Building a Community of Educators of Color as Rebellion: Struggles toward a Rightful Presence in a Historically White Institution

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It's important, therefore, to know who the real enemy is, and to know the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being... There will always be one more thing.

Toni Morrison

In this structured conversation, you will hear from two young Chicana women, both first generation college students, working collectively to change the social order and how society functions, for themselves and their students.

The Educators of Color Club was established at Cal Poly, the Whitest public university in the state of California, during the 2020-21 academic year, by Cecilia Guzman, a Liberal Studies major and aspiring teacher. Building community was a way of coping with the “twindemics” of the time—the COVID-19 pandemic and the backlash against protests for racial equity in the face of police brutality and white supremacy.

Word spread quickly and membership swelled as the student-led network of care addressed students’ needs for a community and a space of their own. The club gave students a way of transforming their own educational experiences in real time and engaging in collective action for change even as the fractious national public discourse, local racial unrest and protests in the streets amplified anti-immigrant rhetoric on campus and in the San Luis Obispo area. The Educators of Color Club united students across multiple levels of professional development, from those early in their undergraduate preparation to newly credentialed teachers preparing to lead their own classrooms.

As an advocate for educators of Color on our campus, Dr. Cheuk had the pleasure of working with and learning from Cecilia and her successor as EOC President, Manuela G. Cruz Sebastian, as their faculty advisor and mentor as they began their journey as future educators and student activists. After Dr. Frye joined the Cal Poly faculty in the summer of 2020 and became faculty co-advisor of the Educators of Color Club, she worked with Dr. Cheuk to find research and institutional support for the club and for a program of research focused on the needs of aspiring teachers of Color as they progress through the teacher educator pipeline from undergraduates, through credentialing and masters’ programs, and into the early years of their careers as established educators.

As researchers and practitioners, Drs Cheuk and Frye build on existing research showing that strengthening teacher networks, creating critical affinity groups, and engaging in critical

interacial dialogue are robust strategies for helping aspiring teachers of Color and of immigrant origin navigate the myriad of challenges they face. Using community cultural wealth and critical race theory as complementary frameworks allows them to challenge the deficit framing of students of Color and aspiring teachers of Color and instead examine how these groups activate multiple forms of accumulated assets and resources to navigate institutions of higher education and develop careers in education.

Dr. Cheuk set the tone of the conversation by asking Cecilia and Manuela some big questions around their efforts around student organizing and community building, what drew them to perform these acts of “rebellion,” and whether they are hopeful for the future, especially for the next generation of educators of Color who enter higher educational institutions that continue to endear themselves toward White supremacist capitalist patriarchal systems. We invite the readers to consider themes of struggle, belonging, and community and how these student activists are creating a rightful presence and community of their own, transforming their own educational experience as well as those who will follow them, as anti-immigrant discourse and racial unrest continues to reverberate both in the halls of higher educational spaces as well as across the country.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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Tina (she/her): Tell me a little bit about yourself and your educational journey.

Cecilia (she/ella): I am a first-generation, low-income, college graduate. In 2021, I graduated from Cal Poly with a degree in liberal studies and a minor in ethnic studies. I’m currently in a graduate program in higher education and student affairs at the University of San Francisco and am an academic advisor for Upward Bound, serving 63 low-income, first-generation high school students in Sonoma County. As I like to say, I am sending the elevator back down to students who are like me. I was in Upward Bound, so I’ve always wanted to go back and work in that same program and now that I have the chance to do that.

Manuela (she/ella): I’m an indigenous woman, a Oaxaqueña, who migrated with my parents and siblings to Santa Maria to work as farm laborers. I went to Allan Hancock Community College for quite a few years and then I transferred to Cal Poly to complete my undergraduate degree. I got a Bachelor of Science in

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7 Lorgia García Peña, Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2022).

Manuela: My family has been amazing and supportive through my educational journey. It took me a long time to find my path. Being from a low-income family and a single parent, it was challenging to return to school and feel like this is what I had to do full time, especially when my parents were struggling as farm workers. Every day, they were working in the fields picking fruits and vegetables. I felt like my job really was dependent on our family’s survival, so it was hard for me [to go back to school full time].

When my siblings were a little bit younger, it was hard to leave them to focus on myself in school. So that’s partly why I was in community college for a long time—I was taking one class at a time or two classes at most. My family has been in full support of me and they have done everything that they can to get to where I am today. For my other family members, including my son, it’s been hard for them to know what and how to support. They are there to encourage and just be there as my support system as I went back and did my education.

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and what that looks like. Two other faculty members, Dr. José Navarro and Dr. Oscar Navarro, encouraged me to start the Educators of Color club.

Tina: What motivated you to start the Educators of Color club at Cal Poly?

Cecilia: In my second year in college, I was transferring from Math to Anthropology, then finally to Liberal Studies. I looked around to see who wanted to go into education and become teachers.

All throughout my freshman year, I felt like I didn’t belong in my own major—I felt isolated. I knew that California was racially diverse. Yet, my peers in the Liberal Studies Program were predominantly White.

I wanted to create a space to feel like I belonged. It wasn’t until I remember seeing Brown people at a picnic hosted by Liberal Studies. I immediately went to them and started a conversation, excited to find people who looked like me and were in my major.

Manuela: I definitely remember Cecilia at the picnic, and I was so grateful for Cecilia for being there. Like her, going into the Liberal Studies Program, I wanted to be the teacher that reflected my own lived experiences. With all of the other students in the program I felt out of place. When Cecilia came to me and Francisca, another Latina student in the major, I felt so welcomed by her.

At this SCTA\(^{10}\) meeting, I felt almost as if they [the White students] were the ones in charge, and I had no opinion. I did not feel comfortable or welcomed but I had to be there because it was part of my class. I was there to get information and that was it. It wasn’t a welcoming environment. When Cecilia mentioned making the club

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\(^{10}\) SCTA [Student California Teachers Association] is a professional organization for college students in California who are pursuing careers in education.
centered on the lives of educators of Color, it was definitely the most amazing thing, if we could make it happen.

Cecilia had that vision to put into practice how to make it into a reality. The chance encounter at the picnic with Cecilia changed my path. My goal was to come in and leave. Do my education. I didn’t have any friends when I transferred here from the community college, and I wasn’t at Cal Poly to “make friends” because, at first, I didn’t feel comfortable either. Meeting Cecilia changed my path, it made me see and realize that I belong here in higher education.

Tina: Cecilia, tell me about your goals and your vision for this club. Especially in the early days, what experiences motivated you?

Cecilia: When Mandela was talking about the SCTA meeting, I remember going there and thinking, “Okay, since I know I wanted to do education and pursue this as a career, I’m going to attend these meetings. I wanted to be dedicated and do this right and become an officer of this student club. I got involved because I believe that having a community outside of the classroom is important. I went to those meetings. At one of the meetings, I went with Manuela and Francisca. and I remember feeling at my gut level—I felt like I just did not belong. Even though we were all the same major and wanted to be educators, I thought we would all be on the same page. I know it wasn’t their intention to make us feel very out of place. It was this feeling that didn’t feel right.

Yet, I still wanted to be part of this club because I wanted to be involved. But then I remember hearing that once I had applied to be in a leadership position within SCTA, my peers started saying something to the effect that I was “racist towards White people” and wouldn’t qualify to be an officer within SCTA. I immediately thought that’s impossible. I remember sharing this with one of my faculty mentors. You can only imagine how this made me feel. These are the same women who are in my major who wanted to be educators yet were so quick to judge me in terms of how much I advocated for myself and how much I wanted to advocate for the students who they were going to be teaching! I remember sitting down and thought, “How am I going to be in a club that isn’t welcoming and isn’t open to different opinions to different identities?” At the same time, I was also trying to make sure that my voice was being heard in this major because Liberal Studies was a predominantly White women major; whereas the students that they are going to be teaching will be very diverse.

I wanted to make a club that didn’t just talk about how to get fingerprint Live Scan, but rather how we could provide financial support to students who the cost would be a barrier. I wanted to create a book library and exchange for students who couldn’t afford to buy or rent books every quarter. I wanted a space to talk about different opportunities that were outside of classroom teaching that were about education, because I didn’t want to be a teacher. I wanted to do more community-based outreach so that we weren’t so insular and isolated from students and their families.

I knew that I needed that support system and there wasn’t one. So I needed to create it with others. Creating this space and the club not only provided us that safe community, but also, it saved me from being pushed out from this major that I knew I was passionate about. I hope the community is a legacy that carries on, not just for me, but because I want other future educators of Color to have that support system.

Tina: Talk to me a little bit about your organizing and community-building efforts. What drew you and your colleagues into this space to work in solidarity and focus on your strengths?

Manuela: Part of it was just being able to have that space where we feel comfortable.
There was not this safe space for students of Color here. I didn’t feel welcomed at Cal Poly, especially as an undergrad. This club was about having that space where we were able to understand what other students of Color were coming from.

We started the first meeting wanting to do everything that was mentioned earlier by Cecilia. We talked about building an exchange library, raising funds to help pay for so many of the fees associated with being a teacher. That first winter, Cecilia and I led our winter fund-raising event. The donations went towards our club buying and distributing toys, books, and pajamas for over 100 children of farmworkers in Santa Maria. It was at this event we realized the potential we had as educators of Color—working to serve in the communities that we grew up, and schooled at, and would return and become teachers and leaders.

I know our efforts don’t address the root causes of income, food, and housing insecurities that so many of our young students and their families face, but as students in higher education, we were able to have that voice and make those connections with each other and with our local communities was an important step for us. To see us work together, students of Color all in one room. It wasn’t just me, or just Cecilia, it was all of us working together to make this happen for our community.

With the pandemic that started in the spring, we got a lot of students of Color craving connection with those who shared lived experiences like them—and to have a safe space to talk about what our community needed. Especially with George Floyd’s murder and Black Lives Matter, we were able to talk about how we felt—in classes where most of the students are White, and process what it has been like to navigate those conversations and silences, and those unspoken feelings that our White colleagues might have felt or projected about us, Black and Brown people.

Cecilia: Partly, our solidarity emerged as we were bonding through trauma, navigating our daily lives in a PWI (Predominantly White Institution).

I’ve had a lot of people ask me whether I regret going to Cal Poly. Or do I wish that I had gone to a Hispanic Serving Institution? No. I don’t regret it. If it wasn’t for being in this space where I was forced to reevaluate my identity and my purpose, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Creating this club and this community has been foundational to my identity. The holiday toy drive put us on the map. I wanted to show others that education is beyond what happens in the classroom, and much of the work is about making connections and giving back to the community. The fact that students like us—have not only survived but thrived for ourselves and have extended that to the communities we care about.

Tina: What parting messages do you have for aspiring educators of Color?

Cecilia: I want to know that for educators of Color who are here, they can make it through and thrive. The resources exist and there are faculty and staff who will see and embrace your full humanity. When I talk about my experience and I think about how much Cal Poly has changed me and forced me to evaluate how much my identity means to me, my experiences have shaped my values, which is to “always send the elevator back down.” I learned to advocate for myself, make my voice heard. I want my peers to be empowered to create the communities that don’t exist.

It’s on us. It’s a lot of pressure for us first-generation college students who also come from low-income families. We’re not only going through school trying to figure out who we are as young adults, but at the same time, coming face to face with how lacking our university is in
recognizing our existence. It’s like they force us to figure it out on our own on purpose. It’s about surrounding yourself with people who share the same aspirations as you.

Manuela: You belong here. You worked hard. It is challenging to tell that to ourselves because we all have that imposter syndrome, where we feel like we’re not smart enough, we don’t belong, we’re not able, we can’t do this . . . Yes, you can. You made it all the way here. If the community isn’t present, build it. Find your people and create that support system. For us, that has made all the difference.

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What you heard were cumulative sets of hopes, experiences, and feelings, forged in White institutional spaces of higher education and emerging by design from two Latina student activists—educators. Throughout, these young leaders powerfully articulate themes of belonging and exclusion, the necessity of community, the centrality of their identities as women of Color of immigrant origin, and the importance of creating and maintaining sources of emotional support and encouragement.

Interestingly, at no point during our conversation did Cecilia or Manuela refer to themselves as “activists.” Rather, they described how they recognized each other as “strangers to the institution [who] find in that estrangement a bond.” Together, they shared their realizations that none of the on-campus spaces for teacher education were made for them, and neither, ultimately, was the campus itself. Both Cecilia and Manuela fought to educate their own—to resist the layered toll that racism in teacher education has filtered into their lives, and work in solidarity to create new ways of being with one another.

For these students, their activism came in the form of self-protection and collective affirmation. They made space for one another when none was present for them. Creating the club, planning activities and outreach events, and creating systems for sharing encouragement, support, and practical strategies for navigating the Cal Poly campus as well as the gatekeeping processes around teacher credentialing and professional advancement wasn’t fueled by a desire to pad their resumes, but by their clear commitments to themselves and their communities. Cecilia and Manuela, like their peers and colleagues in the Club, are working for not just the survival but the thriving of the children they plan to serve and for the incoming generations of educators of Color who will walk in their footsteps.

Community in this form isn’t simply a form of resistance but is one of rebellion. What has been worth sustaining for them is that of audacious hope.

Driven by their passion, optimism, and resistance, these young leaders are transforming higher education so that it can better center their Color Groups at U.S. Colleges and Universities,” Sociology of Race and Ethnicity 8, no. 1 (2022), 386–402.

14 Bettina Love, We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019).

15 García Peña, Community as Rebellion.

creative energies and dreams in ways that were unimaginable by past generations.

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