

A “Safe Space” All Alone: The Transforming Essence of a Latina/o Cultural House

Honors Senior Thesis by Maureen Kattah

Introduction

“On the back of this paper, write down how others see you. OK, now write down what you want them to see you as. Are there any differences? How so?” Thus began one of the most interesting discussions I have had here at the University of Illinois. This activity was part of a “Shades of Brown” workshop sponsored and, in part, created by La Casa and its workers. The purpose of the workshop was to have frank discussions about race and racial issues here on campus. The people gathered came from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some were graduate students, some undergraduates; some white, some black, some “brown.” Yet all were there to try and find the commonalities of our experiences, while respecting the specificity of each person’s college path. I like to think that I have had a unique experience here as a person who identifies as Latina. This experience in many ways led me to my research site, La Casa, and to the questions that I have posed throughout the research process.

My father was born and raised in Bogota, Colombia, moving to the United States when he was twenty-two. He met my mother in Maryland while she was attending college and he was working at a local hospital. My mother is of German descent, accounting for much of my physical appearance. Blonde hair, green eyes, pasty white skin, and the first name “Maureen” often led people to believe I was Irish. However, I identify more with my Colombian heritage than any other. The majority of my extended family is from my father’s side; all my cousins are part-Colombian. Though there is no true measure of what makes a person legitimately “Hispanic,” my love for Colombian music and dance, and my close relationships with my cousins overseas through

the internet, have been a part of my life since I can remember. Thus, when it came time to apply to college, I checked the Hispanic box, not because of any benefits I might receive as a Hispanic, but because it was who I was, how I identified myself. Ever since, I have struggled with stereotypes and preconceived notions of what it means to be “Hispanic.”

After I received my acceptance letter from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I received a letter notifying me that I had also been accepted into the President’s Award Program, which was not only an honor, but also provided financial assistance to minorities. I was then notified about the three-day orientation for minorities. I was nervous about the orientation. Classmates at my high school had accused me of taking advantage of my father’s heritage, and charged that I was not really “Hispanic.” I could only imagine what other Latina/o students would think of me. The orientation went without a hitch however, though I did not make any friends from it nor planned on using any of the resources they advertised. I thought my “special treatment” as a minority would end after the orientation, but was surprised when I received a call from the Office of Minority Student Affairs telling me that I needed to set up a meeting with a graduate student who counseled incoming minority freshmen. I remember after that first meeting I was furious. I called my sisters and my brother, asking if they had ever been singled out like that by their universities. The graduate counselor I was told was there to “check up on my academics” and “make sure I was ok.” I did not understand why they thought that I would struggle more in the transition from high school to college than any other person. I felt insulted – I was just as smart as any of my Caucasian friends and could succeed just as much as they could. Yet because my father was Colombian, there was an assumption that I would not do as well in school. I have to say, however, that because I felt this was an assumption, I excelled my first semester, which opened the door to the Campus Honors Program, a program I entered my second semester my freshman year.

The Campus Honors Program only accepts twenty-five students off-cycle, and I was one of them. In my mind, I had “proved the University wrong.” Though my perspective has dramatically shifted about these retention programs now that I have done research on them, there was significant miscommunication as to why we were all there. For example, I was later informed that the program was geared specifically towards those minority students who had a scholarship (President’s Award Program, Educational Opportunities Program, etc.), as a way to make sure the University’s investment was worthwhile. I also later found out about the low retention rates of Latinas/os on campus, and that Latina/o students demanded in 1992 that the University take more of a stand on Latina/o recruitment and retention.

Thus, my problems with being Latina were twofold: one, that I was somehow not authentically Latina for whatever reason – I only knew Spanish from what I had learned in high school; my mother was not of Latin American origin and thus I had no reason to identify that way; I was not economically disadvantaged; I was white; and so on. The second was that by identifying as Latina, the university “assumed” I would not do as well in school. Yet, my friends often teased me for loving Colombian music and listening to it all the time, and unlike most of my friends, I did not support the Chief, seeing it as racist. I did not fully fit in in either community. Then “Shades of Brown”-the event on which I began- happened and I found that other people felt the same way, too. When I told the mediator that many people only saw me as white, yet I also wanted them to see my “Latina” side as well, two other people next to me opened up and admitted the same thing. It was one of the most honest discussions I have enjoyed at the University. That workshop also addressed many of the stereotypes associated with being Latina, and how we have to confront them in order to create a better living environment for minorities on campus in general. There was a

man there who said we had to unite again in order to create change in the way minorities were treated throughout campus. He also talked about the history of La Casa and its rebellious nature.

In many ways, my primary argument in this thesis emerges from the Shades of Brown discussion. I have found that La Casa occupies a complicated position as it attempts to overcome the tensions within the Latina/o community, while also representing Latina/o interests to a historically apathetic and homogenizing University on issue of race. Both efforts have contributed to both a general attendance problem at La Casa, and to the relative failure of a new retention program that is the core of this thesis' ethnographic analysis. I conducted nine interviews, observed five events associated with the new retention program that I will call "I-achieve," and distributed surveys to get an idea of how La Casa participants understand its purpose, and to see who actually goes to La Casa events (namely how they define themselves ethnically, their major, and their year in school).

This thesis takes up the tensions both between the different races at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and within the Latina/o community itself. The first chapter covers the history of La Casa in terms of these tensions in order to consider how I-Achieve's failure is in part historically constituted. I open with a discussion of race and racial formation that is the method of analysis in this paper, then move to a description of the Boricua and Chicano movements, placing particular emphasis on the heterogeneity in these movements and their emphasis on acquiring space in the U.S. nation-state that ultimately brought La Casa to the University of Illinois; and then finally focus on the struggle between La Casa and the University through analysis of the 1992 protests and the Chancellor's Report published ten years later to see what progress had been made in the demands of those protests. I examine how the university has ignored the demands made in 1992 and reiterated in 2003 in terms of retention. Retention is an

integral part in the racial struggle here at the University of Illinois because since Latinas/os are only a small percentage of the overall undergraduate population, that number shrinks when Latina/o students are not retained, ultimately creating a less welcome atmosphere for Latinas/os and minorities in general. It is also represents the university's failure and discourages others to persist.

The second chapter examines the intense racial climate at the national level and at the local level that has caused factionalism in the Latina/o community here and marginalized La Casa. Though this may seem paradoxical, as there has been significant coalition-building to combat racism on campus recently, the recent proliferation of Latina/o sororities and fraternities, and establishment of new registered student organizations (RSOs) with clear political objectives, are all tied to the stereotypes and racism experienced by Latina/o students and the need for "safe spaces" on campus. The marginal position of La Casa is also caused by the University's efforts to homogenize racial difference by promoting a "color-blind" mentality through programs like Inclusive Illinois, the drive to create one multicultural center instead of having the separate cultural houses, and the apathetic and historic treatment of La Casa as just another Latina/o registered student organization. The final chapter examines this factionalism and the marginal position of La Casa in the words and actions of the students themselves. It is also shows that while La Casa does, in fact, offer a safe haven for incoming Latino/a students, it is only one of such spaces on campus.

Definitions and Redefinitions of Race: Tensions within the Latino/a Community

Omi and Winant define race as "a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies," in opposition to beliefs that it is essential, meaning unchanged and fixed, and merely an illusion, a "purely ideological

construct” (54). In other words, race has been regarded in the past as simply skin color, a part of our biology, and completely social construct that has no meaning whatsoever except the meaning we give to it. Omi and Winant, in their definition, combine these beliefs with the emphasis on “bodies” and “symbolizes social conflicts,” but also emphasize the historical social conflicts that contribute to the current meanings of race. They offer racial formation as an alternative mode of describing race (compared to class-, ethnicity-, and nation-based approaches) (Omi 55). Their definition allows for the transformation of race and racial categories, explaining racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi 55). Too often, race is regarded as static, as not being able to be changed either because of biology or because racial categories can be seen to be fixed – Hispanic or Asian-American, and so forth. However, how people identify themselves, and how these racial categories are defined and redefined, is constantly changing. Klor de Alva, Rendon, and Ruiz demonstrate these facts.

Race is transformed on a day-to-day basis, by people who have multiple identities, including their race and gender and sexuality. Vicki Ruiz shows how women in the Chicano student movement were torn between standing by their men and supporting the movement, and fighting for positions in the administration of the movement and for not being relegated to household chairs, among other demands. What it meant to be a true “Chicana” was being debated in these divisions, whether it meant to be the help-mate of the husband and to fight only the gringo enemy, whether it meant to rebel against Chicano machismo attitudes and threaten walk-outs if they did not receive equal treatment, and whether there could a middle-ground. The redefinitions of race are clear, including the fact that “Chicana lesbians often found themselves isolated from Chicanos and heterosexual Chicanas” (Ruiz 121).

These racial categories can also be transformed by the many different nationalities that are encompassed in the Latina/o community. Because La Casa formed during the heyday of the Puerto Ricans and the Young Lords movement and the Chicano movement, it is important to consider what their ideologies are, including the rebellion against assimilationist thought and the creation of alternative modes of identification, namely the creation of Aztlán and Boricua. The Chicano movement during the 1960s was a revolt against the stereotypes about Mexican-Americans and a demand for “land, justice, and dignity.” Rendon, in his Chicano manifesto, states that the “true Chicano does not want to be a black man, a red man, or a white man, and he rejects the opportunity, if it can be called that, of becoming like the rest” (106). He specifically rejected the notion of an American melting pot, stating that it only works for people with “white skin,” mirroring Omi and Winant’s critique on the ethnicity paradigm of race, which is that anybody who works hard can assimilate into the U.S. nation-state. They used Aztlán as their ideological basis for their demands on the land of the southwest United States. Aztlán was a mythological homeland for the Aztecs, located, historically, to their northwest. However, more than just land, Aztlán became a part of their very selves. They declared “we have rediscovered Aztlán in ourselves. This knowledge provides the dynamic principle upon which to build a deep unity and brotherhood among Chicanos” (Rendon 10). The idea that Aztlán was in them and part of them is reinforced, for they state that “we are part of the land, but we need not seek a geographic center for our Aztlán, it lies within ourselves” (Rendon 16). The Chicano student movement, according to Rendon, started around 1966-67, and eventually overtook the national Chicano movement (133). Their belief in Aztlán and their sense of responsibility to their community was and is very strong. However, they also spearheaded the efforts for material gains on campuses all over the United States. They wanted to create “safe spaces” for Latina/o students to unite and maintain a strong

sense of community, a purpose that La Casa fulfills to this day. Ruiz describes one of the first meetings of Chicano youths in March 1969 in Colorado. Organized by one of the older generation leaders, Corky Gonzalez, the event was described by one of the attendees as “days of celebrating what sings in the blood of a people who, taught to believe they are ugly, discover the true beauty in their souls...” (Qtd. in Ruiz 104). MEChA was established soon after this conference, a student organization that “stressed the importance of applying their education for the benefit of their communities” (Ruiz 105). There is a chapter of MEChA on campus now, established within the last four years, showing the close relationship between the Chicano student movement and Mexican-Americans today. The sense of giving back to the community is still a strong one, not only demonstrated by MEChA but many other Latina/o RSOs.

Puerto Ricans here also strongly believe in giving back to the community and have a need for “safe spaces,” which is historically constituted by the Young Lords movement. At the same time as the Chicano movement, the Puerto Rican movement emerged with similar tactics, namely the use of indigenous symbols of their respective country’s cultural past (“Aztlán” for the Chicano movement, “Borinquen” for the Puerto Rican movement). According to J. Jorge Klor de Alva, Borinquen was the word used to describe the island by the original inhabitants (73). Puerto Rico’s political status in relation to the United States and the rest of the world is one hotly contested (Klor de Alva 74). In contrast to Mexico, US presence is deeply felt in all areas of island life, from television to navy bases to elections, and the “problem” of immigration is not one directly affiliated with Puerto Ricans because they are U.S. citizens. The exposure to U.S. culture from a young age, according to Klor de Alva, has made it hard for Puerto Ricans to fight the pressures of assimilation (74). Borinquen became the ideology to try and unite Puerto Ricans on the U.S. mainland. Klor de Alva explains that “this search for roots was not limited to the improvisation of

a fanciful contemporary island; it also devised a fabulous Borinquen, graced by peaceful Taino inhabitants living in an idyllic pre-Hispanic setting” (75). Soon, however, Borinquen went through another transformation, one that put Borinquen inside every Puerto Rican as a “spiritual state,” much like Aztlan became a part of the very soul of Chicanos (Klor de Alva 75). The tensions between Puerto Ricans on the island and Puerto Ricans on the mainland soon became pronounced, however. Many Puerto Ricans saw their U.S. citizenship as an advantage, and did not want independence from the U.S., unlike some of those born and raised in the U.S. Despite the heterogeneity of these movements, and in the case of some Chicanas, disenfranchisement, many positive changes were made, including the establishment of La Casa on campus.

The University and La Casa: A History of Apathy and Homogenization

The history of La Casa shows cycles of acquiescing and ignoring. La Casa was established after significant student protesting, organized in part by CHESS, a “nonprofit coalition of organizations composed of Latina/o college teachers, staff and students.” Their goal was to improve Latinos’ status at universities throughout Illinois, targeting specifically non-Chicago schools. The University Archives’ folder on La Casa has a document that describes in detail the establishment of La Casa and its progression over time. This document explains that “Chess drew a master plan toward implementing Latina/o programs, starting cultural centers, and having Latino faculty and staff hired by universities in the state. There was a need to organize peaceful protests and pressure tactics” (Archives Folder). The group was founded in 1971, and after three years of these protests, La Casa was finally established at the University of Illinois. Their struggles were far from over, however. The space was given, but furnishings, computers, and even salaries for directors were not. La Casa itself was regarded simply as another registered student organization,

which allowed the university to justify not giving the director a salary, nor having stability in the La Casa's leadership.

Eighteen years of apathy came to a breaking point in 1992, when real changes were made due to significant protesting, including a relative stability in the leadership of La Casa and a stable amount of funds allocated to La Casa. Most importantly, they demanded that the "University give Latinas/os the respect of distinguishing between La Casa Cultural Latina (our cultural center) and Latina/o registered student organizations" (Latinas/os Appendix A). In an elaboration on this demand, the students demanded that financial support be given to La Casa in their programming dollars and in their maintenance of the facility, namely installation and upkeep of printers and computers. La Casa is now under the office of the Dean of Students with two other of the cultural houses on campus; however, the perception and apathetic treatment of La Casa as another registered student organization has continued.

Concerning the diversity of the Latina/o community, Latina/o students were cognizant of their homogenization and demanded that the university change its ways. The first demand was "a breakdown of the word 'Hispanic,'" insisting on differentiation between international students and those who grew up in the United States (Latinas/os Appendix A). They also demanded that each Latina/o be identified according to their geographical area and their country. Being the first demand, this is very significant. It seems to make a statement to an apathetic University: we are diverse; we have particular histories that need recognition on the part of the University. Another reason for this demand was offered: "in order to determine what [sic] populations are being served/affected by affirmative action programs specifics are required" (Latinas/os Appendix A). This would seem to be an insistence on recruiting Latinas/os of all backgrounds, all countries, wherever possible.

The apathetic nature of the university in increasing diversity on campus was also realized by the protesters and demanded to be changed. They required that “Latino/a graduation figures are to be at least equivalent to the percentage of Latinos in the State of Illinois (11.6%)” (Latinas/os Appendix A). Logically, this would mean that the size of the Latina/o population be increased to at least 12% in order to have seniors comprise 11.6% of the graduating class. The university has failed miserably in this respect. The incoming class of Latina/o freshmen this year was around 7%, and Latinas/os in general are only 7% of the entire undergraduate population. However, paradoxically, the size of the population has increased dramatically – from around 50 in 1974 (the year La Casa was formed) to around 2,000 today. Though the percentage has only increased in small increments over the years (3% in 1974), the population itself is very sizeable. In terms of retaining that diversity, the students were very explicit in the 1992 demands. “We demand that the Peer Retention Program must become stabilized by implementing a line-item budget policy... a stronger connection must be established between the Peer Recruitment Program and Latino/a retention efforts” (Latinas/os Appendix A). The Peer Recruitment Program is part of the Office of Admissions and Records. Retention still is not one of their concerns. There have, however, been efforts on the part of La Casa Cultural Latina, The African American House, and the Office of Minority Student Affairs to aid in this endeavor. All of these institutions have retention programming as part of their mission statements. Yet the dialogue between the above mentioned groups has been limited, a fact pointed out in the 2003 Latino/a report composed by the Chancellor’s committee on Latina/o issues. This committee was composed of a variety of people, from undergraduate students to faculty members, to Veronica Kann, an “academic professional.” In its conclusion, there was a suggestion for a retention committee: “Although programs of the Office of Minority Student Affairs, La Casa Cultural Latina, and African American Cultural

Program address retention issues of historically underrepresented students, a committee that focuses solely on retention of undergraduates, graduates, and faculty will serve to unite the three groups and combat the effects of decentralization of campus units, departments, and programs” (Latinas/os 38). This committee still has not been created.

There is no question that the University has picked and chosen what demands to acquiesce to, and what demands to ignore. The 1992 protests did make a difference in some respects, no doubt. La Casa was moved to a bigger space, and the department of Latina/o Studies was created. However, retention rates of minorities are 18 percent lower than those of Caucasian students, signaling a serious problem that should be dealt with. The lack of communication between the various retention programs is also a problem that should be fixed; and the peer recruitment program should play a role in making sure the students they recruit end up staying here. Yet the university instead focuses on programs like “Inclusive Illinois,” showcasing diversity but not aiding in the efforts to make sure those diverse people make it through school. The university also has historically homogenized these populations, as the 1992 protests recognized and tried to fix; however, the University has not acknowledged this difference. As the next section will show, the same cycles of acquiescing and ignoring, and homogenization of minority peoples, are being repeated right now in 2008.

Ethnographic Moment: Not Much Has Changed

The “Latina/o problem” has plagued not only university administrators but also national policy makers for years. The majority opinion on Latinas/os is that they are unable to assimilate into American society, and that they do not wish to assimilate. According to this opinion, all Caucasian-Americans want is to live in a “color-blind society,” but with Latinas/os “playing the minority card” all the time, it makes it difficult to do so. Recent racist activities on campus have

shown, though, that much as we might want to live in a “color-blind society,” we actually live in one where racial difference is noticed and denigrated. These racist activities have required a response from the university, the immediate ones being town hall meetings, e-mails from the Chancellor to the entire student body population, and installation of required diversity workshops for incoming freshmen. However, the university recently has been trying out new racial projects through old methods, namely the rearticulation of racial ideology, to try and “fix” this “Latina/o problem.” The racist climate here and nationally, and the new racial projects, which are Inclusive Illinois and the attempt to have one multicultural center instead of the separate cultural houses, have ironically in part led to the relatively low attendance of La Casa events. Namely, I suggest that they have caused a proliferation of “safe spaces” on campus and politically-minded registered student organizations, and have reduced La Casa and Latinas/os position on campus. This chapter starts with a description of these stereotypes of Latinas/os and an explanation of what rearticulation of racial ideology means, moves to the recent racial projects on the part of the University, and finishes on the racist events on campus that spurred the racial project of “Inclusive Illinois,” and the university homogenization that spurred the racial project of having only one multicultural center.

The stereotypes of Latinas/os are far-reaching, including a belief that they are perennial hostile foreigners who could never and would never assimilate into American society, according to Nicholas De Genova. De Genova is an ethnographer who has done extensive fieldwork in Chicago with Mexican migrants, offering a unique perspective on the ongoing immigration debates. His book, Racial (Trans)formations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States shows how racial categories, from the earliest days of the U.S., have been created and transferred to different groups. Historically, the U.S. was composed of a racial triangle – Caucasian-Americans, Native-Americans, and African-Americans (2). He explains how that has changed into a black-white binary, with Native-

Americans, Latinos and Asians being characterized as outsiders and perennial foreigners unable to be acculturated into U.S. society (De Genova 5-7). De Genova shows how historically the U.S. nation-state has transformed racial categories and decided who is part of its fabric and who is a foreigner unable to assimilate into it; however, that is not the only way race is transformed – it is transformed on a day-to-day basis, by people who have multiple identities, including their race and gender and sexuality.

Another stereotype of Latinas/os is that they are all alike, and lack heterogeneity. Many of the people I interviewed and half of the people I surveyed identified as Mexican or Mexican-American (besides the surveys I gave to a specific ethnic RSO that was not Mexican). De Genova, in his other book Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and Illegality in Mexican Chicago, says “this inherent ambiguity and heterogeneity about being ‘Mexican,’ regardless of one’s place of birth, citizenship status, or cultural orientations and tastes, is instructive; it reflects an expression in everyday practice of the resignification of Mexicanness as a specifically racialized category within the U.S. social order” (3). In many ways, the efforts of the university to homogenize the diversity of the Latina/o population reflect a national effort to disregard the “place of birth, citizenship status, or cultural orientations and tastes” of Mexicans, according to De Genova. One of his more profound ideas is the “legal” production of migrant “illegality.” He explains that “my aim is to denaturalize the commonplace notion that migratory movement can be equated with transgressing that ‘thing’ we know as the law, and to underscore instead the deliberate and calculated interventions by which particular laws have effectively generated undocumented Mexican migrants’ ‘illegal’ status” (2). He shows how laws have been made to encourage undocumented status, and also as a way to hold power over Mexicans as a cheap labor force. Laws were created to threaten deportation, not to actually deport all undocumented workers; this puts Mexicans in a “legally vulnerable” condition. Contrary to popular belief, “illegal” Mexicans have some of the lowest crime rates in Chicago because of fear of being deported. Though laws have been made to

keep them out, they are in fact forcing them to stay permanently in fear of not being able to get back to the States easily. Most migrants (as De Genova calls them) want to go back to Mexico. They come to the States in order to work for the most part; fear of losing a job that supports their family through the intense border patrol forces them to stay. The misconceptions and the “legal production of illegality” have repercussions at Champaign-Urbana as well. Though not reported on by the school newspaper (privately owned but widely acknowledged as “the” school newspaper), there were recent raids on the illegal immigrants in the area. By producing all Mexicans and Latinas/os as foreigners and “illegal,” when in fact they are used to do the least desirable jobs for little pay, we see the racist tendencies of Caucasian-Americans and how they hide behind their words. After all, they are not racist; they just do not want “illegal” people here. This hiding behind their words can be understood by the idea of rearticulation of racial ideology.

Omi and Winant show how the formation of the “new right” in the 1970s tried to “absorb, to marginalize, and to transform or ‘rearticulate’ the meaning of the reforms won in the earlier decade” (78). The Civil Rights Movement could not be reversed, and people could no longer be outright racist. Thus, they regained their hegemonic status through this rearticulation. Omi and Winant explain how code words, such as “justice” and “equal opportunity,” were used to limit minority political gains (Omi 123). In the 1980s, this changed to a more direct approach to battling minority gains such as affirmative action. The right lamented the “reverse discrimination” they experienced because of the “special treatment” minorities received (Omi 128). Inclusive Illinois allows this type of discourse to continue.

Inclusive Illinois is perhaps the most easily accessible yet least known University program. With a link on the main web page of the Urbana-Champaign campus (<http://www.inclusiveillinois.uiuc.edu/>), the University offers it prominent status. Its pamphlet

was in every cultural house that I visited at the beginning of the school year. However, ask the average student, and he may have heard about it but does not know what it is. Inclusive Illinois, in the “about” section of its website, has as its objective “awareness and engagement about issues of identity and importance of examining and respecting differences based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, age, physical ability, religion, as well as the multiple and intersecting ways we see ourselves and others.” It is a “journey” that each student should make, and realizes that though we might not like the answers, we need to be “open” and “accepting” of them. There is a section on the website where clubs and individual students can make a “commitment statement” to be open and accepting of different perspectives and ideas, with the ultimate goal of having “one campus, many voices.”

This all seems innocuous and even admirable on the part of the Chancellor. However, if you analyze what he says, one can see how this project could ultimately disenfranchise minority populations, including Latinos/as voice and the voice of “their cultural center.” In the fall of 2007, the *Daily Illini* privately funded the coming of the “N.W.C” play to the Krannert Center of Performing Arts. “N.W.C” represents the starting initials of some of the most derogatory terms used to describe, respectively, African-Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans. The play originated in California, and was performed by three students who represented the different minorities they were talking about. The controversy surrounding it was enormous. In my anthropology class, many students raised objections that the university was even housing such a play, especially considering the recent racist parties. In Chancellor Richard Herman’s address to the annual diversity celebration in November, he acknowledges that the minorities were “hurt” by not being involved in the decision to have this play come. However, he says it “opened discussion” and that conversation unites people, no matter how painful it may be. In privileging

“all voices and perspectives,” he diminishes the voice of minorities to just one of many. When the Daily Illini wrote a response piece to the protests surrounding the play, it said there should be bigger concerns than this play, diminishing the minorities “voice” and not being very respectful of all opinions (Cruse III). Though the university administration wants to encourage discussion, it is really only reproducing structures of domination. When Native-Americans protested the admissibility of Chief insignia on homecoming floats, the Chancellor said that freedom of speech belongs to all students, opening the door to recent attempts to reinstate the Chief. Professor Antonia Darder wrote a response to this decision, saying “how can we believe we have a voice in this Inclusive Illinois, when we can’t even depend on the administration to act with dignity and respect, on such an important issue?” Events like N.W.C and allowing Chief insignia to reappear on homecoming floats despite its abolishment are “fruitful discussions,” not the systematic apathy towards minority demands. Inclusive Illinois is about not privileging one person over another, no special treatment whatsoever, and in that manner minorities are disenfranchised. The second major racial project occurring here reflects similar treatment of minorities. This is the proposition of the University to combine all the cultural houses into one state-of-the-art multicultural center, a proposition made possible, I argue, by this rearticulation of racial ideology displayed in Inclusive Illinois.

The most direct threat to La Casa and the other cultural houses right now is the idea of one multicultural center to replace their houses. In an open forum at La Casa, this proposition was debated. The general consensus was that a multicultural center would be beneficial, but that the university should let the different cultures have their different houses. “There is so much diversity within the Latina/o community alone, it would be too much for a multicultural center,” exclaimed one participant. “It will homogenize everyone into one building. It says a lot about this university

that they want to do this,” another offered. Latinas/os are conscious of the university racial projects and disagree with them, as the 1992 protesters were conscious of the dual threats of apathy and homogenization by the university. The “melting pot” ideology has long been a part of American society, and its presence here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign can be traced as far back as 1975. The mural at the old La Casa (it moved in 1995 to the former President’s House; Latina/o Studies is now housed on the Chalmers Street residence) was created by Oscar Martinez, a Puerto Rican student. A Daily Illini writer writing in 1975 states that “one by one the painted figures in line fall into a huge kettle of people—the melting pot—over which a Latin American with a guitar is standing. He represents the lost culture, and he is crying over the melting pot” in this mural (Gonzalez). The history and struggles of each of the cultural houses cannot be ignored; each is produced by a particular historical moment – the African-American house from the Civil Rights Movement; La Casa from the Chicano and Puerto Rican movements; and so on. To ignore the history and combine all minorities into one giant “melting pot” of “brown and blackness” would be devastating. Having one multicultural center also would not provide as safe a space for these minorities to draw on in the face of racist parties on campus. In the words of one of my interviewees, “I do feel we need our space, that it’s a good thing. We are separate cultures; I won’t feel as at home [in a MCC].” Considering the recent racist parties, “safe havens” or “homes” have become increasingly needed.

The first of these racist parties occurred in 2005. It was called “Tacos and Tequila,” and it was an exchange between a white sorority and fraternity. Members wore ensembles such as Mexican flags, farming clothes, and one woman stuffing her shirt to look pregnant (O’Kelly). They ate tacos and drank tequila, common stereotypes of Latinas/os (O’Kelly). The subsequent uproar brought much attention to the problem of racial sensitivity. A coalition of students,

comprised of many Latina/o Greeks, went to the Chancellor's house to demand a response from the University. The initial response was that "it's a Greek thing; they are being punished by the national Greek system." However, that was not good enough for Latina/o students. Now that "the university has been exposed as racist," as one of Jaime Olmos' interviewees explained in her report of her university research findings, there are required racial workshops for incoming freshmen. Yet it soon became obvious that this was not as effective a response as hoped.

Despite these efforts, another racial party occurred in early 2008, a Compton-themed party in which fraternity members dressed in wife beaters and gold chains, and carried fake guns. The reactions were dramatically different this time, though. When minority groups protested the racial stereotyping, members of the fraternity flat out said they did not believe it to be racially insensitive. In a response of the article in the Daily Illini, AnnaMarie Stone wrote, "where do we draw the line? At what point is it no longer innocent fun and instead racial stereotyping, and who has the right to decide where that line rests? More specifically, what is the difference between a "Compton" party where students participate in activities commonly associated with that culture and an Arabian Nights themed formal dance..." What a person has to question is, whose culture is associated with gun-toting and wearing gold chains and wife beaters, according to her? Is it "hip-hop" culture, an industry dominated by African-Americans (with notable but few exceptions)? Whose "culture" is being represented here, and what does that mean for the African-American community and the minority community in general here? Though the fraternity is "in dialogue" with the diversity staff here, the university is unlikely to punish the students any more than requiring "intensive diversity training" (Cisneros). Under Inclusive Illinois ideology, the fraternity president's "voice" declaring that he did not intend the party to be racist, nor, in fact, was it racist, has equal weight with the minority voice, and all people should be "open" and "accepting" of it.

Thus far, I have shown the continuity and historical development of the tensions and struggles between the races which have particular relevance to why La Casa has low attendance as described in the first paragraph of this section. As I will show in my final chapter, there are tensions between various members of the Latina/o community, though all originate in the racism and stereotypes experienced by Latina/o students. I draw upon other Ethnography of the University Initiative research to support my argument. Ethnography of the University Initiative is a project in which students, undergraduate and graduate, conduct research and do ethnography on other university students, administrators/workers, and faculty members.

The Latina/o Population at the University of Illinois: A Divided Community

The average La Casa workshop consists of 15-20 people, yet the size of just the undergraduate self-identified Latinas/os is 2,000 students. In a program that was supposed to be continuous – meaning a student would come every two weeks to assess their progress for their respective goals – the first meeting consisted of ten people, and afterwards La Casa had to cancel the program due to low attendance. For some reason, Latinas/os are not coming to La Casa as much as La Casa and its workers would like. What is the problem here? Why is a program so carefully designed and with Latina/o student interests at its heart not succeeding? I argue that major factors mediating against wide participation at La Casa are the new definitions of race being developed by various Latinas/os and the myriad ways Latinas/os can get “involved” on campus, effectively marginalizing La Casa. Combined with University apathy and efforts to homogenize and disenfranchise, problems like retention remain a serious problem affecting all minority students. This next section will show, through the work of fellow researchers and my own field research, how different Latina/o institutions on campus produce different ideas on what it means to be Latina/o, at times creating animosity and definitely creating misunderstanding between these

different social organizations. La Casa's function can thus be seen as a meeting ground, at the intersection between Greeks and non-Greeks, graduate students and undergraduates, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans

The popular conception of La Casa has long been contested. In the 2003 Chancellor's Report, the committee, consisting of undergraduate students, faculty members and "academic professionals," described these perceptions in detail – "perception of La Casa as too political," "perception of La Casa as self-segregating," "focus of La Casa as a site of cultural performances, often of traditional Latin American cultural expressions, rather than the lived, everyday cultures of Latina/o students" (Latinos/as 30). The only one of these perceptions I have heard in my research is that La Casa is self-segregating, but only one interviewee told me this. Ryan Files took these perceptions a step further, asking how people who regularly go to La Casa conceive it. He found his results mixed, much as I did:

Some viewed it as an educational institution aimed at promoting Latino cultural awareness within the Latino community and throughout academia. Other viewed it as a cultural sanctuary aimed at providing a social haven for students entering the university. Another viewpoint saw La Casa as a political institution that promotes dialogue about the responsibility the administration has towards its Latino population. (Files).

Thus, Files agrees that La Casa can be seen as political in nature; however, he adds to the perception list through its perception as a "safe haven" and "promoting Latino/a cultural awareness" whereas in 2003 the perception was that it represented Latin American culture, rather than Latina/o culture. Files describes La Casa as educational, but in the sense of educating people about Latina/o culture, not in the academic sense. This was the reason offered to me by two of the architects of the new program and reinforced by a focus group attendee that people were not coming for the goal-setting and assessment meetings, an integral part of the new retention programming. I tested all these hypotheses of how La Casa is perceived through a survey. I asked

people from various groups, including a focus group, an I-achieve workshop on Macnair scholarships, a lunch and learn about Latina/o poetry, and a club that met in La Casa what they thought was the main function or functions of La Casa on campus. My options included: (1) to spread awareness of Latina/o culture to non-Latina/o students, (2) to provide a safe haven, (3) to provide academic resources, (4) to achieve personal goals with peer support, (5) to provide a space for Latino/a organizations to meet, (6) to plan social events, (7) to represent Latino/a interests to the university administration, and (8) to connect with fellow Latina/o students. It also asked their year, major, and how they defined themselves ethnically. The overwhelming response was to check all the boxes. Out of thirty-five respondents, the function least associated with La Casa is social events; the highest function was for connecting and networking with fellow Latina/o students. My major hypothesis though, that “providing academic resources” would be considered low as a major function, was wrong. It received twenty-six out of thirty-five votes. Nearly seventy-five percent identified goal-setting and academic resources as part of the main functions of La Casa.

These results presented a quandary for me: if so many people inside La Casa itself saw it as all of the above – an academic, social, and political space – then why was I-achieve, the new retention programming, not more popular? The most obvious answer was that students were getting these services through alternative routes and creating communities and networks outside of La Casa, rendering La Casa secondary to these goals in comparison with other academic resources outside of La Casa. This would make sense, considering the number of Latina/o clubs on campus and the retention programming being recognized as the premier concern of the Office of Minority Student Affairs who offers tutoring services and mentors for incoming freshmen (the graduate counselors I mentioned in my introduction) or of the Greek system that has a minimum GPA

requirement. These problems, though, also reflect the very clear apathetic nature of the university towards La Casa. As mentioned before, for a long time La Casa was treated by the university as another registered student organization with limited funding and not shown enough “respect,” in the words of the 1992 protesters. This lack of respect is still being shown today, as in the 2003 recommendations made by the Chancellor’s Committee concerning La Casa in particular. Stating plainly, “La Casa has no links to academic units to support its efforts in retention and mentoring. La Casa’s links to other programs within the University are based on the informal networks of its staff,” recommendations included expanding these links to OMSA and the graduate counselor program, and earlier in the report, the forming of a retention committee with a paid head that included La Casa, African-American Cultural House, and OMSA representatives (Latinos/as 30, 38). These decentralization effects have been recognized by La Casa’s workers on this retention programming, one stating to me that they were trying to get an OMSA tutor to come on a regular basis to La Casa next year. This is not the only problem facing La Casa and its overall low attendance, however. The recent boom in Latina/o non-Greek and Greek registered student organizations, and their political nature, has reduced the role of La Casa in the Latina/o community and caused factions in the community.

One major way to get involved in the Latina/o community on campus is through the Greek system, which has boomed since the 1990s from one to twelve sororities and/or fraternities. Two-thirds of these fraternities/sororities were established even more recently, in the year 2000 and above. Though most non-Latina/o sororities and fraternities are primarily social rather than political in nature, holding exchanges and charity events, the stigmas and stereotypes of “Greeks” in general have resulted in a redefinition in what it means to be a Latina/o Greek. Jaime Olmos’ very title to her work shows a redefinition of “Greekness” and at the same suggests a tension

between Latina/o non-Greek and Greek registered student organizations – “Do Latino Greeks foster more political activity than other Latino-based student organizations?” In the abstract to her research, she explains that Latina/o Greeks are more politically active, but non-Greeks try to achieve long-term change more so than Greeks do. What constitutes “political activeness” has to be questioned, however. Olmos brings up the point that it was mainly Greek organizations that protested the Tacos and Tequila incident and that they brought attention to Latina/o non-Greek registered student organizations and to African-Americans and faculty and administration that it was not just a “Greek” problem; it was an all-Latina/o, all minority problem demanding a bigger response from the university. Certainly, this constitutes “political activity.” However, there is also a large amount of activity politically from non-Greek RSOs as well, showing the new politically-minded Latinas/os and the tensions between these two different registered student organizations.

I observed a meeting of a Latina/o non-Greek RSO, in which the very first part of the meeting discussed the political situation in their country, the current elections and the controversies surrounding it. They talked about a strike going on there and the struggle the participants in this strike were having between their union leadership and government policy. Their political consciousness and desire to unite the Latina/o community with other minorities and within the Latina/o community soon became apparent. They described the situation at the University of Illinois succinctly, how before minorities used to work together to combat injustice, but “now we’re really divided, nothing gets done,” and how the African-American and Latina/o houses should unite. They talked about how the university was trying to “hide things,” evidenced by the late publication and omission of certain articles in the jubilee report, a report on racial parties that the university ignored. They also decided on sponsoring a second discussion by a former director of La Casa because of low attendance of the first one. The first talk, which they attended, brought

up how the university does not like “fire in the students,” and how the director was removed from his position to another administrative position with little contact with students because he successfully organized the Latina/o community and fought the system. They are co-sponsoring and advertising a talk about the unification of Latin America. Their political tendencies are obvious, and they not only want long-term change, but want to build a coalition now and unite now for change. I put an emphasis on the word “now” because Olmos’ work argues that Latina/o RSOs don’t pursue immediate change, unlike Latina/o Greeks. The new political nature of this organization was explained to me by the president after the meeting. She elaborated that they were going through a process of reactivation on campus after a hiatus, and said that though the organization had existed for many years previously, the only event they really had was a tasting of their particular ethnic food. The emphasis on uniting and fighting divisive forces on campus are reminiscent of Jaime Olmos’ explanation of telling non-Greek RSOs that they had to unite to combat this problem of racist intolerance.

The assumptions made about these different organizations and La Casa have been hard to combat. An anonymous student researcher in Fall 2007 conducting research for the ANTH 411 methods of sociocultural anthropology class continually observed a non-Greek Latina/o RSO called “El Grupo” that meets in La Casa, and interviewed the members about their experience here at the U of I, explicitly demonstrating the animosity between Latina/o non-Greek and Greek registered student organizations despite their common experiences and political tendencies. Amanda’s perspective in this work is really interesting. The researcher reports that “not only does she not agree with the general Greek system but she also does not wish to segregate herself from non-Greek affiliated students and she does not see the need in having to prove herself worthy of any sorority” (Differential). She also states that Latina/o fraternities and sororities create divisions

in the Latino/a community rather than “solidarity” (Differential). She finds La Casa to be Greek-dominated, but believes that La Casa is a necessary tool in her desire to create social change (Differential). Another of the researcher’s interviewees expressed similar sentiments to Amanda – “I asked Cristina about the importance of El Grupo within UIUC. She likens presence of Greek organizations with a ‘divide and conquer’ policy that results in no political organization” (Differential). One of the people I interviewed, Luisa, explained how her negative experience with the sororities at La Casa was one of the factors in her distance from La Casa freshman year; she later returned to work at La Casa in order to “be the change you wish to see.” In one of my LLS classes, the heated confrontation between a Latina in a Greek organization and two members of a Latina/o RSO on campus over whether Latina/o Greeks suppress homosexuality and do not provide adequate programming for them created a highly tense classroom environment.

The relationship between La Casa and Latina/o Greeks is a close one, though I myself have never heard the claim of La Casa being Greek-dominated. One of the workers I interviewed is a member in a fraternity, thus I asked her how involved she would say her fraternity is with La Casa. She said they were “very involved.” She explained that their latest activity was trying to keep a Chicano painting of the Virgin Mary in Chicago. La Casa is having a whole week of events to raise consciousness of it. Her fraternity is also a co-sponsor of Semana de Mujer, hosted by MEChA, a recently instated non-Greek registered student organization, and Dia de Los Muertos, hosted by La Casa. She also explained that in the 1992 protests, her fraternity was very involved. The relationship, however, between non-Latina/o Greeks and La Casa can also be a close one. One meeting of a non-Greek RSO I observed discussed the possibility of having a concert at the Levis Center “if La Casa co-sponsors the event.” When I asked the president why she chose La Casa as the site of her meetings, she explained that she has gotten a lot of support from La Casa workers in

her group's activities, and that "La Casa has always been a second home, it feels like a home away from home." Perhaps most poignantly, one freshman explained the role La Casa played in her first semester here:

"It's a comforting place to go, to ask for help, to have people guide us because, its obvious that the university has the majority of students who are not Latino and we are a really small group." The "safe haven" status of La Casa in many different Latinas/os lives is obvious, with thirty out of thirty-five respondents declaring it as a main purpose of La Casa on campus.

Through the lens of two registered student organizations, we see factionalism in the Latina/o community, specifically between a graduate and undergraduate RSO that identify ethnically as a country-specific Latina/o (I refrain from saying which country because of anonymity purposes). This division is caused by the complex histories and backgrounds and thus identification of Latinas/os here, and has created two different clubs, or "ways of being involved," in the Latina/o community that directly affects La Casa and who goes there. The undergraduate registered student organization in question meets in La Casa and often sponsors events there. The graduate RSO president explained that she thought La Casa served only undergraduate students and specifically those from Chicago, the same divisions these two clubs had between each other - "[one] is mainly students from Chicago, not that its just for them but for some reason it happens that they're all in there more than they're in ours. And undergrads too," whereas theirs mainly was composed of graduate students coming directly from their country. She explains that the two clubs used to be united "about three years ago or so," before she got there, but they divided because of cultural differences. The graduate organization spoke mainly in Spanish and did not have the common experience of growing up in Chicago that the undergraduates had. The graduate organization also apparently resented being called "international" students, though the president

acknowledges that this is hearsay as she was not there when they split. The president of the graduate organization said “I don’t believe in having the division for those reasons; that doesn’t make much sense for me.” She also explained that she did not, nor did her organization really, have a close relationship with La Casa, saying “with La Casa, I may be mistaken, but it has more to do...with undergrads rather than grad students in most cases. But I think it’s more a matter of time. They have time to go to these activities.” When there is a disassociation by graduate students from La Casa, La Casa programming suffers. In the 2003 Chancellor’s Report, La Casa stated that they wanted to build their relationship with graduate students through the stabilization of the graduate counselor position at La Casa and through the expansion of “opportunities in which graduate students can meet each other” at La Casa (Latinas/os 31).

Historically, La Casa was regarded simply as an RSO, something that the 1992 protests successfully changed. La Casa, however, can still be seen as another club on campus. On my surveys, the highest rankings for the purpose of La Casa were to provide space for RSOs to meet and to connect/network with fellow Latina/o students. La Casa’s function can thus be seen as a meeting ground, at the intersection between Greeks and non-Greeks, graduate students and undergraduates, Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. It can be the main socializing and politically organizing space for certain students, but more often than not it is the route to sororities and fraternities, clubs, and academic resources (OMSA tutoring). Few people come on a regular basis, as the new retention program failure demonstrates.

The current ethnographic moment has much to do with the divisions within the Latina/o community. The heated debates on immigration by the Washington capital has, in the words of Barack Obama (current Presidential nominee), “seen hate crimes skyrocket.” Because race itself is so politicized right now, including the fact that Caucasian students blame minorities for playing the

“race card,” and even hearing that same charge by Latina/o students, being “political” becomes something to actively push against or to pursue. MEChA was established on campus in 2005 because of these debates. Representing Latina/o women and LGBT rights, MEChA’s history originates in the political struggles Chicano/a student movement. As mentioned above, one-third of all the Greek Latina/o RSOs were established in 2000 or above. Their everyday lives are affected by the politics of race, from the comment by a white student that he is against affirmative action because it does not promote “equality,” to the charge that questions from minorities to the performers of the “N.W.C” play are “ridiculous,” according to the Daily Illini. The need for “safe spaces” and creating community is easily understood, a concept described as “latino cultural citizenship” by William V. Flores and Rina Benmayor. He describes this concept as “a broad range of activities of everyday life through which Latinos and others claim space in society and eventually claim rights...the motivation is simply to create space where the people feel ‘safe’ and ‘at home,’ where they feel a sense of belonging and membership” (Flores 15). La Casa is just one of those spaces on campus. When asked how they helped retention, a non-Greek RSO representative at the meeting to see the retention plans already in place in the Latina/o community said “mainly through providing ‘a support network and a safe space,’” the very same things most people saw as major functions of La Casa, according to my survey.

Recently, there have been attempts to unite the community and overcome these tensions and divisions. The divided graduate and undergraduate registered student organizations are currently working to host an event together, and both presidents expressed a desire to reunite. La Casa’s workers have realized the problems they face and are attempting to use retention as a “common ground” to unite the Latina/o community and increase attendance to La Casa programming. This semester, though La Casa continues to host workshops like the Macnair

program, it is revamping its retention programming, hoping to institute it next year. In an interview with one of the workers, I asked what inspired this new approach and what they hope it will accomplish. She said that the general idea was to get the input of Latina/o campus organizations which already have retention programs in place as to what works, what doesn't, and how La Casa can change its perception to being all about retention. The ideas include having an OMSA tutor come to La Casa once a week and so all the resources can be "in one space." She also hosted a "retention workshop," in which all the paraprofessional Latina/o organizations (pre-med, pre-law students etc.) and all the sorority and fraternity academic chairs were invited to participate in. At the actual event, though no paraprofessional groups showed unfortunately, the discussions were fruitful. Two workers prefaced the workshop with a reason why they wanted to focus on retention, and how the Greek and non-Greek organizations could help. "It is a challenge across the Latina/o community. We need to keep it in mind. It will help us work together, collaborate, and may increase attendance to La Casa and bring people in."

Retention has become the prerogative of many different campus units recently. The Office of Minority Student Affairs has extensive retention programming; Latina/o paraprofessional groups and sororities/fraternities have extensive retention programming; and certain university administrators have even declared retention to be their top priority (according to a La Casa worker). La Casa, too, emphasizes in its mission statement the want to help retain Latina/o students. However, there are many different ways to aid in retention. Providing a "safe space" for Latina/o students and connecting them to the many resources this university has to offer is an invaluable tool in aiding retention. La Casa does that and is accurately perceived to do that by those who use La Casa regularly. What La Casa should work on, perhaps, is dispelling this idea that it is only "for" certain students in the Latina/o population; trying to get Latina/o Greeks,

Latina/o non-Greeks, and unaffiliated Latinas/os to really work together to try and create bonds of friendship across these factions; and making sure that Latinas/os know their academic success should be a very important aspect of their lives on campus, just as important as effecting change and fighting stereotypes of being “Latina/o.” If all Latinas/os feel welcome at La Casa, use its facilities, and talk to its workers, then when those students run into problems with their academics, La Casa can effectively guide them to the help they need.

The university can also aid in this endeavor by making sure Latinas/os are introduced to La Casa when first coming here. The three-day orientation in which minority students toured all the cultural houses and were introduced to its resources has been cancelled, thus making it harder for La Casa to reach out to its population. This reaching out is also prevented by the lack of ties between La Casa and academic units, for if certain Latina/o students are intimidated for one reason or another by La Casa’s house, they might be more inclined to getting to know La Casa representatives if they are in an academic setting such as the college of LAS. Finally, there are many people who use the La Casa facilities, and as such La Casa can act as a proverbial “pool” of students who could be positively affected by new university retention programming, if there are open discussions between La Casa and other retention-oriented campus units.

There are many different directions I could see the research around this issue going. The relationship between the Office of Minority Student Affairs and other university diversity administrators and La Casa should be more closely examined, as well as the chancellor’s claim that “Inclusive Illinois” is “helping the racial climate” at this university. There have been studies that see a close correlation between universities’ racial climates and retention figures, thus making “Inclusive Illinois” a particularly salient project in terms of retention. I also think more research on the relationship between non-Greek and Greek RSOs would be very helpful, especially as it

relates to La Casa. This kind of research could be most effective by students already in these organizations, as it is hard for people outside these organizations to get a hold of these students and receive approval to do research from these groups' executives. Finally La Casa will be reinstating the revamped retention programming in fall 2008, and it would be productive for a researcher to see how it is received.

La Casa has many challenges ahead to try and get students to feel welcome at La Casa, to unite the Latina/o population, and to aid in retention of Latina/o students more than La Casa already does. These problems are created by the hostile racial climate both nationally and locally, university apathy towards Latina/o students, university homogenization of Latinas/os, and the historic tensions within the Latina/o community. Hopefully La Casa will accomplish all these goals in the years to come, despite the obstacles in place.

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