated design started from an infinity symbol and was later converted to a three-dimensional shape. The hand-molded pieces were first created out of clay (see figures 15 & 16), then scanned and modified in Rhino. They were then fabricated via a 3-point router (see figure 17 for the hand-shaped forms and figure 18 for the scanning process). The three-dimensional pieces were also converted back to simple two-dimensional illustrations. Three pieces were produced at a time, taking about 4-hours to carve (figure 21). The rough, unfinished pieces were then taken to the workshops where they were finished by participants (figure 23).



Figures 15 & 16: Step 1: *Molding Shape in Clay*. Photo by author.



Figures 17 & 18: Step 2: *Scanning Shapes*. Photo by author.



Figures 19 & 20: Step 3: *Rendering & Processing*. Photo by author.



Figure 21: Step 4: *Milling on the Router*. Photo by author.



Figure 22: *Carved, unfinished pieces.* Photo by author.



Figure 23: *Participant finishing a piece.* Photo by Dat Mai

### SECTION 3 OF THE WORKSHOP: SELF-REFLECTION

During this portion of the workshop—as the participants polished their pendants to a personally pleasing, smooth surface—I read poems from Carmen Tafolla’s *Sonnets and Salsa* and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*. These poems were important because they expressed perseverance over personal, cultural and societal struggles. I mentioned that they had just participated in an act of making and that this particular process was a wonderful entry point for self-reflection. I gave them a few moments to either think about or write about how that activity made them feel. The questions I used for this particular section were: *what thoughts crossed your mind?; why did this activity make you feel this way?; is this something you want to keep exploring?; describe it and analyze it.* On the next prompt, I had them think about the people they had mentioned earlier in the workshop that had supported and inspired them. I mentioned that I believed that the pendants represented those people and that I hoped they were also a reflection of the confidence and happiness they felt after completing this activity. I mentioned that this activity was a type of meditation—a practice that could be done anytime and anywhere—and could be used to help relax the busy, stressed mind.

The self-reflection portion built upon a strategy developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and discussed in his book *The Flow of Creativity*, in which he declared the importance of *making*—or *flow* as he calls it—and its importance to individuals’ happiness and consciousness. He says that, as human beings, we are programmed for creativity and the act of making could help evolve our consciousness.<sup>31</sup>

What is the relation between *making* and *happiness*? For me, for example, when I’m in the process of making, my mind is focused only on that activity, nothing else

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<sup>31</sup>Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. HarperPerennial, 1997, 108.

matters at that moment. It is not until after the act is finished that I feel a sense accomplishment, satisfaction, and even wellbeing. Acknowledging this sequence sparked my connection between making, happiness and meditation. I had practiced meditation for a couple of years prior to starting graduate school, and it took me a long time to get into the practice and quickly fell out of practice after starting school. I realized that during my design practice and making process, I achieved similar moments of happiness and reflection as in meditation. It made sense to have participants actively make something rather than just sharing my story and historical facts. It would have been hard for me to connect with the participants and almost impossible to build the instant communal sense of achievement and joy we attained. The session ended with the young women sharing one thing they realized and/or reflected on during the workshop.



Figure 24: *Participant at First Workshop*. Photo by Dat Mai.

## **MY REFLECTION ON THE WORKSHOPS**

The two workshops at UT Austin were, in my opinion, a great success as prototypes and allowed me to develop and refine the concept. The feedback I received from the participants was positive. The workshops were scheduled for three hours, but both ran longer, as participants enjoyed the process and requested additional time.

I began by making a presentation citing historical facts and the more recent demographic information regarding Latina/os in the USA. I also shared my own story and images of my work. This portion of the workshop took about 20 minutes; the rest of the time was focused on participant discussion and the making component of the workshop. Initially, there were no time limits on the sharing portion of the workshop, but when the first workshop ran over time by about an hour and a half; I quickly realized that I needed to give each participant the same amount of time (5-minutes per) and guide the group through the process more swiftly. Managing time more effectively in this section meant that the second workshop only went over by 30-minutes. Despite reducing the sharing portion of the workshop, I still did not have enough time to have a discussion about meditation and its importance on inner strength. This section required an extensive and comprehensive introduction in order for the participants to have a deeper understanding of techniques and practice skills. Regardless, I briefly discussed different forms of meditation and shared a couple of quotes from meditation practitioners. For future workshops, I would like to extend this portion of the workshop and introduce additional meditation lessons and techniques. This will require additional research and a better understanding and knowledge of the meditation practices on a personal level.

## Chapter 6: Formation of the Exhibition

My thesis exhibition presented documentation of the workshops and communicated the Latina experience in the USA to a broad and potentially uninitiated audience through a collection of objects, materials and forms. In my exhibition, I included the following works:

*Stories* – an anonymous audio collection—represented commonality to other Latina women and offered a counter-narrative to the uninitiated audience.

*Video* – documented and communicated the atmosphere of the workshop.

*Mirror* – communicated statistics about Latinos in higher education. Similar to Maya Lin’s Vietnam memorial—reading statistics over one’s face heightened empathy—the mirror connected the viewer to the Latina/o community.

*Jewelry* – embodied the essence of the pieces created during the workshop and represented the evolution of the shapes, form and material. The quantity of the pendants represented the rhizome effect of the workshops.

*Shelves* – supported and embraced the finished jewelry, but mainly strengthen the memory of the workshops to the participants.

The form of the exhibition installation imparted and underscored experiences created during the workshops, from the blue wall I used to create a soothing atmosphere, the light-colored wood shelves I designed to create warmth and the curved shelves that welcomed and embraced the audience. The mirror was chosen to *reflect* the statistics of the Latino community in higher education and their internal struggle; the audio was intentionally designed for headphones to create an intimate moment for the listener. The video brought the workshop experience to the gallery so the audience could observe both the jewelry-making process and a sampling of the interchange among the participants.

Both the tabletop and the shelves used unfinished birch wood to represent bareness, honesty and truth.



Figure 25: *Exhibition Space 1*. Photo by Dat Mai.



Figure 26: *Exhibition Space 2*. Photo by Dat Mai.



Figure 27: *Exhibition Opening Night 1*. Photo by Dat Mai.



Figure 28: *Exhibition Opening Night 2*. Photo by Dat Mai.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions

In recent decades design has moved beyond the object—it has evolved to discussions of sustainability, tech-appreciation, forms of collaboration and designing for meaningful, positive social changes. In the spirit of Thackara’s *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*, I have decided to focus my thesis on people, not objects. But rather than simply abandoning the object, I have reassigned meaning to designed objects, using them as tools to empower individuals. As Claudia Dona aptly observes, “after centuries of building objects as projections of our bodies, we can now begin to consider them as projections of our minds.”<sup>32</sup> Like design of yesteryear, the work completed for my MFA project presents beautiful objects and spaces; however, those objects are deployed as part of a larger system and utilized as tools to transform current social conditions. The design elements I deployed included research, analysis, prototyping, and community-centered design. I am focused on supporting individuals, in this case Latinas, as they persevere on their journey through higher education and negotiate a hybrid cultural experience. The workshops, however, can reach many by rhizomatically, creating networks of Latinas moving through higher educational institutions and establishing themselves professionally, so a small intervention might have a longer, far-reaching change, and hopefully, evolve into an ongoing support network. By encouraging small changes in the community and focusing on teaching Latina women self-reflective techniques, we can generate long-term societal changes to build stronger communities, and ultimately effect political change for the Latina/o population.

The objects presented in the exhibition, especially *Stories*, the audio component in the space, are the beginning of a life-long project. They offer a new perspective on the

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<sup>32</sup> Claudia Dona, “Invisible Design”, *Design After Modernism: Beyond the Object*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1988, 152.

Latina experience and bring a different form of engagement with the community. The success of my workshops—only three in number at this point—can be measured by the participants’ feedback. Below are a couple of inspiring quotes that have encouraged me to continue with this project in this specific field of design.

“The workshop was a wonderful experience. I felt less stressed and more in touch with myself at the end, with something tangible as a keepsake.”

Female, UT Student, age 19-25

“The workshop allowed me to be something I’m rarely capable of—I was relaxed, calm, and most surprisingly my head was clear. On top of that, I felt peace in being able to express my feelings with other girls in a peaceful environment.”

Female, UT Student, age 19-25

“It was great to work alongside my friends during this workshop. Angelica provided an environment in which we could open up and talk about ourselves in regards to our roots, culture and the importance of education. The entire experience as a whole was amazing!”

Female, UT Student, age 19-25

The workshops grew out of my own struggles to succeed in higher education, and my desire to help other Latinas understand that their “personal struggles” were, indeed, part of a shared experience, and often not that personal after all. I started my path by making personally expressive works, but ended by designing experiences that could be shared by many people and that could help empower Latinas to persevere in higher education (as opposed to just commenting on, or expressing my own frustrations with, the unfairness of the educational system). I would like to think I’ve contributed to an area of investigation in the field of community-centered design, and will continue to expand my research and assist in the building of stronger communities and more equitable structures for all humankind.

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