SOCIOLOGICAL INQUIRY

The Norm among the Exceptional? Experiences of Latino Students in Elite Institutions*

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This article examines Latino students' experiences within two elite educational contexts: an elite liberal arts college and an elite law school. Drawing on combined data of 42 in-depth interviews, we interrogate how elite institutional spaces reify and shape panethnic identities. In the face of marginalization in predominantly white, elite spaces Latino students strategically search for new community and comfort, which in turn influence how they perceive their identities, encouraging a broadening of boundaries to include both panethnic and minority alliances. By documenting the experiences of Latino students in two stages of the educational pipeline, we show how elite institutions influence identity talk lead students to cultivate a sense of shared fate with other Latino-origin individuals and at times, people of color in general.

Introduction

> As much as you want to think that the problem isn't there in terms of discrimination or social isolation, it is there. I feel like you always have a choice to be like, "I don't care. It doesn't matter. I'm going to be who I am," which is really great. But, at the same time, you really can't ignore the fact that you're still… not white. Noemi, second-generation immigrant, law student

Espousing identity is a dynamic negotiation that ebbs and flows throughout one's life course. This process is significant for all identities but is especially salient with obvious external markers. Panethnic identities, like racial and ethnic ones, are socially constructed—they are shaped by social structures, interactions, and experiences.[1]

Latino[2] identities, reflective of Mead's "I" and "Me" fusion (Mead 1967)[3] and the parallel assertion and ascription (Cornell and Hartmann 1998), are constructed by macro-, meso-, and micro-level social processes. Macro-level processes work at the global, national, and civic levels to shape where and with whom groups are permitted to interact; colonization, international migration, national policies, and urban racial segregation are representative of these processes. Meso-level processes work within institutions where interactions among individuals are structured and where small-scale policies and social climates

Sociological Inquiry, Vol. xx, No. x, 2020, 1–24
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DOI: 10.1111/soin.12354

bound the experiences of ethnic and racial groups. Micro-level experiences—the interaction between individuals—are nested within these macro- and meso-settings.

One type of meso-level site is elite higher education. We conceptualize elite institutions as those with highly selective admissions, large endowments, and listed in the top 20 colleges of their kind in national rankings (e.g., *U.S. News and World Report*). Warikoo (2016) makes the case for studying elite colleges because they are "institutional sites for cultivating elite identities and shaping elite understandings" (p. 8). Building on Ray's (2019) work, we contend that elite higher education is a type of racialized organizational setting "inhabited by racialized bodies"—historically white and affluent individuals—with abundant resources (pp. 36). Elite institutions also offer exclusive networks from which students can benefit for future careers; this opportunity is unparalleled when compared with non-elite sites. Yet, within elite higher education, racialization occurs, facilitating processes of identity negotiations (Pan 2017a, 2017b; Reyes 2018). The experience of racialization is omnipresent within these elite spaces and impacts the cultivation and stronger assertion of panethnicity during identity talk.

Latinos are significantly underrepresented in elite higher education (Excelencia in Education 2015). For Latino college students who do secure entry into the most selective and prestigious institutions, elite environs can be isolating, especially because they are typically not surrounded by co-panethnics.[4] We contend that these experiences of isolation are key to Latino students' identity formation processes. By interrogating how experiences within these institutions shape Latino identity processes, we seek to fill a crucial gap in the scholarship of identity, race, immigrant adaptation, and education (Blackwell 1987; Carbado and Gulati 2004; Granfield 1991; Schleef 2005), which often overlooks the small but increasing number of Latino enrollees at these institutions.

To learn about meso-level effects on Latino identity formation, we ask three questions: How do Latino students experience elite institutions' racialized organizational settings? Are there shared experiences between undergraduate and postgraduate Latino students? How do these experiences shape their identity talk and reflections of their schooling? Drawing on two multi-institutional studies,[5] we find that elite institutions distinctly impact how Latino students talk about their identities. We find that at both stages of higher education—college and law school—there are similarities in how Latino students reflect upon their racialized experiences of othering, marginalization, and tokenism, which are significantly shaped by their underrepresentation. We further see similarities in how Latino students cope with these experiences, and how they talk about their identities as a result, including pan-minority affinity with non-whites in general and with white women. Latino students strive to understand their

place within elite spaces (Chávez 2011; Gándara 1995; Lopez 2005; Ochoa 2013), and studying them along the higher education continuum provides insight into the identity development of upwardly mobile Latinos.

Literature Review

Racialization and Latino Panethnic Identity Formation

Scholars of race and panethnicity identify ascription as an essential process in the cultivation and creation of identities (Brown and Jones 2015; Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Okamoto and Mora 2014). Ascription occurs when a person or group is marked as "other"; overt racism, microaggressions, and marginalization are a few examples of ascription processes. Race scholars describe these processes as an important part of racialization (Golash-Boza 2016; Grier-Reed 2010; McGabe 2009; Solórzano et al., 2000).[6] Individual ethnic groups become racialized under a common identifying umbrella as a result of similarities in geo-regional ancestry, sociopolitics, phenotype, and history (Cornell and Hartmann 1998). Racialization includes overarching dictation on the part of the majority. For example, Waters (1999) found that despite West Indian New Yorkers' assertion as Trinidadian, Guyanese, or Jamaican, their skin color and phenotype resulted in their racialized ascription as black. And scholars of race and ethnicity claim that panethnicity formation occurs through a process of racialization reinforced by external forces in concert with the mobilization of a common identity by insiders (Brown and Jones 2015; Pan 2015; Pan 2017a, 2017b; Reyes 2017, 2018).

Ascription takes place in many settings, including predominantly white institutions where non-white individuals are often ascribed as "other" in both overt and covert ways. Consider the recent compilation of essays in *Presumed Incompetent* (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2015), which underscore the experiences of scholars of color and white women in the academy, and showcase how sexualized stereotypes of Latinas transpire in the classroom during faculty–student interactions. Latina professors note how the "hot tamale," "sizzling hot," or "sexy" images of Latinas contribute to inappropriate comments made by students. These intersectional experiences within academic settings can in turn shape how faculty of color understand their own identities within these spaces. The numerically and culturally white environment of elite colleges are the structures where racist ideologies are inhabited and brought to life through stereotypes and racialized discourses (Golash-Boza 2016; Ray 2019).

Institutions that foster mobility—which are traditionally white—are critical sites for studying identity shifts because of the marginalization experienced within them. Social scientists have explored how class mobility influences identity within traditionally white professions. Agius-Vallejo (2012) describes a

"minority culture of mobility" where upwardly mobile middle class and professional Mexican Americans develop a class-based identity and retain their ethnic identities by becoming hyphenated Americans. This identity emerges from their feeling that they are not bona fide "Americans" in their new—predominantly white—professional settings *and* because their new class status relegates them as deviant from their working-class origins. Such workplace stereotyping based on race, ethnicity, and/or phenotype, and the ascription as "other" that accompanies it shape self-identities (Dhingra 2007).

Immigration and race scholars argue that group racialization contributes to a propensity to identify panethnically when in the numerical minority, which also affect identities (Okamoto 2003; Okamoto and Mora 2014). Similarly, Golash-Boza and Darity (2008) argued that Latinos who face discrimination and racism are more likely to identify as "Latino" when compared with their counterparts who did not have such experiences. Being entrenched in environments lacking co-panethnics heightens one's sense of otherness. Latino lawyers, for example, convey that their panethnic—as opposed to ethnic—identities are elevated, since they are often the only Latino attorneys in courtrooms or meetings (Chávez 2011). These examples of othering demonstrate the pervasiveness of racial marginalization. Elite institutions are sites wrought with instances of racial marginalization given the exclusive nature of these settings and the presence of privilege and affluence (Byrd 2017).

Elite Educational Institutions and Legal Education

Elite institutions were created as closed spaces. Testing and admissions processes within these schools reify inequality by fostering the hoarding of monetary, social, and cultural capital (Massey 2008). In general, higher education overwhelmingly continues to favor the affluent as they tend to congregate at institutions with the most wealth and resource connections. Given the disparity among institutions, some sociologists of education have more recently focused on colleges and universities as organizational sites for cultural production (Mullen 2009; Stevens 2007). Research has thus documented the processes by which institutions of higher education incubate students (Stevens et al. 2008) and shape them into particular types of people with specific tastes, practices, and even identities. These works explore how students engage in politics (Binder and Wood 2013; Reyes 2015), socialize (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), and choose careers (Binder et al. 2015). Since institutions of higher education appear to play a significant role in affecting student identities, it is important that we understand institutional climate as perceived by students and garner knowledge of how students act and interact within these spaces.

Inequality within institutions has implications for racial–ethnic interpersonal experiences and identities. Scholarship on elites who attend Ivy League

institutions find that students from wealthy and highly educated families deem normal the ability to aspire toward esteemed opportunities, and this affects their approach toward college, including attending office hours at rather high rates (Thiele 2016). Their counterparts from less socioeconomically privileged families, however, do not feel entitled to attend Ivy League schools, and they are reserved in their campus interactions, such as avoiding attention from faculty (Mullen 2009; Stuber 2011; Thiele 2016). Newly minted elites who are from a lower SES background often comment on the class-based hostility and bravado in elite spaces (Jack 2019a, 2019b). Because class markers are not always immediately evident in these spaces, working-class students find themselves "faking it to make it" (Granfield 1991).

Due to the racialized nature of American universities, underrepresented minority students also experience college differently from their modal white peers (Bonilla-Silva 2012; Feagin et al. 1996; Fischer 2008; Lewis 2012; Rankin and Reason 2005; Reyes 2018; Saenz et al. 2007; Sidanius et al. 2010). Research uncovers feelings of isolation among students of color (Lopez 2005; McGabe 2009; Solórzano et al. 2000) where campus climates play an important role in their identities (Hurtado 1992; Reyes 2017). Recent student activism and coalition building on college campuses throughout the nation are a testament to the continued marginalization for those who are not perceived as the norm in these spaces (Byrd 2019). Sociologist Anthony Jack's artfully written *New York Times* article speaks to the cultural milieu—and implicit hostility—that plague non-modal (white, upper-middle class) students at elite institutions. Although education scholarship has long engaged with hostile racial environments and a deficient sense of belonging, these processes, especially at elite institutions, have not been compared among Latinos at two different stages of post-secondary education. We focus on Latino students' racialized experiences during these two stages of education to *enunciate* the power of interactions in elite spaces—in our case, an elite liberal arts college and an elite law school.

In this article, we particularly emphasize how being Latino in an elite academic space can be transformative. As noted, identity negotiations become salient when one is in the minority of any institution. Working-class students mask their class background, women students navigate masculine cultures, and non-white students feel racialized isolation. These ascribed experiences comprise Mead's "Me," integrating one's identity. While we acknowledge that identity formation is dynamic and processual, the specific experiences within elite institutions allow us to examine how simultaneous cultural ascription and assertion affect a non-majority group. In other words, the sense of self in elite institutions may be context-specific; however, the experience with this elite context leads to unique outcomes. We find parallels in the experiences of Latino law students and undergraduate students, as individuals, within elite spaces.

Data and Methods

To examine the experiences of Latino students within elite institutions of higher education, we combined data collected from two distinct multi-year, multi-institutional studies. Combining, or pooling, quantitative data is common in the social sciences, irrespective of research site or timeframe.[7] This practice has become increasingly popular for mixed-methods research, especially in the health sciences. Sandelowski (2000) argued that there are three levels of mixed-method research where combining data is useful: paradigm, methods, and techniques. Its purposes are triangulation, to achieve or ensure corroboration of data; complementarity, to clarify, explain, or fully elaborate the results of analysis; and development, to guide the use of additional sampling, data collection, and analysis techniques. These purposes, however, are not limited to mixed-methods analyses; they could also prove beneficial using qualitative methods.

We combined data from two distinct research sites because processes of racialization are similar among Latino students within our respective original studies. The joint data underscore the richness and robustness of our combined sample making for stronger analyses. Combining qualitative data is appearing quite common. For example, Cardwell et al. (2012), in their examination of the relationship between breastfeeding and the onset of childhood diabetes 1, pooled individual participant data through observational studies but created consistent categorization of the reported results; this method allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the phenomenon. And, Vasquez and Wetzel (2009) make contributions to our understanding of ethnic authenticity and symbolic boundaries by combining data on Potawatomi Indians and Mexican Americans.

Reyes conducted a multi-institutional comparative study of Latino undergraduates at three college campuses: a private elite liberal arts college, a public research university, and a public regional university. Pan conducted a multi-institutional comparative study of law students at two differently ranked law schools: an elite law school and an urban, tier-four law school.[8] The data for this article, however, derive from a subsample of the sites: ELAC and ELS, to which we now turn.

ELAC, an elite, highly selective four-year college, accepts fewer than 20 percent of undergraduate applicants and enrolls 1,500 students total per year. With a faculty-to-student ratio of 8:1, over 90 percent of the students are expected to graduate within four years. Tuition is over $30,000 per year. ELS, a top-ten law school with an enrollment of 900, admits roughly 20 percent of applicants and boasts an impressive student–faculty ratio of 13:1. Over 90 percent of ELS students graduate within the normative time of three years, and

tuition is over $50,000 per year. Latino students comprise 11 percent of the student body at both institutions (see Table 1).

Data Collection

Undergraduate students at ELAC were recruited from two Latino student organizations observed by Reyes between 2008 and 2010. Latino law students from ELS were recruited by Pan via student organizations and through snowball sampling; they were interviewed between 2009 and 2011. In total, our respondents ranged from 18 to 28 years of age and consisted of 30 women and 12 men. Our field sites were on the West Coast of the United States, and our respondents were mostly Mexican origin (68%) but included Latinos of Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, Puerto Rican, Peruvian, and Guatemalan ancestry. Most attended college and law school in their home state, while some hailed from other regions of the United States. Roughly 55 percent of the respondents (n = 23; 14 out of 20 undergraduates and 9 out of 22 law students) reported being the firsts in their families to attend and graduate from college. Among respondents who were not first-generation college students, most hailed from families in which only one parent attended and completed college, including junior college, while the other did not. Approximately 35 percent of the sample —primarily law students—grew up in households in which parents were white-collar professionals with advanced degrees. Respondents at both institutions were asked similar questions about their experiences with their respective schooling and their racial/ethnic identities. For example, Pan's interview schedule included "how would you identify your race and/or ethnicity?" "what have

Table 1
Composition of Field Sites

	Elite Liberal Arts College (ELAC)	Elite Law School (ELS)
Acceptance rate	<20%	~20%
Enrollment	1,500	Over 900
Student faculty ratio	8:1	13:1
Expected graduation rate	Over 90%	Over 90% (Bar passage: 87.2%)
Tuition	Over $30,000	Over $50,000/year
% Latino	11	11

your experiences been like at ELS? What were your experiences like at your undergraduate institutions?" among others. And, Reyes' interview schedule included: "how was your transition to ELAC? How do you identify – racially, ethnically? In your own words, what does the term you prefer mean?" among others. Interviews lasted between 45 and 150 min.

Data Analysis

Because both authors explore similar topics, our conversations revealed overlapping patterns among our respondents. We re-analyzed our original, respective data once we conceptualized this article. Each author began open coding our respective data, examining texts line by line for all five original institutional sites. In this initial coding phase, we each looked for emerging concepts and codes (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Huberman and Miles 1994; LeCompte and Schensul 2010). Then, by using the codes about ethno-racial experiences, we consolidated our data and began a "second cycle of coding together, which consisted again of line-by-line coding, looking for all of the previously identified concepts (Miles et al. 2014)". After this second cycle of coding, we examined patterns and themes that characterized respondents' ethno-racial experiences on all five campuses. What emerged were strikingly similar experiences at the two elite institutions, to which we then directed our attention. This sample included 20 Latino students from ELAC and 22 Latino law students from ELS. Our third wave of coding focused only on these 42 interviews, and we find that the unique nature of elite spaces inspired our respondents to align panethnically, or with other marginalized groups in their identity talk.

The nature of an in-residence elite college and an elite law school reflects total institutions. Per Erving Goffman, total institutions re-socialize individuals through bureaucratic standards and processes (Goffman 1961). ELS and ELAC fit the criteria as these institutions are all encompassing given where the students live, with whom they interact, and the activities and organizations to which they belong all signify an elite nature and culture (Pan 2017b). In this way, we find the samples comparable. While the themes presented in this article are unique to elite ELAC and ELS, they could also be representative of similar processes at other comparable sites.

ELAC's Multicultural/Diversity Approach

Latino undergraduate respondents reported feeling tied to their institution and considered it a "bubble" separate from the outside world. Like most colleges, ELAC expresses a commitment to diversity, and the school offers several programs intended to integrate ethnic minority students. A large endowment allows ELAC to recruit ethnic minority candidates from across the country.

Because Latino students represent a small minority on campus, many of them reported initially feeling racially marginalized. Yet although the school dedicates considerable effort to ameliorate these feelings, Latino students at ELAC still feel as if they do not fully belong.

ELS's Multicultural/Diversity Approach

Similar to ELAC, ELS also espouses a commitment to diversity. Akin to most top-tier law schools, ELS offers various ethnic affinity groups with which students can associate. Latino students in particular often align with the *Journal for Latinos and the Law*, and the Latino Law Students Organization. Upon acceptance to ELS, Latino prospective students were contacted by members of the Latino Law Students Organization and personally welcomed to the law school. During the ELS open house for admitted students, prospective Latino students were housed with current Latino students, as assigned through the Latino Law Students Organization. Current and prospective students share meals, living quarters, and stories about their respective experiences in college and law school.

Despite the availability of co-panethnic opportunities and affinity clubs, Latino students at ELS still report experiencing culture shock in a predominantly white space. In general, we found that experiences in higher education are shaped by campus characteristics (Reyes 2018). This article is a conduit to present the words of Latino students as they underscore what they think matters most in their own identity talk.

Findings: Experiencing Elite Higher Education as Racially Isolating

The Latino students in our combined sample share similar experiences. They describe the climate of their respective elite institutions as racially isolating and unwelcoming, and report experiencing othering, marginalization, and tokenism. We now turn to these findings.

Experiencing Othering

Transitions to and from any environment can be difficult. For our predominantly first-generation college-going Latino respondents, the transition from high school to an elite liberal arts college was especially so. In part, the difficulty arose from the perceived culture of their non-Latino peers and the majority of the student body as being different from their own. Students experienced both socioeconomic and racial differences, sometimes in tandem. Servino says, "[ELAC] has very few Latinos and it's very white dominated. I felt really out of place when I first got here. It was very intimidating to be around a lot of different people." Here, Servino demonstrates perceiving his panethnic difference on campus, in addition to his socioeconomic disadvantages. Our Latino

respondents' experiences with othering reflected a sense of not belonging. Presumably, on mostly residential campuses, college students in general experience some disorientation as they find themselves in a new residence within a new institutional home. But for our Latino respondents, this transition was limned with feelings of racial distinction, which highlighted their own otherness.

The markers of otherness are stark for Latinos in a predominantly white environment, no matter the stage of the educational pipeline. As soon as they arrive on campus, Latino students experience a heightened sense of unfamiliarity. This adds to a perception of a foreign climate, one to which these students must learn to adapt. Diego, a law student who completed undergraduate at a private university, shared how his otherness was heightened at ELS:

> There are many layers to it. The first is, it's hard to hide one's race, skin color. There's always a question of how that informs how you are treated. Beyond that, the unique cultural experiences that I not necessarily subscribe to but that I certainly feel, as having grown up [third] generation, very, very close to my immigrant grandparents, speaking two languages.

As demonstrated by Diego's sentiments, being non-white is compounded by experiential differences—close to the immigrant experience, bilingual, and cultural norms, to name a few.

It is worth noting these feelings of otherness transcended the socioeconomic background of our respondents. Diego, for instance, is not a first-generation college student and had parents who worked in academia. We might imagine this level of socioeconomic class advantage would buffer the feelings of othering within an elite academic setting, but despite their backgrounds, he and other Latino students self-reported experiences similar to those of their less privileged peers. In sum, Latino students experience loneliness and uncertainty in an elite environment, and as such, they desire to interact with those who share similar experiences. The fact that Latino students feel as if they do not belong or are perceived as "other" while on campus becomes quotidian within the context of these elite spaces—especially since their prior life is not reflected or valued. As demonstrated here, we see Latino students contending with how underrepresentation invalidates their experiences and to some extent, their lives.

Perceptions of Marginalization

Along with feelings of non-belonging in elite spaces, Latino students often experience marginalization. Non-belonging and marginalization appear as co-constitutive processes, one compounding the other. Within the elite spaces of ELS and ELAC, students recognize that relative to their non-Latino peers, their own childhoods seemed "abnormal." This realization led many Latino students to feel marginalized. Similar to Jack's (2014) black student respondents' experiencing cultural dissimilarity, the Latino students at ELS and ELAC also

reported marginalization through the same mechanism. Natalie, a student at ELAC, explained: “It was kind of hard because I feel like I was unprepared with my writing and analytical skills. It was in my senior year of high school when I got straight A’s. I think it’s because we go to low performing high schools where we are not really challenged academically.”

Like Natalie, other Latino college students felt underprepared from high school and resolved to convince themselves they actually belonged at their elite schools. Josiana from ELAC shared: “In my high school, I was one of the smartest kids, so it was easy. But this was because we didn’t have the best teachers. I never had to do so much writing, and it has always been hard for me. I didn’t feel like I belonged [at ELAC] because there weren’t many Latinos. I needed to get over my insecurities.” By claiming that she needed to “get over her insecurities,” Josiana describes a social psychological process of learning that she, too, belongs at an elite institution.

Akin to college students, law students also described feeling as if they did not belong at their institution. For many, the sense of not belonging derived from common stereotypes of their non-Latino—especially white—peers. Evellia, a law student who attended a prestigious public university as an undergraduate, expressed this sentiment:

> I think minorities might have a harder time, but whatever, you just deal with it… We don’t have parents who have those experiences or siblings [who have those experiences]. Even though it’s not directly tied to your academics, I can’t have a conversation with my parents about this stuff. My [white] classmates can. Or with their siblings. It’s another type of support that others have that we don’t.

Similarly, Sara, the first in her family to attend college (a large public university) and law school, recounted emotional unpreparedness to take on the latter:

> I wish I had taken time off. I wish I had come here [ELS] when I was older. Had more life experiences, more maturity, more strength, emotional strength… I feel like my peers that are older that have worked, that have had outside experiences… I feel like they’re in a better position here. They’re more ready for it. They’re like, “Oh, this is the time in my life and I knew it!”

It is not uncommon in law school to feel unprepared where many students with attorney family members take on internships to bolster their legal familiarity before starting law school. Pan’s (2016) findings corroborate Sara’s sentiment. Students who worked before commencing law school were generally more confident about their abilities to successfully complete the rigorous professional training when compared with their peers who transitioned immediately to law school. Tellingly, a majority of white students took time off between undergraduate and law school, while their non-white counterparts,

regardless of class background, did not. In this regard, for Latino law students, the ability to take time off signaled not only class advantage, but also panethnic privilege.

Marginalization experiences led to a hyperawareness of the need to continually claim and show they indeed belonged. Feeling stigmatized, Latino students learned to view their lives through the lens of panethnic, or racial difference. Vanya explained:

> I was always aware that race played a part and I had instances where I've been discriminated against for being Latina, but I never saw a place where race plays out as strongly. I never wanted to give it as much importance, but it hurts, and things have been said that I don't agree with. I think college teaches you to analyze everything, like, "Is this happening because I'm Latina?" I would say it's a double-edged sword, the race thing—it teaches you to defend yourself, but it makes you overthink everything.

Vanya's perspective on race relations changed after leaving her predominantly Latino community. At ELAC, she became hyperaware of her racial distinction and felt she must protect herself against racial marginalization. Franklin et al. (2014) described this hyperawareness as "racial battle fatigue," wherein "the stress associated with being a student and attaining a higher education degree is compounded by additional racialized stress for students of color" (p. 307). The underrepresentation of Latinos at ELAC (11% compared to the state population of 38%) leads to "experiential othering," which works as an ascriptive process for students to defend themselves through hyperawareness of their marginalization. Underrepresentation negatively affects Latino law students, as Sara (ELS) reflected:

> I think I'm so much more conscious about being a Latina. In college [a local public university with high Latino enrollment], I never had this extra burden. But I think about what it means for me to be here, what it means for other people. My place here. My place in society. I'm just so much more conscious of my race and other's races, and being a person of color and being in school, and my aspirations. I'm just so much more conscious of race. It's true. That's changed me. And it's changed me in also that I'm not invincible.

The dearth of Latinos—and people of color in general—at ELS means students not only recognize but also experience marginalization in ways that challenge their perspectives. As Sara poignantly stated above, being Latina was heightened in law school. Since attending ELS, she thought more about how her place in society was affected by her experiences as a non-white person. Similarly, Paloma at ELAC has this to say regarding cultural dissimilarity in an elite environment: "my suitemates were okay. Most of them were white and they talked about things that I couldn't connect with. Like, they talked about their vacations and I had nothing to add. My family didn't go on vacations." Both Sara and Paloma, as Latinas, became more aware of their otherness within

elite educational spaces. These are burdens they did not consider in the past, when they were surrounded by more co-panethnic peers.

Experiencing Racialized Tokenism

Although elite institutions may strive to enroll diverse student bodies, their efforts might actually further heighten marginalization through tokenism. Flores (2011) finds that Latina elementary school teachers, as newly a part of the middle class, contend with being "racialized tokens" because they are a numerical minority within a predominantly white profession. Similarly, Latino students at elite institutions, as numerical minorities, are also racialized tokens. Some expressed at times, they felt as if they were admitted to serve as the visual manifestation of diversity. Paloma says, "I think that the school claims that they have diversity and they use us to have diversity… At times, I feel that *I* am the school's diversity." Lorena describes her feelings similarly: "I have always felt that I've been called *the diversity*. I have been given so many awards for being the diversity on campus. But when something racist happens against my family, the [ELAC] administration didn't pay attention. For me it's been '*no mas cuando les da la gana o les conviene'* [only when it's convenient for them]." In the context of diversity at ELAC, the boundaries of inclusion broaden and close to include only particular aspects of these Latino students' lives—the cultural "flavor" they bring, but not the uncomfortable moments accompanying racial discrimination (Muro 2016).[9]

Latino students experience tokenism in and outside of elite classrooms. When it happens in the classroom, especially led by a professor, students feel an elevated sense of embarrassment and injustice. For example, Esperanza, a law student, recalled when a professor singled her out in class because of her Spanish-sounding first name and assumed she did not possess American cultural awareness:

> [The professor] presents a hypo[thetical case] for me. And he's talking about football. And then he's like, "Wait. I'm talking about American football. Are you familiar with American football?" And people just looked at me. And I'm like, "Yes, I am." It was so embarrassing!… People were coming up to me later that day, "Like oh my gosh, Esperanza, did you get what he was trying to tell you?" I was like, "I got it, I got it. He thought I just got here yesterday [and that] I was not familiar with football.[10]

Marco further explains how tokenism occurs in law school courses: "In certain classes, I'll realize that I am the only one to point something out that maybe someone else hadn't pointed out or even thought of. So, maybe it's true that that's what we [Latinos] bring to the table." Although it may be good for diversity to have some Latino students in racially homogeneous classrooms, they feel tremendous pressure to appropriately answer questions and represent

their panethnic group. As Luis, a law student, shares: "So, in my large class, there were maybe ten persons of color, out of like ninety. So, given that there were so few, I almost put on myself extra pressure to answer the questions correctly, just partly because I wanted to show that you belong here."

Because only 10 percent of Luis's class consisted of non-white students, he felt additional pressure to correctly answer questions posed by professors. Luis assumes the burden of representing non-white law students and to demonstrate that "people of color, coming from where I'm from, we can do law." This type of tokenism contributes to Latino students' marginalization in predominantly white classrooms. Pressures of tokenism are multifaceted, and it appears that Latino students lean on shared experiences with other co-panethnics for survival.

Experiencing Elite Higher Education with Co-Panethnics

Students of color cope with racial microaggressions through establishing counter-spaces (Grier-Reed 2010; Rollock 2012; Solórzano et al. 2000); we find Latino students at elite institutions also establish familiarity among co-panethnics and build new communities for comfort. Building upon prior work on the role of physical "safe" spaces, our respondents activate a "shared fate" perspective within and beyond classrooms.

Establishing Familiarity among Co-Panethnics and Building New Community for Comfort

Given experiences with marginalization and tokenism at ELS and ELAC, Latino students look to establish community on their respective campuses. Grier-Reed (2010) finds African American students on predominantly white college campuses turn to a racialized network comprising black faculty, staff, and graduate students. Deemed a "sanctuary" from the toxicity of the microaggressive environs of higher education, black students are then able to "(1) make sense of their experiences on campus and determine whether a racial microaggression has even occurred, (2) find support and validation for their experiential reality, and (3) identify alternative ways for responding to such incidents" (p. 183). Our Latino respondents cope in similar ways by becoming a part of Latino-specific organizations at their respective institutions. Genova describes her experiences in an exchange about the Latino organization in which she was a member:

> Reyes: Is this organization important to you?
>
> Genova: I think it [Latino organization] helps as we continue to be away from home. I really miss talking to people that will understand me. I feel like a lot of us are away from our

> family, and even if we live close by, I think it's different because we're not in a Latino community or in Latino families…A lot of us come from families where Spanish is the main language spoken at home. The biggest change was being around people that don't speak Spanish and being in a white community.

Latino students ascertain a sense of familiarity through identification with co-panethnics, as seen above. This identification is social, and Joaquin comments: "Sure, on a social, ethnic level, you tend to orbit people within our same ethnic or linguistic background. I have a lot of friends that are of Hispanic descent. It seemed *natural* to sign up to the [Latino Law Students Organization] on a social level."[11] Joaquin was adamant during his interview that he saw himself as different from his fellow Latino peers—his parents are both medical doctors, he comes from a solid upper-middle class upbringing, and he attended a large and relatively racially diverse private university for undergraduate. Yet when asked about his friendship circles and social involvement, Joaquin deferred to a sense of cultural familiarity. Despite his socioeconomic deviation from most of his Latino peers at ELS, Joaquin needed the support of the Latino Law Students Organization to make his way through law school. In other words, being Latino in an elite space trumped his privileged socioeconomic upbringing.

In the same vein, Lucia, a student at ELS who attended a racially diverse public university for undergraduate, said, "I never sought out the Latino organization in undergrad. And I think in law school, I definitely identified and joined that group because it felt like there were fewer of us in law school than there were even in undergrad." Because of the significant Latino student population, Lucia did not feel racially othered while in college. This changed at ELS, where the dearth of co-panethnics compelled her to find and surround herself with "familiar" faces. This act is both individually activated and organizationally strategic.

Aside from familiarity, Latino students also find comfort while interacting with other Latinos. Karla described a Latino organization: "I thought I should go because there aren't very many Latinos here [at ELAC]…it's [the campus] only half an hour away from my house, and it just feels so different. Sometimes I'm in class and I realize I am the only person of color. I wanted to meet other Latinos and that's why I came to this organization."

Luis, a law student we met earlier, expanded on his initial reasons for joining and remaining in the Latino Law Students Organization:

> I like Latinos. [Latino Law Students Organization] seemed like a good place to meet Latinos. A lot of my closest friends are in there. So I always had more Latino friends. Probably because that is just what I have always had. And I feel very comfortable, very easy for me to get along with, because of similar backgrounds. I like how, with the [organization], when I was a 1L, the 2Ls and 3Ls were very helpful. And I think that's something that we, as 2Ls

> now, something that we really try to push. And I don't think we need to try to push, people just do it... We're all friends and we're all trying to support each other. It's a beauty.[12]

Panethnic student organizations serve as a supportive community in law school. The students join for a sense of familiarity but stay because they are comfortable—personally, culturally, and professionally. Students take care of one another, and the more senior students provide much needed mentorship to new students. As Luis described, the students "all care and try to help each other." This type of new community then serves as a "beauty" to cope with experiences of panethnic marginalization.

Expanding Identificational Boundaries

Seeking comfort and familiarity in elite spaces can at times lead to a more critical understandings of marginalization. Students within these elite spaces expressed panethnic solidarity during their identity talk; in other words, they aligned with a group identity. For example, Manuel (ELS) grew up near the United States–Mexico border and asserts a strong Mexican American identity. However, in law school, he adopted the umbrella panethnic identities of "Latino" and "Hispanic," in large part because he witnessed similar economic, political, and social struggles among diverse Latino national-origin groups. While working on an asylum case for a client of Guatemalan descent, ethnically Mexican Manuel felt close affinity with the client. He said, "Again, this is where I got the feeling that these [panethnic] relationships are really special. That we can interact in Spanish and share everything. Felt a really close relationship." Manuel further commented on his commitment to work on behalf of panethnic Latino communities:

> Because I've seen so many people in the Hispanic community just struggle—struggle for their economic rights, social rights. There's a lot of people struggling out there. And I'm very fortunate to be able to continue my education. Even to have a bachelor's [degree] is special enough. But to be a lawyer is something almost unheard of! I don't know many individuals who are Hispanics who are going to law school.

The common struggle among co-panethnics serves to coalesce shared experiences and strengthen group identity. In this way, the recognition of a "group" struggle, along with understanding one's educational privilege, seemingly propels Latino students to identify panethnically. Reflexivity appears key here, as Sara from ELS shared:

> I feel like I have this sense of responsibility that I need to identify as Latina... I feel like we have this responsibility to follow traditions and actually get involved in the identity organizations and groups that are about students of color...And I feel like I often reflect upon my place in the school—more than the average student—and how I fit in here, and what does

> this mean? Not just for me but the larger context of the school and of academia and society in general.

That Sara finds herself reflecting "upon [her] place in school" signals an understanding of her own positionality and privilege. As such, the onus of identifying as, and speaking on behalf of, Latinos falls on her and her peers' shoulders.

In other instances, Latino students adopted a "shared fate" approach with non-white students more generally. Expanding upon a panethnic group identity, they assert a *pan-minority* one. Elite institutions boast small numerical representation of *all* people of color, not just Latinos, and some Latino students come to see themselves as students of color, not only Latino. For example, Natalie, a student at ELAC, said: "I didn't know much about the [Latino] organization my first year, but as a woman of color and a Latina at a predominantly white space, it was very overwhelming." Fabian, a student at ELAC, constructed a similar narrative: "I met a lot of students of color and [white] women and a lot of feminists. I was around people that would challenge ideas that were common with power ideology. I started off pre-med and dropped it that semester and I felt that a lot of the discussion was about *me* not being smart enough because I was a person of color."[13]

Some Latino students aligned with other underrepresented members of their institutions—feminists, white women, and students of color in general—to further carve out a space for survival. They espoused a collective pan-minority identity—the sense of shared fate (Saito 1998) and solidarity in the face of common oppressive histories (Feliciano et al. 2011)—that emerged from a critical understanding of marginalization and power. Extending beyond racialized delineations, white women, whose experiences and voices are often marginalized and ostracized despite numerical parity with men, are often also included as "minority" (Blair-Loy 2003; Costello 2005).

A pan-minority identification appears in law school, where a dominant white institutional culture ascribes and nurtures identities. Sara, who began identifying as Latina at ELS, spoke further about aligning with communities of color:

> [I]t's important to have a space where you can discuss and feel comfortable and welcomed. And go beyond that and make it a better place for students of color in general—incoming students, future generations of students of color... People before me have made an effort to make me feel more welcomed. I just feel like there's a duty to continue to give that back and follow in that tradition.

For students like Sara, being "of color" means advocating for and sustaining an environment where future cohorts can thrive. In the words of Felicia, a law student, "My duty is to help people of color in other working-class

communities. Not to the detriment of whites but to the equity of all people. And I want to support Latinos directly by mentoring them. Women of color directly by mentoring them." The pan-minority notion of "shared fate" demonstrated by Felicia's pan-minority alliance underscores an understanding of hegemonic power dynamics in conjunction with minority underrepresentation.

That Latino students in elite institutions expand their identificational boundaries underscores the sense of marginalization and alienation among all non-white students in such spaces. As non-modal students, they see the dearth of minority representation, but also experience the need for having—and creating—safe spaces. While not necessarily a new phenomenon among non-whites due to a history of coalition building across panethnic-lines (e.g., Filipino and Mexican farm laborers; "third world" student coalition building for meaningful ethnic studies curriculum, etc.), identifying with other minorities however, in elite spaces, is a unique occurrence among the five sites within this research. We contend that a pan-minority identification serves as a function of an elite institution, and we would not be surprised to find similar forms of identificational boundary expansion in other elite spaces.

Discussion and Implications

Combining and coding data from five institutions, we find two elite educational institutions facilitate marginal identity ascriptions that Latino students then internalize and assert. While a common trope about upward mobility suggests that racial or ethnic differences become less salient as non-majority groups ascend the SES ladder, the experiences of Latino students in elite spaces indicate otherwise. Their panethnic divergence from the majority of their peers was heightened in and out of the classroom, which led to feelings of marginalization. Further, Latino students' experiences with tokenism demonstrated an undesired patronizing on their campuses. Each of these instances marked Latino students as different from their modal white peers, which further affected their perceptions and experiences of inequality within elite spaces. Their sense of identity, especially their socialized identity—their "Me"—was undoubtedly influenced by such experiences, and they forged and asserted alternative identities to fit into their institutions.

The stakes are high at elite institutions, and these students passed institutional vetting to secure admissions. They identified racially marginalizing experiences and may contest their treatment, but they did not stop there—they survive in these environments. Latino students internalize institutional othering, but they also push back by expanding their ethnic boundaries to include social and group identities. Some see their campuses as racialized organizations (Ray 2019) because of the dismal representation of non-white individuals at elite institutions, and not only align with but also intend to work on behalf of all

underrepresented peoples (e.g., Felicia, who plans to mentor women of color more generally, beyond Latinas).

What are the implications of this racial marginalization within elite institutions? Reflective of W. E. B. DuBois's double consciousness, Latino students wrestle with their marginalization in these elite spaces where they contend with "always looking at one's self through the eyes" (DuBois [1903] 1994) of cultural status quo. In the midst of receiving an elite education, which allows them to reap copious social capital, Latino students find, in their racial marginalization, that they are not fully accepted. Their double consciousness—internalizing ascriptive notions about their identities while asserting new ones—leads them to feel a sense of simultaneous belonging and ostracization. In response, they activate a concerted panethnic identity—or adopt a social identity—for comfort and familiarity, joining Latino student organizations and becoming involved in causes that affect all Latinos, not just those of their own particular ethnic origin. While current literature focuses on the sociopolitical processes of racialization, it appears upward mobility via elite institutions further heightens non-white racial awareness, affirming the tenacity of double consciousness.

Latino students find solidarity among other non-whites (and at times, with white women too) who experience similar marginalization and ascription within elite institutions. This occurs because as Latino students ascend the mobility ladder, there are fewer people of color in general and because Asian Americans, black/African Americans, and other non-white racialized groups also contend with ostracization simply because their histories, phenotype, and cultural backgrounds do not reflect a normative elite culture (Harper et al. 2011; Mercer et al. 2011; Sue et al. 2007). Thus, for underrepresented members of society, and in this case Latinos, elite institutions are critical sites for identity complications and expansions. In this way, being a part of an elite institution is not a neutral product of immigrant adaptation to the host country or of social mobility. To the contrary, the alienating effects of these elite spaces heighten panethnic and pan-minority otherness. Until institutional cultures can change from a status quo that alienates non-white individuals, identifying as "the other" will remain the norm among the exceptional.

Funding information

This research was funded by the Research Foundation of CUNY—PSC-CUNY, The Society for the Study of Social Problems, University of California, All Campus Consortium on Research for Diversity (UC/ACCORD), University of California-Irvine, and University of California–Irvine's Centers for Research on Latinos in Global Society, the Study of Democracy, and Organizational Research.

ENDNOTES

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[1]Panethnicity results from a process of racialization that relegates a group of ethnic individuals into an umbrella panethnic category. For example, while "Mexican" is an ethnic identity, "Latino" is panethnic and connotes racialization. Co-panethnics in the context of this article then refers to fellow Latinos of any ethnic ancestry.

[2]We acknowledge and are aware of the more recent degendering use of "Latinx." Our research was conducted during a sociohistorical moment when "Latinx" was not used in common lexicon. Thus, out of respect for accuracy in reporting responses, and consistency with the then common lexicon, we elect to use "Latino/a" in this article.

[3]For Mead, identity and the self are reflective of social processes. While the "me" represents internalization and identities, the "I" reacts to expectations of individuals within societal contexts (Mead 1967).

[4]We use co-panethnic to refer to individuals who belong to the same meta-ethnic category. We believe co-panethnic in lieu of co-ethnics better describes the intra-Latinx relations and interactions, alongside racialization. We use panethnic throughout the article for this purpose.

[5]These respective studies were analyzed in toto, but upon further analysis, we recognized the distinction among student experiences at elite institutions.

[6]See Golash-Boza (2016) for thorough review of race theory.

[7]See, for example, van der Steen et al. (2008), where the authors pooled data derived from studying US and Dutch nursing homes.

[8]As ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*.

[9]Sociologist Jazmin Muro examined the interactions between white and Latino parents at a Spanish language immersion school, where white parents appeared more interested in making cultural gains for their children rather than integrating with Latino families.

[10]While this incident can be construed as microaggressive, it does not preclude that the false assumption happened because of Esperanza's name and phenotype. These instances reify the image that Latinos are recent immigrants and not native-born.

[11]Emphasis added.

[12]Years in law school are abbreviated and reflect students' tenure. 1L corresponds with first-year law student, 2L with second-year law student, and 3L with third-year law student.

[13]Emphasis added.

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