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Theorizing Racial Microaffirmations as a Response to Racial Microaggressions: Counterstories Across Three Generations of Critical Race Scholars

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& Layla Huber-Verjan^{***}

ABSTRACT

This article follows a Critical Race tradition of counterstorytelling to tell three stories from across three generations of Critical Race Scholars in Education. In each of our stories, we explain how we came to research racial microaggressions and how this work eventually led us to our current theorizing of racial microaffirmations. We have theorized racial microaffirmations as one of many responses to racial microaggressions. In this article, we define racial microaffirmations as subtle verbal and non-verbal strategies People of Color consciously engage (with other People of Color) that affirm each other's value, integrity, and shared humanity. We explain how racial microaffirmations have emerged within our own work and provide theoretical evidence of the concept, as discussed in research on self-affirmation theory in psychology. Finally, we provide examples of racial microaffirmations in the literature and encourage other scholars to conceptually and empirically examine the concept in the experiences of People of Color.

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I. INTRODUCTION¹

Henry Louis Gates Jr.² begins his memoir, *Colored People*, with a letter to his daughters. His daughter, Liza, prompts this letter by asking about why Gates always “speaks to colored people” he passes in the streets. Gates writes:

Dear Maggie and Liza . . . [L]ast summer, I sat at a sidewalk café in Italy, and three or four “black” Italians walked casually by . . . [E]ach spoke to me; rather, each nodded his head slightly or acknowledged me with a glance, ever so subtly. When growing up, we always did this with each other, passing boats in a sea of white folk . . . [W]hich is why I still nod or speak to black people on the streets and why it felt so good to be acknowledged by the Afro-Italians who passed my table at the café in Milan . . . [A]bove all, I enjoy the unselfconscious moments of a shared cultural intimacy, whatever form they take, when no one else is watching, when no white people are around . . . And I hope you’ll understand why I continue to speak to colored people I pass on the streets.

Love, Daddy.

During our academic careers, separately and collectively, we have been reading, researching, and teaching racial microaggressions—a systemic form of everyday racism directed toward People of Color³ that are often carried

¹ This article was originally submitted for inclusion in the 2017 LatCrit conference proceedings. Professor Tayyab Mahmud referred to this article in the foreword of that issue. See Tayyab Mahmud, *Foreword: What’s Next? Counter-stories and Theorizing Resistance*, 17 SEATTLE J. FOR SOC. JUST. 607, 655 (2019). Unfortunately, the article was not published in this issue as intended, due to an unknown oversight of the journal. Professor Mahmud’s comments in his foreword apply to this article. There may have been research on racial microaffirmations that has been published during the delay in publication that has not been cited herein. To our knowledge, this is the first peer-reviewed article to discuss racial microaffirmations from a Critical Race Theory perspective.

² HENRY LOUIS GATES JR., *COLORED PEOPLE: A MEMOIR* xi–xv (1995).

³ We intentionally capitalize the term “People of Color” throughout this article to reject the standard grammatical norm that shapes the discursive operation of power within language generally and terminology specifically. We use capitalization as a grammatical strategy to (re)claim power typically removed from terms used to describe historically

out in subtle and automatic or unconscious ways.⁴ In our work, we have found People of Color *respond* to racial microaggressions in numerous ways (e.g., self-policing, proving them wrong, creating counterspaces, and engaging various art forms).⁵ Indeed, Gates’s letter to his daughters recognizes one of those responses—those “unselfconscious moments of a shared cultural intimacy”⁶ that African Americans express to each other to affirm their humanity and dignity in everyday life. Our recent work on racial microaggressions has led us here—to theorize the everyday forms of affirmation and validation People of Color engaged with each other in a variety of public and private settings—those nods, smiles, embraces, use of language, etc.—that express acknowledgement and affirm self-worth. We call these interactions *racial microaffirmations* and define them as subtle verbal and non-verbal strategies People of Color consciously engage (with other People of Color) that affirm each other’s value, integrity, and shared humanity.

In this article, we follow a Critical Race tradition of counterstorytelling.⁷ We each tell a story of how we came to research racial microaggressions and

marginalized racial groups. This rule also applies to the capitalization of “Communities” and “Students of Color.”

⁴ See generally Lindsay Pérez Huber & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research*, 18 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 297, 320 (2015).

⁵ See generally, for examples of our work that explicit discuss and theorize responses to racial microaggressions, Lindsay Pérez Huber & Daniel G Solórzano, *Visualizing Everyday Racism: Critical Race Theory, Visual Microaggressions, and the Historical Image of Mexican Banditry*, 21 QUALITATIVE INQUIRY 223 (2015); Lindsay Pérez Huber & B. M. Cueva, *Chicana/Latina Testimonios on Effects and Responses to Microaggressions*, 45 EQUITY & EXCELLENCE IN EDUC. 392 (2012); Daniel Solórzano et al., *Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students*, 69 J. NEGRO EDUC. 60 (2000).

⁶ See Gates, *supra* note 2, at xv.

⁷ Counterstorytelling in Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been and continues to be a powerful tool to challenge the racial privilege and normative values of whiteness that shape dominant perspectives of the world around us. Our story is not a traditional critical race counterstory with composite characters engaged in a storyline as found in some of the foundational CRT counterstories by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado. See generally DERRICK BELL, AND WE ARE NOT SAVED: THE ELUSIVE QUEST

how this work eventually led us to our current theorizing of racial microaffirmations. We tell these stories in a particular way, as an intergenerational counterstory, across three generations of Critical Race Scholars—Daniel G. Solórzano, a professor of education, Lindsay Pérez Huber, an associate professor of education, and Layla Huber-Verjan, an eighth grade student. As our stories will tell, our lives and work are closely connected. Lindsay has been trained and mentored by Daniel, or “Danny,” during the past sixteen years. Layla Huber-Verjan is Lindsay’s daughter. Collectively, our stories are told across four decades, beginning in the late 1980s continuing to present day, and show how racial microaggressions and racial microaffirmations have emerged and evolved in each of our lives over this time. At the end of this article, we also share what we have learned from this research and how we see the future of the research moving forward. We begin here.

II. DANIEL SOLÓRZANO’S STORY

The story of how I came to work in the field of racial microaggressions begins with two articles—one in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*⁸ and the second in the *Yale Law Journal*.⁹ In the summer of 1993, I was at the East Los Angeles College Library, going through my ritual of browsing a combination of journals, magazines, and newspapers—looking for artifacts I could use in my teaching and research. I came across an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Peter Monaghan titled, *Critical Race Theory’ Questions Role of Legal Doctrine in Racial Inequality*.¹⁰ The article

FOR RACIAL JUSTICE (1987); RICHARD DELGADO, *THE RODRIGO CHRONICLES: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT AMERICA AND RACE* (N.Y.U. Press, 1995) (examples of Critical Race counterstories in the law). Rather, this is an actual account of our academic and personal journeys to research on racial microaggressions, and racial microaffirmations.

⁸ Peter Monaghan, ‘*Critical Race Theory’ Questions Role Of Legal Doctrine In Racial Inequality: Lani Guinier, Ill Fated Justice Dept. Nominee, is One of its Traditional Adherents*, CHRON. OF HIGHER EDUC., July 23, 1993 at A7.

⁹ Peggy Davis, *Law as Microaggression*, 98 YALE L. J. 1559, 1577 (1989).

¹⁰ See Monaghan, *supra* note 8.

introduced me to an emerging field in the law called Critical Race Theory (CRT). According to Monaghan,¹¹ CRT was challenging the orthodoxy of race and racism in the law and mentioned several legal scholars and leaders in the field, such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Linda Greene, Lani Guinier, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. As I read the 1,600-word article, I was introduced to a framework that would help guide me in answering some of the questions that had been troubling me—especially questions on how we center race and racism in our academic research and teaching. This started me on my journey through the field of CRT in the law and, ultimately, to the fields of education and the social sciences.

Over the next couple of years, I put the CRT literature in conversation with the fields of Race, Ethnic, and Gender Studies and the work of Paulo Freire to examine and analyze the context of the structures, processes, and discourses of educational research and praxis.¹² I came to define CRT as the work of scholars who were attempting to develop an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education, and that works toward identifying and challenging racism as part of a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination. Over the years, my colleagues and I have worked to “reinvent” CRT in the context of education by developing *Critical Race Tools* to help us understand the ways People and Communities of Color experience and respond to racism—both institutional and in the everyday.¹³ One such tool in CRT is *racial microaggressions*.¹⁴

¹¹ *Id.* at A7.

¹² See generally Daniel G. Solórzano, *Images And Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping and Teacher Education*, 24 TCHR. EDUC. Q. 5, 19 (1997); Solórzano et al., *supra*, note 4, at 73; Daniel G. Solórzano & Tara J. Yosso, *Maintaining Social Justice Hopes Within Academic Realities: A Freirean Approach to Critical Race/Latcrit Pedagogy*, 78 DENVER L. REV. 595, 621 (2001).

¹³ Daniel G. Solórzano, *Critical Race Theory's Intellectual Roots: My Email Epistolary with Derrick Bell*, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION HANDBOOK, 48–68 (Marvin Lynn & Adrienne Dixson eds., 2013).

¹⁴ See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 4; see also Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 5. See also Davis, *supra* note 9.

As I was immersed in the CRT literature in the early 1990s, I came across the second article in my journey researching racial microaggressions by Peggy Davis in the *Yale Law Journal*,¹⁵ titled *Law as Microaggression*. This was the first time I saw the word microaggression in either a title or in narrative. Davis referred to the origins of microaggressions in the work of Chester Pierce.¹⁶ Davis mentions the first of five Pierce citations in her article.¹⁷ These footnotes led me to Chester Pierce and his colleagues' definition of microaggressions, "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders." ¹⁸ The offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous. The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions."¹⁹

The Davis article, the Pierce citations, and this definition started me on a journey to find, understand, and utilize the concept of racial microaggressions in my research and teaching.²⁰ I went on to immerse myself in the works of Chester Pierce.²¹ Indeed, I wanted to know how and why Pierce came to work on microaggressions. I wanted to know his story.

Between 1994 and 1995, I re-analyzed data I had collected on Ford Foundation Minority Fellows using the analytical tool of racial

¹⁵ Davis, *supra* note 9.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 1560.

¹⁷ Pierce introduces the concept of microaggressions in 1969 in Chester Pierce, *Is Bigotry the Basis of The Medical Problem of the Ghetto?* in *MEDICINE IN THE GHETTO* 301, 301–14 (John C. Norman ed., Appleton-Century-Crofts Press 1969). His work theorizing racial microaggressions includes twelve more articles and book chapters. Some of his early key works include Chester Pierce, *Offensive Mechanisms*, in *THE BLACK SEVENTIES* 265, 265–82 (F. Barbour ed., Porter Sargent Publisher 1970); Chester Pierce, *Psychiatric Problems of the Black Minority*, in *AMERICAN HANDBOOK OF PSYCHIATRY* 512, 512–23 (S. Arieti ed., 1974).

¹⁸ Chester M. Pierce et al., *An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials*, 10 *EDUC. & URB. SOC'Y* 61, 87 (1977).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 65.

²⁰ See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 4. See also Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 5; Solórzano, et al., *supra* note 5.

²¹ See Pierce, *supra* note 17. See also Pierce, *supra* note 18.

microaggressions.²² I used CRT as a framework to examine how racial and gender microaggressions affect the career paths of Chicana and Chicano scholars.²³ I had three objectives for this study: (1) to extend and apply CRT to research in education, (2) to recognize, document, and analyze racial and gender microaggressions of Chicana and Chicano scholars, and (3) to hear the voice of survivors of discrimination by examining the effect of race and gender microaggressions on the lives of these Chicana and Chicano scholars.²⁴ As I engaged the data, three patterns of racial and gender microaggressions emerged: (1) scholars felt out of place in academia because of their race, gender, or both; (2) scholars believed their teachers and professors had lower expectations for them; and (3) scholars' consistently encountered subtle and not so subtle experiences with race and gender discrimination.²⁵

As I used the tool of racial microaggressions to re-analyze the Ford scholar data, I began to see the power and complexity of the concept.²⁶ Also, as I worked my way through this analytical process, I came to define *racial microaggressions* as one form of systemic everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. I found that racial microaggressions are: (1) verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic, or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults that are based on a Person of Color's race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative

²² I first used the tool of marginality to analyze this data. See DANIEL G. SOLÓRZANO, *The Road to the Doctorate For California's Chicanas And Chicanos: A Study of Ford Foundation Minority Fellows* (Cal. Policy Seminar, eds., 1993).

²³ See *id.*

²⁴ After finding Pierce's racial microaggressions tool, I re-analyzed the data. See Daniel G. Solórzano, *Critical Race Theory, Race and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experiences of Chicana And Chicano Scholars*, 11 QUALITATIVE STUD. IN EDUC. 121, 136 (1998).

²⁵ *Id.* at 128–30.

²⁶ *Id.* at 132.

assaults that take a physiological, psychological, and academic toll on People of Color.²⁷

In 1998, I published *Critical Race Theory, Racial and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experiences of Chicana and Chicano Scholars* in the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*. As far as I can tell, other than the works of Pierce and his colleagues cited earlier, this article was the first academic work to empirically examine racial microaggressions.²⁸

In the fall of 1999, UCLA Professor Walter Allen contacted me and asked if I would be part of a team of researchers to conduct campus climate studies for *Grutter v. Bollinger*, an affirmative action case.²⁹ *Grutter* was a case making its way through the federal courts challenging the use of race in the admissions process at the University of Michigan Law School.³⁰ Professor Allen mentioned that the Sixth Circuit Federal Court of Appeals agreed to allow student intervenors to enter the trial. As a result, the presiding judge stopped the proceedings and set a July 31, 2000, date for submission of all reports, briefs, and other supporting materials on behalf of the student intervenors.³¹

In January 2000, Professor Allen convened his research team to design a campus climate study of the University of Michigan Law School and its four main feeder schools—the University of Michigan, Michigan State

²⁷ See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 4, at 298.

²⁸ See Solórzano, *supra* note 24.

²⁹ See generally *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 306 (2003).

³⁰ See *id.*

³¹ The intervenors were seventeen African American and Latino/a individuals who had applied or intended to apply to the University, and the Citizens for Affirmative Action's Preservation (CAAP), a nonprofit organization whose stated mission was to preserve opportunities in higher education for African American and Latino/a students in Michigan. See Walter Allen & Daniel Solórzano, *Affirmative Action, Educational Equity and Campus Racial Climate: A Case Study of the University of Michigan Law School*, 12 BERKELEY LA RAZA L. J., 237, 237, 299, 300 (2001).

University, Harvard University, and the University of California, Berkeley.³² Our multi-method design of this study incorporated surveys, focus groups, interviews, document analysis, and other public records. In March of 2000, we gathered data at each of the universities and submitted the final report to the federal court on July 31, 2000.³³ The federal trial in the Eastern District of Michigan resumed in January 2001.

The final report to the federal court was titled “Affirmative Action, Educational Equity and Campus Racial Climate: A Case Study of the University of Michigan Law School”³⁴ and was published in the Berkeley La Raza Law Review.³⁵ My first research article from the Michigan study focused on the experiences of African American students and was published in the Journal of Negro Education and titled Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students.³⁶ Later we published an article based on this data, which focused on Latina and Latino students titled Critical Race

³² The initial team that conducted the data gathering consisted of Walter Allen, Grace Carroll, Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja, and Elizabeth Guillory. In addition, the following people assisted in the preparation of the Report to the Court: Tara Yosso, Gniesha Dinwiddie, and Gloria Gonzalez, all doctoral and former doctoral students at UCLA. See *id.* at 237.

³³ Professor Allen and I were deposed on the campus climate study by attorneys for the plaintiff, Barbara Grutter, before the trial resumed in January 2001.

³⁴ Walter R. Allen & Daniel Solórzano, *Affirmative Action, Educational Equity and Campus Racial Climate: A Case Study of the University of Michigan Law School*, 12 BERKELEY LA RAZA L. J. 237, 237–63 (2000).

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Solórzano et al., *supra* note 5, at 60–73. In one of the most comprehensive histories of racial microaggressions research, Gloria Wong et al. state that this article on African American students preceded Derald Wing Sue’s work on racial microaggressions (published in 2007) by seven years. See Gloria Wong et al., *The What, the Why, and the How: A Review of Racial Microaggressions Research in Psychology*, 6 RACE & SOC. PROBS. 181–200 (2014). However, the Solórzano article (see *supra* note 24) on Chicana and Chicano scholars was published two years earlier than the 2000 *Journal of Negro Education* article.

Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate For Latina/o Undergraduates.³⁷

As part of our commitment to the various communities that supported the student intervenors in *Grutter*, Professor Allen's team traveled to Michigan and presented our findings. At one of these meetings in 2001, at the University of Michigan, we finished giving our presentation on campus climate generally, and racial microaggressions in particular, to a group made up of University of Michigan students and faculty and Detroit public high school teachers and students. As the audience lined up for questions and answers, a young African American high school student came to the microphone. She stood there—crying. When she finally spoke, she said, “[y]ou’ve given me a name for my pain.” This comment continues to affect me because this young woman expressed the raw and real feelings that many People of Color, from many different age groups, communities, and walks of life, have since expressed. This young student showed us that these two words, *racial microaggressions*, were a powerful way to acknowledge the everyday pain and suffering that People of Color experience and that we provided a term that acknowledged, affirmed, and validated that pain.³⁸

Since those first articles on racial microaggressions, I have continued to work with colleagues on research and conceptual manuscripts. For instance, our work on racial microaggressions included publications on an educational equity case in Federal Court in the Northern District of California,³⁹ racial

³⁷ Tara J. Yosso et al., *Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates*, 79 HARV. EDUC. REV. 659, 659–90 (2009).

³⁸ This was probably the first time I realized that the term racial microaggressions is a form of racial microaffirmations.

³⁹ Daniel G. Solórzano & Walter Allen, *A Case Study of Racial Microaggressions and Campus Racial Climate at the University of California, Berkeley*, 23 UCLA CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 15, 15–111 (2002) (An expert report commissioned by the plaintiffs in *Castaneda, et al. v. UC Regents, et al.* (N.D. Cal. 2000)); Daniel G. Solórzano et al., *Keeping Race in Place: Racial Microaggressions And Campus Racial Climate at The University of California, Berkeley*, 23 UCLA CHICANO-LATINO L. R. 15, 15–112 (2002).

battle fatigue,⁴⁰ teachers and racial microaggressions,⁴¹ microaggressions as research tools,⁴² visual microaggressions,⁴³ microaggressions and social work pedagogy,⁴⁴ and encyclopedia entries and policy briefs.⁴⁵ The theorizing that was done in these publications became useful for the investigation of the everyday racism that was happening at my (and other) institutions.

On Friday, October 18, 2013, Gene Block, the Chancellor of the University of California, Los Angeles, emailed the UCLA community an external report titled *Independent Investigative Report on Acts of Bias and Discrimination Involving Faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles*. This report has become known as the *Moreno Report*—named after the chair of the committee, retired California Supreme Court Justice Carlos Moreno.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ William A. Smith et al., *Racial Primes and Black Misandry on Historically White Campuses: Toward Critical Race Accountability in Educational Administration*, 43 EDUC. ADMIN. Q. 559–85 (2007).

⁴¹ Rita Kohli & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Teachers, Please Learn Our Names!: Racial Microaggressions and the K-12 Classroom*, 15 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 441–62 (2012); Maria Ledesma & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Naming Their Pain: How Everyday Microaggressions Impact Students and Teachers*, in CONTESTING THE MYTH OF A ‘POST RACIAL’ ERA: THE CONTINUED SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE IN U.S. EDUCATION 112–27 (Deborah Carter Andrews & Frank Tuitt, eds., 2013).

⁴² See generally Lindsay Pérez Huber & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Racial Microaggressions As a Tool for Critical Race Research*, 18 RACE ETHNICITY & EDUC. 297, 297–320 (2015).

⁴³ See generally Lindsay Pérez Huber & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Visualizing Everyday Racism: Critical Race Theory, Visual Microaggressions, and the Historical Image of Mexican Banditry*, 21 QUALITATIVE INQUIRY 223, 223–238 (2015).

⁴⁴ Lindsay Pérez Huber & Daniel G. Solórzano, *Teaching Racial Microaggressions: Implications of Critical Race Hypotheses for Social Work*, 27 J. ETHNIC & CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN SOC. WORK 54, 54–71 (2018).

⁴⁵ See generally LINDSAY PÉREZ HUBER & DANIEL G. SOLÓRZANO, RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS: WHAT THEY ARE, WHAT THEY ARE NOT, AND WHY THEY MATTER (Chon A. Noriega and Rebecca Frazier, eds., 2015); Daniel G. Solórzano & Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Microaggressions, Racial*, in ENCYCLOPEDIA OF DIVERSITY IN EDUC. 1488–91 (James Banks, ed., 2012); Kenjus Watson and Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Micro In Name Only: Looking Back to move Forward in Racial Microaggressions Research* (Ctr for Critical Race Studies at UCLA, 2016).

⁴⁶ CARLOS MORENO ET AL., INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATIVE REPORT ON ACTS OF BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION INVOLVING FACULTY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES (Oct. 2013).

Chancellor Block mentioned that the Moreno Report contained some sobering and disturbing accounts of bias and discrimination that some of our faculty had experienced at UCLA. The Moreno Report referenced some of our work on microaggressions. It stated:

Several faculty members referenced the notion of ‘*microaggressions*,’ which researchers have defined as “subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed toward non-Whites, often done automatically and unconsciously. They are layered insults based on one’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname.” It is not clear to us whether any workable definition of discriminatory conduct is capable of capturing every such *microaggression* experienced by a minority faculty member . . . Heightened awareness of the issue of racially insensitive conduct may help to reduce *microaggressions* or other subtle behaviors that degrade the work environment for faculty of color.⁴⁷

In response to the *Moreno Report*, the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) established a committee and issued their report in late December 2013 called the *UC Senate-Administration Work Group on the Moreno Report: Report to the President, Academic Council, and Chancellors*.⁴⁸ The report stated that “[s]ystemwide P&T [Promotion and Tenure] has been concerned about *low level discriminatory actions* that occur over a long period of time—things such as undervaluation, *microaggression*, and *marginalization*—that never as a single instance reach the threshold for filing a formal grievance.”⁴⁹

One of the UCOP responses was to initiate a University of California (UC) system-wide equity, diversity, and inclusion seminar for university leaders at each of the ten campuses. The seminar was titled *Fostering Inclusive Excellence: Strategies and Tools for Department Chairs and Deans*. The

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 20–21 (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ UC SENATE-ADMINISTRATION WORK GROUP ON THE MORENO REPORT. REPORT TO THE PRESIDENT, ACADEMIC COUNCIL, AND CHANCELLORS (Dec. 23, 2013).

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 10 (emphasis added).

stated goals of the four-hour seminar were to (1) help participants gain a better understanding of implicit bias and *microaggressions* and their impact on departmental/school climate, (2) increase participants' effectiveness at recognizing and interrupting/addressing *microaggressions* when they occur, and (3) discuss tools and strategies for developing an inclusive departmental/school climate. I was asked to give the seminar lecture titled "Using the Critical Race Tools of Racial and Gender Microaggressions to Examine Everyday Racism in Academic Spaces."⁵⁰ These seminars took place on each of the ten UC campuses for departmental chairs, deans, and other campus senior leadership throughout the 2014-2015 academic year.

In the seven years since the *Moreno Report* in October of 2013, I have given over 100 public lectures, presentations, and workshops on racial microaggressions at my university, at other public and private universities, and in professional and community settings. I have spoken to high school undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, as well as teachers, teacher candidates, principals, principal candidates, counselors, and university and civic leaders.

Since 2014, I have been ending my presentations by focusing on one of the responses to racial microaggressions—microaffirmations. Currently, I am finding, examining, and telling the stories of these everyday responses from parents, siblings, family, friends, teachers, and strangers that affirm the dignity and humanity of People of Color. I am systematically looking for those "unselfconscious moments of a shared cultural intimacy"⁵¹ that People of Color express to each other to affirm their goodness in the everyday—what we are calling racial microaffirmations.

⁵⁰ My colleague and co-author on this chapter, Professor Lindsay Pérez Huber, gave five of the ten racial microaggressions UCOP lectures. Daniel Solórzano and Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for to Understand Everyday Racism*, Presentation to the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) Faculty Leadership Seminar Series (2014–2015).

⁵¹ See Gates, *supra* note 2, at xv.

III. LINDSAY PÉREZ HUBER'S STORY

My story of coming to the work on racial microaggressions and microaffirmations begins here, where Daniel “Danny” Solórzano’s ends. My research in this area was greatly influenced by the training I received under Danny’s supervision early on in my career as a graduate student. Prior to graduate school, I was a first-generation college student, from a working-class family, who benefitted greatly from undergraduate research programs that trained me to become a scholar and enabled me to envision myself as a future academic. My undergraduate research, coupled with my training as a Chicana/o Studies major, allowed me to “see” my experiences represented within higher education. This is where some of my first research questions emerged about the differential and inequitable educational outcomes for Latina/o students, and what has led me to my doctoral program in Social Science and Comparative Education at UCLA, working with Danny. Under his guidance and mentorship, I was trained in Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education. Afterwards, I began working with him to further develop CRT tools that could be utilized to do exactly what he described earlier—to expose, challenge, and transform educational spaces to be more inclusive of a diversity that values the presence, knowledge, and humanity of Communities of Color.

I was initially drawn to these frameworks because they allowed me, as a Woman of Color, to recognize how racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and other systems of oppression are imbedded within social institutions and how those systems shape our everyday experiences. As I reflect back on specific moments in my life—when my high school counselor encouraged me to pursue a vocational program rather than college or when I became an expectant mother and was told that pursuing a doctoral degree would not be possible—I had an intuition, or what Anzaldúa calls *la facultad*, that told me something was wrong with this advice and not to follow it.⁵² But, I did not

⁵² GLORIA ANZALDÚA, BORDERLANDS, LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA 38 (1987).

have a name or an explanation for it. That is until I learned about the concept of racial microaggressions that allowed me to name these experiences or to “name my pain,” as Danny explained earlier.

As my work and training progressed as a graduate student, I developed more complex research questions about how structural racism mediates the educational experiences of Latina/o students, particularly undocumented students. I found that inequitable schooling opportunities for undocumented Latina/o students resulted from racialized perceptions of their undocumented status. This finding revealed a need to examine the intersections of race and immigration status in Latina/o education.⁵³ To respond to this need, I worked with colleagues to theorize the concept of racist nativism.⁵⁴ Racist nativism provides a framework to understand how negative constructions of undocumented immigrants are racialized throughout U.S. history, and how that racialization continues today. I focused on Latina/o schooling experiences from the K-12 system to higher education.⁵⁵ This work is significant to my story about racial microaggressions because I found racist nativism to shape the ways undocumented students experience

⁵³ See generally Lindsay Pérez Huber & Maria C. Malagon, *Silenced Struggles: The Experiences of Latina And Latino Undocumented College Students in California*, 7 NEVADA L. J. 841, 855 (2007); Veronica Velez et al., *Battling for Human Rights and Social Justice: A Latina/o Critical Race Media Analysis of Latina/o Student Youth Activism in the Wake of 2006 Anti-Immigrant Sentiment*, 35 SOC. JUST. 7, 7–27 (2008). Both studies found the educational experiences of undocumented students to be influenced by racist and nativist perceptions of Latina/o immigrant communities.

⁵⁴ See generally Lindsay Pérez Huber et al., *Getting Beyond the “Symptom,” Acknowledging the “Disease”: Theorizing Racist Nativism*, 11 CONTEMP. JUST. REV. 39 (2008).

⁵⁵ Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Discourses of Racist Nativism in California Public Education: English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions*, 47 EDUC. STUDIES 379, 379–401 (2011); Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Challenging Racist Nativist Framing: Acknowledging the Community Cultural Wealth of Undocumented Chicana College Students to Reframe the Immigration Debate*, 79 HARV. EDUC. REV. 704, 704–729 (2009); Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Using Latina/o Critical Race Theory (Latcrit) and Racist Nativism to Explore Intersectionality in the Educational Experiences of Undocumented Chicana College Students*, 24 EDUC. FOUNDS. 77, 77–96 (2010).

microaggressions in K-12 schools⁵⁶ and in institutions of higher education.⁵⁷ Specifically, I found educational policies and practices to (re)produce these racist nativist microaggressions, such as restrictive language policies in public schools and exclusionary financial aid policies in college. These studies provided empirical evidence on how microaggressions in everyday schooling experiences were shaped by structural inequities and institutional racism. This led me to further explore the relationship between everyday racism (racial microaggressions) and *institutional* racism. In other words, there was a need for deeper theorizing around racial microaggressions to understand how everyday racism was, in fact, systemic as we argue in our definition of racial microaggressions.

Danny and I began to advance a theory of racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective to better articulate the systemic elements of everyday racism. That is, how everyday experiences with microaggressions were (re)produced by institutional racism and reinforced by ideologies used to justify everyday racism. In 2015, we published a “racial microaggressions analytic framework” to explain the systemic relationship between racial microaggressions, institutional racism, and macroaggressions, or ideologies of white supremacy that reinforce racism.⁵⁸ This framework analytically centers experiences with racial microaggressions that occur within the context of institutional racism.⁵⁹ We define institutional racism as “formal or informal structural mechanisms, such as policies and processes that systematically subordinate, marginalize, and exclude non-dominant groups and mediates their experiences with racial microaggressions.”⁶⁰ Institutional racism is a key component in understanding the function and permanence of

⁵⁶ Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Discourses of Racist Nativism in California Public Education: English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions*, 47 EDUC. STUDIES 379 (2011).

⁵⁷ Lindsay Pérez Huber & B.M. Cueva, *Chicana/Latina Testimonios on Effects and Responses to Microaggressions*, 45 EQUITY & EXCELLENCE IN EDUC. 392 (2012).

⁵⁸ See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 4.

⁵⁹ See *id.* at 302 for the visual model of the racial microaggressions analytic framework.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 303.

racism in the US. Indeed, systemic racism is imbedded within social institutions, which in turn, serve as structural mechanisms that perpetuate racial microaggressions and other forms of racism.⁶¹ In order to maintain the institutional racism that (re)produces microaggressions, there must be an ideological justification—we call this a macroaggression.⁶² We define a macroaggression as “the set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination.”⁶³ Taken together, these concepts help us understand racial microaggressions as a systemic form of racism maintained by ideologies of white supremacy.

Other models we have developed focus on how People of Color experience racial microaggressions. For example, we articulate a model for collecting and analyzing data on racial microaggressions that centers on the experiences of People of Color. In the model, we outline the four specific components:

Type: How one is targeted by a racial microaggression. For example, verbal microaggressions are frequently casual comments (regarding appearance, language, or country of origin). Non-verbal microaggressions can be kinesic (body language) or visual (images in textbooks, film, advertising).

Context: Where the racial microaggression occurs (classrooms, faculty meetings, stores, on the street).

Effects: The physiological and psychological consequences of racial microaggressions (self-doubt, anger, stress, racial battle fatigue, poor academic performance, poor health).

Responses: How one responds to racial microaggressions (denial, self-policing, proving aggressors wrong, resistance, establishing

⁶¹ See generally MANNING MARABLE, *THE GREAT WELLS OF DEMOCRACY: THE MEANING OF RACE IN AMERICAN LIFE* (2002).

⁶² See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 4, at 303.

⁶³ See *id.*

counterspaces, creating art, microaffirmations). The response can also influence the effects of racial microaggressions.⁶⁴

Racial microaggressions operate to subtly and cumulatively dehumanize People of Color. Yet, People of Color continue to respond and to challenge them. I began to think about racial microaffirmations by thinking more deeply about resilience and resistance as a response to racial microaggressions. This is where my story intersects with both Danny's (previously) and Layla's (to follow). In our initial discussions about racial microaffirmations, we discussed this concept as a response to racial microaggressions, and thus, the linguistic relation (microaggression as antonymous to microaffirmation). We considered various examples of microaffirmations, such as one powerful example written by Henry Louis Gates Jr.⁶⁵ that was discussed at the beginning of this paper. Other examples will be discussed in more detail at the conclusion of this paper. However, I also argue that racial microaffirmations are more than a response to microaggressions. The concept of microaffirmations can stand alone conceptually because its existence lies in the agency of Communities of Color, rather than in systemic racism and white supremacy. Racial microaffirmations can move towards transformation of injustice by focusing analysis on the ways Communities of Color affirm a shared humanity and collective self-worth. To say that I arrived at this understanding of racial microaffirmations exclusively through my research would be inaccurate. It was my oldest daughter, Layla, who prompted me to more deeply consider racial microaffirmations and want to further theorize it. She tells her story next.

⁶⁴ See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 46 in UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Latino Policy & ISSUES BRIEF No. 30 [<https://a2/perma.cc/B36C-EE4B>] outlining these four components of racial microaggressions.

⁶⁵ See Gates, *supra* note 2.

IV. LAYLA HUBER-VERJAN'S STORY

I first learned what a microaggression was when I was eight years old, reading the book *Don't Tell Lies, Lucy!* with my mom one night before bed.⁶⁶ It is a children's book about a girl named Lucy, who had a bad habit of telling lies. On page 11 of the book, the main character, Lucy, crashed her friend Paul's bike. Rather than telling Paul the truth about what happened to his bike, Lucy told him that a "bandit" jumped in front of her, causing her to crash into a tree.⁶⁷ My mom stopped reading and stared at the book. She looked surprised. I asked her what was wrong. She asked me what the "bandit" in the picture looked like. I quickly recognized the hat this "bandit" was wearing. It was a *sombrero*—what the boys wore in my *baile folklórico* dance group.

"Who wears a sombrero?" my mom asked.

"*Folklórico* people," I responded.

"And who are *folklórico* people?" she asked.

"Latinos," I said. My mom then asked,

"So what is this picture telling us?" The answer immediately came to me.

"It's telling us that Latinos are bandits!" I said surprised.

My mom continued to read. I was really quiet as she continued to read the story, and I began to feel very sad because I felt like the author was specifically speaking to me and trying to tell me that I was a bandit. I began to cry. My mom looked down at me and asked what was wrong.

I said, "[b]ut I'm Latino, so they're saying I'm a bandit!"

At first, I thought the image was a "put down," a term that I had learned about in my elementary school for a hurtful comment. Now, however, I am 13 years old, and I can identify the image as a microaggression instead of just a "put down."

⁶⁶ See generally PHIL ROXBEE COX, *DON'T TELL LIES, LUCY!* (Cautionary Tales 2004).

⁶⁷ See *id.*

A few months later, my mom asked me if I wanted to present with her and Danny to share my experience, and I agreed. Soon after, we created a PowerPoint about racial microaggressions and my experience reading this book. We have presented it at conferences all over the country, including the American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference in Washington, D.C., the Critical Race Studies in Education Association (CRSEA) annual conference in Nashville, Tennessee, and at a symposium at California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) for the Department of Chicana(o) and Latina(o) Studies.

A couple of days before the presentation at CSULA, my mom and I were preparing for the presentation. My mom asked me how we could end the presentation differently this time. She suggested that we discuss our next steps for our research on racial microaggressions. I started thinking about what the opposite of a microaggression would be. I thought about the book I was reading at school during that time, *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan.⁶⁸ I explained to my mom that the main character, Esperanza, was a young Latina girl from a wealthy family in Mexico.⁶⁹ After her family experienced several tragedies, Esperanza and her mother lost their home in a tragic fire. Esperanza and her mother had no choice but to move to a migrant camp and work as laborers in the fields of the Central Valley in California. *Esperanza Rising* was the opposite of a microaggression because Esperanza demonstrated perseverance through tough times and is a role model for Latina girls, like me. I felt proud to be able to share the same race as Esperanza. My mom explained to me that what I described was known as a microaffirmation.

Understanding these terms is an advantage for me when it comes to understanding microaggressions, microaffirmations, and other issues related to race and diversity. Many people are uncomfortable talking about race;

⁶⁸ PAM MUÑOZ RYAN, *ESPERANZA RISING* (2002).

⁶⁹ *See id.*

however, because I understand these topics, I think more critically about them and am comfortable discussing them. For example, a group of older students at my school recently gave a presentation about microaggressions to the middle schoolers. They showed us YouTube videos about microaggressions that people have experienced instead of talking about it. Something in this presentation got me thinking. At the end of the presentation, middle school students were able to ask questions about microaggressions. An 8th grader asked, “[i]f those [the microaggressions from the videos] were *microaggressions*, then what is an aggression?” All the teachers and students thought that was an interesting question, including me, although the students presenting weren’t able to answer this question. When I talked to my mom about the question, she shared some of her research with me. She told me that she and Danny respond to this type of question all the time and that the “micro” in microaggression doesn’t mean small. Instead, it means everyday—microaggressions are an everyday part of the lives of People of Color.⁷⁰

Now that I fully understand these terms, I can share about them and talk about my experiences with them, not only in presentations with my mom and Danny but also at school. I wrote about my personal experience with microaggressions reading *Don’t Tell Lies, Lucy!* for an English class assignment recently. The assignment asked us to write vignettes, inspired by Sandra Cisneros’ *House on Mango Street*.⁷¹ Our vignette had to be about gender, power, and expressing who we are. I titled my vignette, “Page 11.”

Page 11 Don’t tell lies, Lucy. A children’s book. One of the two books I read before bed with my mom. “Don’t lie,” her parents told her. But she lied. “Don’t lie,” Aunt Bea told her. But she lied. “Don’t lie,” her brother told her. But she lied.

Page 11. She broke the bike and she lied. Lucy didn’t just run into the tree. A bandit jumped in front of her. A bandit. Not any bandit.

⁷⁰ Watson & Pérez Huber, *supra* note 45.

⁷¹ SANDRA CISNEROS, *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET* (1972).

A bandit wearing a *sarape*, *huaraches*, a *sombrero*. A bandit with skin darker than Lucy. Why does a bandit wear this? Why did the illustrator draw this? What did this mean? Questions running through my mind like tiny, insane people. Latinos are bandits. But I'm Latino, so they're saying I'm a bandit. Tears. Tears shed. It was just a drawing, but seemed like so much more. I felt powerless. Just a powerless young girl. A powerless young bandit? Am I bandit? I wasn't sure what or who to believe. My mom tries to explain. Latinos are not bandits she says. But why does the author show it this way? Confused. Puzzled. Hurt. Have I ever stolen something? I don't think so. Latinos are not bandits she says. But what if I have? Then the author and illustrator are right. They would be right. I am a bandit. Latinos are not bandits she says. My mom's words repeat in my mind over and over again.

I needed to be strong. *We* needed to be strong. We couldn't just let this get past us. My mom and I were the bright red lights that stopped this book and illustration from driving on ahead. Research. That's what we did. Finding the meaning behind Page 11. Seeking the answer. Searching and reading and searching and reading, until... the answer. The stereotypical "Mexican Bandit" as Visual Microaggression in Children's books. We found our answer and we shared our answer with others. Presented at colleges. My mom gave talks. Letting others know what we learned. About the idea of racial microaggressions shown in different places. Books, plays, schools. How they affect the race it's pointing straight at with a finger of confidence, seriousness, laughter, or even with an unintentional finger, just like Phil Roxbee Cox, the author of the book, who pointed at me through the bandit on Page 11.

I decided to write my vignette about this because I feel it is important to be able to identify microaggressions and raise awareness about them. Many people feel uncomfortable talking about race, so they never talk about it at all. Sharing my story can help change this.

V. THEORIZING RACIAL MICROAFFIRMATIONS

Indeed, one purpose of counterstorytelling is to center the experiences of People of Color in the struggle for social justice. Here, we share our stories

of researching, publishing, and speaking on the importance of racial microaggressions in our academic careers. We do so because we believe it provides a language to acknowledge the everyday racism experienced by People of Color that are often dismissed as “hypersensitivity” by white perpetrators⁷² and sometimes by those in our own communities that have internalized racist viewpoints.⁷³ As Paulo Freire argues, the ability to name oppression is a powerful tool and is one of the first steps toward liberation for oppressed groups.⁷⁴ Indeed, we also believe that the practice of naming racial microaggressions disrupts the normalized existence of racism and white supremacy in everyday life and calls attention to the structural inequities and individual pain they cause. For the same reason, we argue it is just as important to create a language for the everyday strategies of

⁷² In 2014-2015, Solórzano and Pérez Huber worked with the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) on its Faculty Leadership Seminar Series. See Pérez Huber & Solórzano, *supra* note 50. These seminars were designed to broaden UC faculty leaders’ capacity to support faculty diversity and enhance department and campus climate toward inclusive excellence. The seminars focused on structured dialogues on racial microaggressions and implicit bias in higher education. Following the seminars, several scholars challenged the approach to recognize racial microaggressions in higher education. See Todd Gitlin, *You Are Here to Be Disturbed*, CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUC. (May 11, 2015), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Plague-of-Hypersensitivity/229963> [<https://perma.cc/W4LX-F76F>] (where Gitlin critiques strategies to disrupt racial microaggressions in higher education, warning that such efforts create a “plague of hypersensitivity” that threatens free speech). Eugene Volokh makes a similar argument that same year in his *Washington Post* piece where he directly challenges the UCOP Seminar Series. See Eugene Volokh, *UC Teaching Faculty Members Not to Criticize Race-Based Affirmative Action, Call America ‘Melting Pot,’ and More*, WASH. POST (June 16, 2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/06/16/uc-teaching-faculty-members-not-to-criticize-race-based-affirmative-action-call-america-melting-pot-and-more/?utm_term=.36b92c72a813 [<https://perma.cc/AR9A-4BVE>]. For a more detailed critique, see also Scott Lilienfeld, *Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence*, 12 PERSP. ON PSYCHOL. SCI. 138 (2017).

⁷³ Lindsay Pérez Huber et al., *Naming Racism: A Conceptual Look at Internalized Racism in U.S. Schools*, 26 CHICANA/O-LATINA/O L. R. 183–206 (2006); Rita Kohli, *Internalized Racism: The Consequences and Impact of Racism on People of Color*, 6 UCLA CTR. FOR CRITICAL RACE STUD. (June 2017), <http://www.ccrs.gseis.ucla.edu/publications> [<https://perma.cc/EB5M-EJXZ>].

⁷⁴ See generally PAULO FREIRE & DONALDO MACEDO, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 43–69 (30th ed., 2000).

affirmation and validation that People of Color have and continue to engage with each other—those that challenge microaggressions.

We began this paper with what we argue is an example of a racial microaffirmation. In his letter, Henry Louis Gates Jr. explains to his daughters why he chooses “to speak to colored people” he passes in the streets, even though (according to his daughters) they may seem to be strangers.⁷⁵ Gates explains that there were two purposes for why he did this. The first was to acknowledge other African Americans amid the “sea of white folks” as a strategy of acknowledgment in white-dominated space.⁷⁶ The second purpose, he explains, was that this acknowledgment creates a “shared cultural intimacy” among other African American people.⁷⁷ What Gates seems to suggest is that this “shared cultural intimacy” is an affirmative validation of blackness amid white space, where People of Color often experience marginalization, exclusion, and erasure.⁷⁸ To us, this was a powerful example of a racial microaffirmation—a subtle non-verbal strategy Gates engaged that affirmed a shared humanity (both his own and that of the African Americans he passed).

Upon searching the literature for theories that could help us understand racial microaffirmations, we found the theory of self-affirmation in psychology to be useful. Claude Steele first introduces self-affirmation theory in 1988 as a “self-system that essentially explains ourselves, and the world at large, to ourselves . . . activated by information that threatens the

⁷⁵ See Gates, *supra* note 2.

⁷⁶ *Id.* at xii.

⁷⁷ *Id.* at xv.

⁷⁸ See the following articles that articulate racial justice strategies for the disruption of “white space”: Elijah Anderson, *The White Space*, 1 SOC. OF RACE & ETHNICITY 10–21 (2015); Margaret E. Montoya, *Máscaras, Trenzas, y Greñas: Un/Masking The Self While Un/Braiding Latina Stories and Legal Discourse*, 15 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 1, 1–37 (1994); Denise M. Taliaferro Baszile, *Who Does She Think She Is? Growing Up Nationalist and Ending Up Teaching in White Space*, in A LONG WAY TO GO: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE BY AFRICAN AMERICAN FACULTY AND GRADUATE STUDENTS, 158–70 (Darrell Cleveland ed., 2004).

perceived adequacy or integrity of the self.”⁷⁹ Steele explains that self-affirmation is a “coping process” used to maintain self-integrity when one experiences a cognitive dissonance that is “inconsistent with self-images of adequacy and integrity.”⁸⁰ In other words, when an individual has an experience that challenges her or his self-integrity, the person will engage in what Steele calls “adaptive reactions” to reduce the “sting-to-self” and eliminate the perceived threat to maintain one’s integrity.⁸¹ Steele examines this phenomenon in a series of experimental tests where people were exposed to some negative perception of themselves (*i.e.*, being perceived as uncooperative).⁸² In responding to the threat, the individuals engage in “self-affirming actions”⁸³ (*i.e.*, agreeing to help with a project) that validated their overall self-integrity by affirming characteristics of the self that were important to one’s identity (*i.e.*, being helpful).⁸⁴ It is important to note that Steele argues “self-affirming action” does not necessarily directly challenge

⁷⁹ Claude M. Steele., *The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self*, 21 ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOL. 261, 262 (1988).

⁸⁰ *Id.* at 277.

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² See Steele, *supra* note 79 (explaining a series of psychological experiments to test individual’s sense of perceived threats and how they coped with them. For example, one study included Mormon women who were exposed to self-threat by being called “uncooperative” by a researcher posing as a pollster, inquiring by phone about whether the women would agree to participate in a future poll on women’s issues in the community (Salt Lake City). Steele believed that this particular self-threat would have an effect on the women, because of the emphasis on community cooperation of the Mormon religion. This particular experiment found that women who were exposed to the threat (called uncooperative) were more likely to agree to participate in the future poll, than those women who were not exposed to the threat).

⁸³ *Id.* at 267.

⁸⁴ *Id.* at 268 (arguing “self-affirming action” does not necessarily directly challenge the specific threat to self-integrity. Rather, he states, “an individual’s primary self-defensive goal is to affirm the general integrity of the self, not to resolve the particular threat.” Steele continues, “because of this overriding goal, the motivation to adapt to a specific self-threat of one sort may be overcome by affirmation of the broader self-concept or of an equally important, yet different, aspect of the self-concept, without resolving the provoking threat”). This can help explain why People of Color continue to engage in racial microaffirmations, regardless of the permanence of racism.

a specific threat to self-integrity. Rather, he states, “an individual’s primary self-defensive goal is to affirm the general integrity of the self, not to resolve the particular threat.”⁸⁵ Steele continues, “because of this overriding goal, the motivation to adapt to a specific self-threat of one sort may be overcome by affirmation of the broader self-concept or of an equally important, yet different, aspect of the self-concept, without resolving the provoking threat.”⁸⁶ This finding may explain why People of Color continue to engage in racial microaffirmations, regardless of the permanence of racism.⁸⁷

In 2006, Sherman and Cohen⁸⁸ expanded on the theory of self-affirmation. They explained:

People can be affirmed by engaging in activities that remind them of ‘who they are’. . . those qualities that are central to how people see themselves . . . In a difficult situation reminders of these core values can provide people with perspective on who they are and anchor their sense of self-integrity in the face of threat. . . A “self-affirmation” makes salient one of these important core qualities or sources of identity.⁸⁹

Similar to Steele, Sherman and Cohen argue that self-affirmations can lessen the negative effects of threats to the self by affirming important aspects of one’s own identity to maintain a sense of “self-worth.”⁹⁰ However, Sherman and Cohen extend Steele’s theorizing of self-affirmation to emphasize the significance of social identities (*i.e.*, race, gender) in coping with threats. Thus, rather than being exposed to negative information or events about an individual’s personality or habits—as was the case for most of Steele’s

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ Derrick Bell’s theory of racial realism claims that racism is a permanent condition in U.S. society. *See generally* Derrick Bell, *Racial Realism*, 24 CONN. L. REV. 363, 363–79 (1991).

⁸⁸ David K. Sherman & Geoffrey L. Cohen., *The Psychology of Self-Defense: Self-Affirmation Theory* 38 ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL PSYCH. 193, 193–242 (2006).

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 189.

⁹⁰ *Id.* at 184.

experiments in 1988—Sherman and Cohen underline the significance of threats to “collective aspects of self.” They state, “[p]eople will defend against threats to collective aspects of the self much as they defend against threats to individual or personal aspects of self . . . even when these events do not directly implicate oneself.”⁹¹ In fact, psychological research has supported this claim, particularly as it relates to the stereotype threat for People of Color.⁹² We argue that negative racial group threats (such as stereotype threat) are a form of racial microaggressions. Thus, according to this psychological research, People of Color will engage in strategies to affirm a collective racial group’s worth in what we call racial microaffirmations. Moreover, Sherman and Cohen argue that self-affirmations can deter negative health outcomes related to stress, and that “it is plausible that repeated affirmations might help people cope with daily stressors,”⁹³ such as the stress of everyday racial microaggressions. Finally, these researchers and others have found that self-affirmation strategies can improve academic outcomes for Students of Color in schools and in institutions of higher education.⁹⁴

⁹¹ *Id.* at 206.

⁹² Steele’s research on self-affirmation theory led to a closer examination of race-based threats and the impact they have on People of Color. Later in his career, Steele developed the theory of stereotype threat to explain how perceived negative expectations of Students of Color can negatively impact self-esteem and academic outcomes. See generally Claude M. Steele & Joshua Aronson, *Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans.*, 69 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 797, 811 (1995). See also Geoffrey L. Cohen & Julio Garcia, “*I Am Us*”: *Negative Stereotypes as Collective Threats*, 89 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCH. 566, 566–82 (2005). This study explains a concept called “collective threat” that explains how the self-esteem of People of Color can be negatively impacted by those within one’s own racial group who may perceive to reinforce negative racial group stereotypes. It should be noted that these studies do not consider individual and/or group agency or the structural conditions that shape racist viewpoints of People of Color.

⁹³ See Sherman & Cohen, *supra* note 88, at 199.

⁹⁴ Geoffrey L. Cohen et al., *Recursive Processes in Self-Affirmation: Intervening to Close the Minority Achievement Gap*, 324 SCI. 400, 403 (2009); Gregory M. Walton & Cohen, Geoffrey L., *A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students*, 331 SCI. 1447, 1447–51 (2011); Kristin Layous et al.,

Psychological research has already begun to theorize self-affirmations among People of Color. We argue that the theorizing of self-affirmation in psychology provides evidence of the possibilities of racial microaffirmations. However, our theorizing of racial microaffirmations departs from existing research. Our analytical focus is on the explicit ways those affirmations are related to a collective sense of worth among Communities of Color. We believe racial microaffirmations can be used to explain those moments that Gates described in his letter—the “unselfconscious moments of a shared cultural intimacy” when the shared humanity of People of Color are recognized and affirmed.⁹⁵

The next step in our theorizing is to empirically investigate the forms of racial microaffirmations in which Communities of Color engage. As we have already explained, Henry Louis Gates describes his strategies of racial microaffirmations in his letter to his daughters. Indeed, Layla provided another example in a book that told the story of a young Latina girl who maintained an extraordinary resilience and hope for the future despite tremendous obstacles in *Esperanza Rising*—a book that made her proud to be Latina.⁹⁶

We have found other examples of microaffirmations in the literature. We argue that Margaret Montoya’s use of the Spanish language (and storytelling) in her groundbreaking legal article, *Máscaras, Trenzas y Greñas: Un/masking the Self While Un/braiding Latina Stories and Legal Discourse* is a strategy to affirm her own “mestiza” identity, and that of other Latina/o readers.⁹⁷ Montoya writes:

Feeling Left Out, but Affirmed: Protecting Against the Negative Effects of Low Belonging in College, 69 J. EXPERIMENTAL SOC. PSYCHOL. 227, 227–31 (2017).

⁹⁵ See Gates, *supra* note 2.

⁹⁶ See Pérez Huber, *supra* note 56.

⁹⁷ See Margaret Montoya, *Máscaras, Trenzas, y Greñas: Un/Masking The Self While Un/Braiding Latina Stories and Legal Discourse*, 15 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 1, 1–37 (1994) [hereinafter *Máscaras*]; We would also argue that Montoya’s later work on name narratives as pedagogy could be a powerful form of racial microaffirmation used in classrooms for marginalized students in particular. See Margaret E. Montoya et al., *Name*

The Euro-American conquest of the Southwest and Puerto Rico resulted in informal and formal prohibitions against the use of Spanish for public purposes. So by inscribing myself in legal scholarship as *mestiza*, I seek to occupy common ground with Latinas/os in this hemisphere and others, wherever situated, who are challenging Western bourgeois ideology and hegemonic racialism.⁹⁸

Montoya explains that her use of the Spanish language is a conscious strategy to express solidarity with other Latinas/os who are concerned with racial justice.

Another example of microaffirmations in the field of education is Janie Victoria Ward's research that examines how black mothers socialize their daughters in order to maintain self-esteem and self-worth through culturally specific parenting practices.⁹⁹ In her work, she features the story of one black mother, Lillian:

When my daughter Patsy was four, I would sit her down between my legs and every morning as I combed and braided her hair I would have her reach up and run her hands through it. "Look," I'd say, "Look at how pretty your hair is . . . Look at how different it is from your little white friends and how special that is."¹⁰⁰

In a similar educational study about Latina mothers, Bianca Guzmán explains how the culturally specific practices of sharing *cuentos*, *consejos*, and *pláticas*¹⁰¹ with their daughters can create positive self-agency for Latina girls that enables them to challenge racism and other forms of subordination

Narratives: A Tool for Examining and Cultivating Identity, 32 CHICANA/O LATINA/O L. REV. 113, 113–52 (2014).

⁹⁸ Montoya, *Máscaras*, *supra* note 97, at 32–33.

⁹⁹ Janie Victoria Ward, *Raising Resisters: The Role of Truth-Telling in the Psychological Development of African American Girls*, in URBAN GIRLS: RESISTING STEREOTYPES, CREATING IDENTITIES 85, 85–99 (Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater & Niobe Way, eds., 1996).

¹⁰⁰ *See id.* at 85.

¹⁰¹ "Stories, advice, and conversations."

in their lives.¹⁰² In a separate psychology study, J. Parker Goyer and colleagues examine how positive affirmations of middle school Students of Color (Latinas/os and African Americans) led to an increase in levels of self-esteem and long-term positive academic outcomes.¹⁰³

Indeed, we believe many other examples of microaffirmations exist and look forward to exploring them in our future research.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the current United States political moment, where articulations of white supremacy are intentionally encouraged by our current presidential administration, we find the value and dignity of People of Color constantly challenged.¹⁰⁴ At this moment, as in any other historical account, we cannot look to dominant society to find our value or dignity. Searching for validation of our humanity as People of Color, be it in our social systems or institutions, will most certainly lead to disappointment. Racial microaffirmations is a concept that reminds us that our dignity is already within us, and that we affirm it every day with our families, in our communities, with colleagues, and with those whom we may not know, but share a form of “cultural intimacy.” In future research, we hope to further develop the concept of racial microaffirmations to empirically understand the strategies that bind the collective humanity of People of Color.¹⁰⁵ We also hope that others feel

¹⁰² Bianca Guzmán, *Cultivating A Guerrera Spirit in Latinas: The Praxis of Mothering*, 6 J. ASS’N MEX. AM. EDUCATORS 45 (2012).

¹⁰³ J. Parker Goyer et al., *Self-Affirmation Facilitates Minority Middle Schoolers’ Progress Along College Trajectories*, 114 PROCEEDINGS NAT’L ACADEMY OF SCI. 7594, 7594–99 (2017).

¹⁰⁴ Lindsay Pérez Huber, *Make America Great Again: Donald Trump, Racist Nativism and the Virulent Adherence to White Supremacy Amid US Demographic Change*, 10 CHARLESTON L. REV. 215, 215–48 (2016).

¹⁰⁵ Since the writing of this article, we have collected qualitative data with Graduate Students of Color to explore their experiences with racial microaffirmations. We are including preliminary findings from this study in a chapter titled, “*Responding to Racial Microaggressions: Theorizing Racial Microaffirmations*” in our forthcoming book,

compelled to do the same by exploring the ways People of Color engage in everyday interactions that affirm the dignity and humanity of us all.

DANIEL SOLÓRZANO & LINDSAY PÉREZ HUBER, RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS: USING CRITICAL RACE THEORY TO RESPOND TO EVERYDAY RACISM (forthcoming Sep. 2020).

