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AMAE Invited Special Issue

Testimonio as Radical Story-Telling and Creative Resistance

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editors’ Message 5

INTRODUCTION

Our Stories are our Sanctuary: Testimonio as a Sacred of Belonging 6-15
Emma Haydée Fuentes, University of San Francisco
Manuel Alejandro Pérez, University of San Francisco

FEATURED ARTICLES

Farima Pour-Khorshid, University of California- Santa Cruz

La Receta del Testimonio Mole: A Value Rich Recipe for Folklórico Resilience Testimonio 33-48
Manuel Alejandro Pérez, University of San Francisco

Documenting the Undocumented: Testimonios as a Humanizing Pedagogy 49-64
Laura Ochoa, University of San Francisco

“Nuestro camino es mas largo” (Our Journey is Longer): A Testimonio from a Daughter of Mexican Immigrants Turned Professor 65-79
Rosa Jimenez, University of San Francisco

A Call to Action: A Speech for University Professors on the Use of Testimonio and the Nopal Metaphor 80-95
Vincent Chandler, City College of San Francisco

CONCLUSION

Testimonios Informing a Human Rights and Social Justice Education Framework 96-103
Linda Prieto, ALEARN
POETRY

Sea, Me 104-106
Rhummanee Hang, University of San Francisco

"Viento" 107
Olivia Muñoz, University of San Francisco

Author Biographies 108-110

AMAE Membership Application

AMAE Journal Reviewer Form
Editors’ Message

The wait is finally over! The beautiful invited issue, “Testimonio as Radical Story-Telling and Creative Resistance,” is here at last. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Emma Fuentes and doctoral candidate Manuel Alejandro Pérez—both at USF. It has been a tremendous journey for the guest co-editors to gather these powerful stories of resistance and creativity, based in Northern California. The AMAE Journal is proud to support work that takes us to the core of what many Latinx communities are experiencing nationwide. We also support the process of preparing the next wave of junior scholars and up-and-coming PhD students who formed this testimonio colectivo. This issue includes an introduction, five featured articles, closing remarks, and two poems.

We hope you enjoy this wonderful issue!

Juntos logramos más,

Patricia Sánchez, Co-Editor
Antonio J. Camacho, Co-Editor
Our Stories are our Sanctuary: Testimonio as a Sacred Space of Belonging

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“Another world is not only possible, she’s on the way and on a quiet day, if you listen very carefully you can hear her breathe.” –Arundhati Roy, 2014

On June 11th 2016, a shooter walked into a Gay bar in Orlando, Florida and killed 49 of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, the majority of whom were Latinx, in one of the deadliest mass shootings in our history. The people that were killed were celebrating Orlando Pride on Latinx night in a space that was theirs, a space that affirmed their humanity and that served as a “sanctuary for people who are subjected to violence and discrimination on a daily basis” (Greer, 2016). As we sit to write this introduction we carry pain and anger about this incident and hold the people who died and the larger LGBTQ community in our hearts and in our actions. We recognize that violence is not a new phenomenon; terror and pain run deep in the economic and political systems of the United States. We also recognize that this particular moment in our country’s history is marked by increased racial and ethnic tensions; police brutality and state violence; homophobia and transphobia; economic insecurity; environmental racism as seen in Flint, Michigan; and an overall contentious presidential primary season that has allowed space for someone like Donald Trump to utilize a national platform to stoke white racial resentment, xenophobia, and misogyny. During his campaign Trump has said that if he were to win the presidency he would deport millions of Latinx immigrants, build a wall between México and the United States, and ban Muslim immigrants from entering the country, among other deeply problematic statements. Statements such as these, in addition to violence in and around most of his rallies, has added to what the Southern Poverty Law Center is calling the “Trump effect.” In a recently released SPLC report on the impact that the presidential campaign and Trump in particular is having on our nation’s children, Costello (2016) found that this so-called
“Trump effect” is “producing an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom” (p. 4). In addition, more than two-thirds of the teachers interviewed reported that their students—mainly children of Latino and Muslim immigrant parents—“have expressed fears about what might happen to them after the election.” We are undoubtedly living through turbulent times.

We believe as Julie Quiroz (2015) of Movement Strategy Center so eloquently states, “these dark times illuminate what matters most.” It is no surprise then that this moment is also marked by a surge in transformative movements grounded in racial and social justice. Communities across the United States and the world are rising up to assert their right to self-determination and to live in dignity. In the United States, young leaders of color have rekindled our collective radical imagination and are inviting us to see that other worlds are indeed possible. #BlackLivesMatter, the Dream Defenders, Domestic Workers Alliance, Undocumented Queer Youth Collective, End Mass Incarceration, and others have blossomed in the last decade and ground their work in the notion of radical love and collective liberation. Their work allows us to witness both new ways of building solidarity across difference and creative tactics that challenge white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, state violence, and narrow notions of citizenship and belonging. These Twenty-First century movements and activists are changing the material and social conditions of our lives and are reinventing a society that humanizes us all.

At the heart of all of these movements is the use of art and creativity. Many of the leaders are artists and cultural workers who see art as a process of story-telling, as an essential aspect of movement building, and a powerful tool to disrupt power. One example of this is seen in the work of Julio Salgado, a San Francisco Bay Area artist and cultural worker. Salgado is a visual artist whose work brings to life the many stories of queer and straight undocumented immigrants. His work is grounded in the notion that “undocumented immigrants should be leading and constructing the narratives of their own struggle” (Jobin-Leeds & AgitArte, 2016, p. 82). On the use of art as a powerful tool of resistance, Salgado says, ”We need three dimensional stories that show our beauty and imperfections. But only we can do that” (Quezada, 2015). In addition, Gaby
Pacheco, one of many DREAMers who participated in the Trail of DREAMs in 2010, shares that “our stories are the most powerful tool that we have” and are central to any organizing effort (Jobin-Leeds & AgitArte, 2016, p. 92). Art and story-telling are central to many of the movements we are witnessing today. These transformative movements are weaving together a collective story, or testimonio, that makes the impossible possible by humanizing those whose stories are not told, whose realities are not seen, and whose lives are too often disregarded.

This issue is both inspired by and contributes to the use of art, creativity, and story-telling as a tool to dismantle systems of oppression, to inspire social change, and to reclaim the right to survive and thrive. We see testimonio as both a sanctuary and as a tool for creative soulful resistance and utilize it in our work and praxis as both a radical methodology and pedagogy within a human rights and social justice education framework. Similar to other forms of “decolonizing methodologies,” including auto-ethnography, testimonio serves as a conceptual and methodological tool that transforms cultural and personal narratives into critical social analysis. One of the key tenets of testimonio is to analyze and interpret individual stories as part of a collective experience. In this way testimonio is a practice of being with others “that not only can inspire the possibility of political community but also can be understood as an ethical practice of the self” (Han, 2012, p. 113). As the Latina Feminist Group (2001) writes, “testimonio [offers] an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community” (p. 3).

We draw on the works of Prieto and Villenas (2012) who ground testimonio within a Chicana feminist critique and see it as an act of “collective sobrevivencia.” Three main themes emerged from their work Pedagogies from Nepantla: cultural dissonance, conciencia con compromiso (consciousness with responsibility and commitment), and cariño (authentic care). We see all three as deeply embedded in the testimonios in this special issue and add the additional two frameworks of testimonio as sanctuary and as creative resistance. Each essay in this issue situates individual narratives within a larger collective experience simultaneously marked by oppression, agency, and resistance. Each of the authors provide compelling counter-narratives that unveil societal (and educational) inequities while re-centering stories of marginalization as
powerful sites of knowledge production and transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

This issue is motivated by a series of questions that explore the similarities and differences between counternarratives and testimonio: How do the two inform each other and how are the two different? How can we as educators incorporate artful resistance, counter-narratives and testimonios into the field of education? How can we subvert narratives and discourse that normalize whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality? How do we actively resist promoting hegemonic and oppressive stories that continue to marginalize our communities?

Counter-narrative and testimonio are methodologies and frameworks from which story-tellers re-center the voice of marginalized communities born into a family of story-telling for liberation, resistance, and radical imagination. Both reframe and promote a discourse of liberation and healing for marginalized communities and provide a voice for those who are too often silenced. Counter-narratives are necessary, important, and act as an antidote to a dominant discourse that often inflicts pain and violence to marginalized communities. Born out of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, counter-narratives resist and oppose white supremacy and domination. Counter-narratives then become a way to push back against dominant narratives. Delgado (1989) asserts that stories serve two functions for members of oppressed groups. Stories are a means of psychic self-preservation and serve to lessen group subordination, and that “this proliferation of counter-stories is not an accident or coincidence. Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). Counter-stories are critical to the livelihood of communities who are displaced beyond the borders of master narratives.

In turn, we see testimonios as standing on their own without the need to counter, as essential stories of resistance and healing that reignite social change from beyond a binary of us versus them. Testimonios reimagine a world of possibilities for truth and liberation in ways that are beautiful examples of soulful, creative resistance, both in terms of process and product (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). For example, testimonio, as a methodology, allows for the artful expression of voice and
story through the use of theory and praxis simultaneously. The researcher transforms into a part of a dialogue that is both reflexive, critical, and participatory (Yudice, 1991). In this spirit, each of the contributors within this space offer their stories as artful resistance in both language and form. In doing so, the stories shared by the authors in this issue are personal stories and also testaments to the ways in which communities share their Truths. Alarcón, Cruz, Jackson, Prieto, and Rodriguez-Arroyo (2011) describe the process of story-sharing in the following way, “the personal is indeed political as we acknowledge our collective memories, our shared histories. Through testimonio we acknowledge our own resiliency and the histories of our resistance” (p. 370). In essence, testimonio allows for the representation of authentic stories of communities from inception, (co)creation, production, and exposition. Cruz (2012) highlights this transformative power of testimonio as having the ability to uproot dominant narratives that historically exclude the voice of marginalized communities.

The testimonios shared within this special issue actively participate in naming injustice, resisting oppression, and finding artful ways to allow the soul to breathe and thrive. Yosso (2005) discusses this same cycle in the context of race and underscores the importance of examining racism, naming racist injuries in an effort to give voice to the victims of racism. We would argue that this naming process is also helpful to restorative counter-narratives that focus on healing and empowerment after trauma, pain, loss and suffering. In order to heal, it is essential to examine and name the pain in order to deconstruct it. Similarly, testimonios offer healing as well, from a space that honors a new world of possibilities outside of comparison to dominant discourse.

Truth-sharing through testimonios is about the power, resistance, and liberation for oppressed communities that is deeply embedded within the fabric of the story in product and process. These stories of Truth thrive within both counter-narratives and testimonios. In a similar way, testimonios can be counter-narratives and at the same time they can also thrive through and beyond stories that exist to actively resist dominant narratives. Testimonios are the radical imagination of liberation and artful resistance for marginalized communities. In retelling the stories of pain, empowerment, and transformation of marginalized communities, it is crucial to hear the narrative of the
oppressed as the principal story, not as a secondary subplot or tangent from a grand narrative.

Counter-narratives and testimonios are not mutually exclusive, and to assume that they should be is to succumb to the very oppressive and hegemonic systems of domination that would render their Truth-telling power as null and invaluable. We believe that both frameworks hold space together as camaradas in the world of storytelling for liberation, for healing, and for resistance. Without a critical awareness of the power and need to share both essential types of stories, we continue to cultivate a landscape that both directly and indirectly support and promote toxic and violent behaviors that are rooted in the oppression of marginalized communities. These behaviors actively alienate, violate, victimize, and disregard the lived realities of women, trans, and queer-identified communities, people of color, and Muslim communities, as is evidenced within the discourse of the 2016 Presidential election and the recent shootings in Orlando.

The authors in this special issue join a growing number of scholars in the fields of anthropology and education who are utilizing testimonio to bring voice to the experiences of communities of color and to better understand how they respond to and heal from oppressive structures and experiences (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). Utilizing testimonio provides new possibilities for the ways in which we conduct research, heal the fragmented spaces caused by histories of marginalization, and create opportunities for reflexivity and genuine voice, while building community and brave space within in the academy. In sum, the articles and essays in this issue will demonstrate the importance of the telling and re-telling of personal lived experiences as integral to the production of knowledge and as a powerful form of resistance to multiple marginalities.

Farima Pour-Khorshid sees collective testimonio as a process for homemade theory making or what Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) called conocimientos. Her essay brings together the stories and experiences of three educators of color who are part of a California grassroots social justice critical study group created exclusively for people of color. In a profession dominated by more than 80% White teachers (Goldring, Gran, & Bitterman, 2013), the testimonios of these teachers are examples of their resiliency,
agency, and community cultural wealth that they possess and have utilized to thrive within a oppressive education system. This essay posits that the use of collective testimonio among educators of color serves as a tool for critical teacher professional development, which is centered in political education, solidarity, empowerment, love, and resistance.

In his essay, Manuel Alejandro Pérez explores the story of three hermanas and their connections to comunidad, familia, and artful resistance through their involvement in baile folklórico. Through their testimonios the hermanas explore their relationship to sexual orientation, their ethnic identity, and cultural heritage as queer Mexicanos who have a relationship to traditional Mexican folklórico. These stories are examples of testimonio as both a product and a process. More importantly, these testimonios illustrate the ways in which marginalized communities make sense of the world around them in a way that empowers and uplifts the MindBodySpirit.

In “Documenting the Undocumented,” Laura Ochoa delves deep into the experiences of immigration and notions of belonging. Her essay is an example of testimonio as radical methodology that documents the experiences of four undocumented immigrants living in the US. Her essay seeks to create a rich narrative of human survival and resistance while highlighting the struggles and obstacles undocumented immigrants face within our current immigration system. Rosa Jimenez’ “Nuestro camino es más largo” (Our Journey Is Much Longer): A Testimonio from a Daughter of Mexican Immigrants Turned Professor in the Academy,” provides a powerful reflexive piece on the power of community cultural wealth, familia, and the use of testimonio as a sacred space. She shares her story of growing up as a little girl in California’s Central Valley as the daughter of working class Mexican immigrants to being an Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco.

Vincent Chandler’s essay is a beautiful example of testimonio as creative soulful resistance. He breaks the mold of traditional academic essays and invites the readers into a role-play of sorts. We are drawn into his speech specifically directed at educators around the use of testimonio and the powerful cultural capital Latin@/Chican@ students bring with them into the classroom. He adds a new dimension to work on community cultural wealth by introducing the concept of the Nopal Metaphor as a symbolic and
visual representation of the intrinsic wealth Latin@ students carry. Finally, the special issue closes with two poems by Rhummanee Hang and Olivia Muñoz. Both poems highlight the power of art, creativity, and radical storytelling.
References


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Abstract

This author utilizes collective testimonio (Sánchez, 2009) as a process for homemade theory making or what Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) called conocimientos. This collective testimonio brings together the stories and experiences of three educators of color within a California grassroots social justice critical study group created exclusively for people of color. In a profession dominated by more than 80% White teachers (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013), these teachers of color share stories of resiliency and the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) they possess and have utilized to thrive within an oppressive education system. Applying Critical Race Theory’s tenet of counternarrative, their individual and collective testimonio speak back to the dominant discourses about people of color as being deficient and lacking dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and instead, highlights how internalized and institutionalized forms of racism serve as obstacles as well as motivation to fight against oppression. The role of collective testimonio among educators of color can serve as a tool for critical teacher professional development (Kohli, Picower, Martínez, & Ortiz, 2015) centered in political education, healing, empowerment, love and transformative resistance.

Introduction

Recruiting and retaining teachers of color in public education has become a growing national concern across the country and has been deemed a social justice issue (Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014). Currently, students of color make up almost 50% of the student population in U.S. public schools, yet only 18% of all public school teachers in this country are teachers of color (Goldring, Gran, & Bitterman, 2013) and data show that they leave the field at a rate 24% higher per year than their White counterparts (Ingersoll & May, 2011). The disproportionate representation between students of color and teachers of color is an important issue in relation
to equity and diversity. Yet, we also need to move beyond simply diversifying the profession by race and think more deeply about the need for developing and supporting teachers of color committed to social justice if the goal is transformation in service of those historically marginalized. Public schools shaped by systemic discriminatory policies upholding racism, homophobia, sexism, and other systems of oppression in the U.S., are increasingly impacted by corporate interests, standardization, and high-stakes accountability (Picower, 2012). In response to these trends, teachers committed to social justice strive to combat these issues in solidarity with all stakeholders, including families, students, and community members (Picower, 2012). Considering that teachers of color are likely to have also experienced oppression as students prior to becoming educators, their stories are important to critically reflect upon and heal from (Kohli, 2008). Therefore, teacher learning and professional development approaches for supporting and sustaining anti-oppressive diverse teachers is a fundamental factor in retaining teachers who are committed to equity and racial justice in public education and in society at large.

Mandated forms of teacher professional development is often shaped by state standards and reforms in which hegemony is implicit in their resulting professional standards, as well as teaching and learning conditions. Imperatives to diversify the teaching profession cannot ignore the struggles related to discrimination and structural oppression that teachers of color have often experienced and fought through, especially in relation to the historical context of White supremacy and neoliberal capitalism (Keisch & Scott, 2015). Although diverse teachers committed to social justice are an asset to students and schools, they are commonly pushed out of the profession for enacting their commitments in restrictive school climates (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Initiatives and approaches to simply diversify the teacher workforce must take into consideration the specific needs and support for teachers of color who do not ascribe to the dominant practices of American schooling or culture.

In California, a collective of teachers within a social justice grassroots organization have organized alternative forms of professional development led by and created explicitly for teachers of color committed to social justice in education. This critical professional development space (Kohli, Picower, Martinez, & Ortiz, 2015) incorporates critical dialogue, popular education (Friere, 1970), and radical healing (Ginwright, 2016) as professional support for teachers of color in the California Bay Area, who are interested in deepening their analyses of education and teaching through the lenses of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural
Wealth (Yosso, 2005). This form of teacher support serves as a tool to enact a collective vision of education for liberation, which can potentially lead to creating context-specific, critical professional development frameworks such as the one described below.


For over fifteen years, the grassroots Teachers 4 Social Justice organization in the Bay Area of California has been engaging in and facilitating critical study groups, annual conferences, events, and forums for educators and organizers committed to social justice. The organization is volunteer-based and considers the work to be a labor of love. Their mission is to provide opportunities for self-transformation, leadership development, and community building for educators in order to affect meaningful change in the classroom, school, community, and society. The H.E.L.L.A. Educators of color study group is one of several that is created by and offered to educators, the acronym stands for Healing, Empowerment, Love, Liberation, and Action. The term *hella* was intentionally chosen because it is also a very popular and widely used slang term originated from the Bay Area which is defined by the Urban Dictionary as an all-purpose word:

> It has its roots deep in the soul of Northern California. It means something along the lines of "very" or "really," but it's much more than that. It's not just a word, but a statement of cultural identification, of a long-standing bond of trust and respect for fellow Northern Californians, and of a mutual understanding between you and the rest of the world that you are from (or, in the case of anyone who has lived with [folks] from NorCal, that you are an honorary resident). As the subtle innuendoes of the word can only be understood by absorption, one must experience and be engulfed by it (as Northern Californians are from birth) to truly understand when its usage is appropriate. Hella is a word. It's a symbol. It's a way of life. (Urban Dictionary, n.d.)
The H.E.L.L.A. group is composed of twelve educators of color who teach in a variety of settings such as K-12 schools to juvenile halls, and in a variety of roles such as classroom teachers to English Learner specialists. In addition to the professional diversity, the group is also diverse in terms of race, sexuality, age, language and life experiences, which adds a beautiful mix of perspectives at each monthly meeting. Our overarching goal is to build on the leadership strengths, critical analyses, intersectional experiences/testimonios, and pedagogical creativity of social justice classroom and community based educators of color. More specifically, this critical learning space was designed to explore how Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework can be used to empower us as teachers of color to identify the strengths and assets we bring to the profession, while also planning and workshopping ideas on how to teach about and nurture these capitals in our practice and personal lives. Yosso’s framework builds on Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital which he argues positions the White, middle class culture as the “norm,” wherein cultural capital refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills, and abilities that are valued by privileged groups in society in order to be successful. Yosso uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) to argue that there are various forms of cultural capital that marginalized groups possess which are not recognized or valued within the dominant capital framework, including aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital (Yosso, 2005, p. 78-81). This framework allowed us to reflect on our own cultural capital as intersectionally diverse educators of color and also work with one another to workshop lessons and strategies to incorporate this framework in our practice.

Collective Testimonio (Sánchez, 2009) as a methodology for Critical Professional Development (CPD) within social justice grassroots teacher networks and coalitions can be actualized in the form of teacher inquiry groups (Kohli, Picower, Martínez, & Ortiz, 2015). Some of the key attributes that make these CPD groups and learning spaces so necessary and effective is the sense of solidarity, love, community, shared experiences, political education, and critical dialogue that leads to action and agency in and out of classrooms (Kohli et al., 2015). Another important aspect is its anti-hierarchal element that resists the common model of professional development, wherein individuals who are often arbitrarily deemed as experts “train” teachers even when they might be disconnected from the communities and contexts that teachers work in (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Kohli et al., 2015). The incorporation of testimonios in our group has historically been used to build solidarity among women of color.
(Anzaldúa, 1990) and although our group is composed of a mixture of multi-age, cis-gender, transgender, and gender nonconforming classroom and community educators, we believed that *testimonio* could also serve as a tool in our CPD space to build solidarity and unity among us. *Testimonio* as a method engages storytellers and witnesses in critical reflections about our racialized lived experiences as a means to bring about awareness and possible change through consciousness-raising about our collective struggles and resistance. When teachers of color testify and theorize our lived experiences navigating the oppressive systems that we are committed to transforming in an era of neoliberalism, neocolonialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other inequitable relations, it serves as a tool of resistance, love, and comradery.

In *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) and, more recently, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) written by Chicanas and Latinas, women of color have demonstrated the power behind the telling of *testimonio* as a method that exposes injustices and disrupts silence. Sánchez (2009) describes a participatory action research project she was involved in, and her group’s use of collective *testimonio* as a process for *homemade theory* making or what Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) called *conocimientos*. She quotes Aurora Levins Morales in *Telling to live: Latina feminist testimonios* (2001):

> My thinking grew directly out of listening to my own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened. This is the central process of consciousness raising, of collective *testimonio*. This is how homemade theory happens (p. 87).

When educators of color come together across generations, geographic locations, and intersectional identities to listen to our collective *testimonio* and to participate in our *homemade theory* by reflecting on and sharing our own stories, we find shared meanings, patterns, and ways that we enact and embody resistance and love as radical practices of social justice. This practice also develops an ethic of collective self-care as it opens up a space for healing and love. Cruz (2012) describes her use of *testimonio* as a teacher in her classroom and names it a “methodology of travel” that positions audience members for self-reflection. She grounds her work in the theoretical work of Lugones (1987) which states that to fully become subjects to one another we must travel with playfulness and loving perception to each other’s worlds. Cruz (2012) draws important connections between *testimonio*, listening with love, being wholly
“present...and vulnerable in a way that allows travel” and “profound empathy” (p. 468). She frames this combination of skills as “necessary to move forward social justice work” (Cruz, 2012, p. 468).

H.E.L.L.A. Educators of color embarked on this journey by writing our own testimonios and traveling to each other’s worlds with love and solidarity. We connected with one another’s stories and found collective themes among us, which validated our stories and empowered us to share them. We hope to allow readers to also travel with us as you engage in deep, reflective, and powerful storytelling that bridges our lived experiences to theory, love, healing, and transformative praxis in teacher professional development.

Katina Castillo’s Testimonio

It’s hard to reflect on myself as an educator of color, particularly for system involved, system tracked, system attacked youth on the margins of society. Because they always teach me so much—about humility, about gratitude, about perseverance, about faith—and with only short-term interactions visiting their class, youth program, or controlled environment, I can only hope the glimmer in their eyes that sparks as they hear the historical overview of what brought us to this point—of social disparity, inequity, monoculturism, and mass incarceration—will stay with them far beyond our brief encounters.

I cash in on my Linguistic Capital to connect with street-organized, street-affiliated young people to share knowledge and complex analyses of the systems out to get them (from school houses to jail houses and foster care) by “keepin it 100,” speaking colloquially in the terms and phrases that as urban young POC we have come to utilize as a way of identifying when “game recognizes game.” My linguistic capital spans that of the youth I’ve trained in social justice organizing, and my own mixed-ethnic background. My mother was born and raised in the Mission of San Francisco and my father in Detroit, two U.S.-born mixed-Latinos heavily influenced by Black music and culture in the 50s, 60s and 70s. We spoke Soul in my house, and listened to jazz, funk, hip-hop, and Salsa on Saturday nights.

Their working-class parents came from Nicaragua, El Salvador, México, and Greece to root down in the belly of Empire as early as the 30s and 40s. Although my Mexican grandfather didn’t pass Spanish down to my dad after having been prohibited from speaking it in Texas public schools, I had heard enough of my mom’s phone conversations with my grandmother to apply a perfect accent to the language when I learned it in high school and college. So Black
kids, Latino immigrant youth, Native, and even poor Whites, can connect with me on a linguistic tip—it’s the vernacular of struggle, of “I ain’t no square” or no punk, of “I feel you.” When I review U.S. history from Native genocide and boarding schools to African slavery and Jim Crow to Operation Wetback and illegalization of Spanish to Japanese internment and Foster Care trains, all the way up to Three Strikes, gang injunctions and private prisons, young people of color and poor youth who have all in one way or another been impacted by these hostile policies, either directly or via familial experience, are able to make the connections, see the forest from the trees, and follow the arc of historic colonial oppression that has created the suffering conditions which surround them because I skip the theories and academic rhetoric and just give it to them straight. They reflect on their great grandparents struggles as intergenerational trauma, in the same way that I make sense of my family dysfunction by looking back on the conditions we were forced into 5 plus generations ago—pushed off land and into industrial centers and taught to hate everything we once were. When we close a session with Assata’s chant regarding Our Duty, even if they have only just heard of who she is, they understand the depth of her urgent call to action, and they wit it.

I acknowledge our Cultural Wealth as a given, and encourage young people to look toward not those that “made it” in their families/communities in the conventional sense i.e., by smooth assimilation and nearly arriving to Whiteness in a social sense (although never, ever making it), but specifically toward those who “fell” through the cracks at some point in their lives, similarly to the ways in which they might be struggling now, and were able to pick themselves up each time the System pushed them down. Or to those who resisted the dominant narrative that told them to be ashamed of themselves—our loved ones formerly incarcerated, recovered addicts, formerly homeless, survivors of violence, undocumented, differently-abled learners, Queer and non-conforming, etc. I have found that honoring and promoting these non-traditional success stories, oftentimes the former black sheep of families and communities, as the real heroes, success stories, trusted guides and mentors, not only broaden young people’s perspective of their hood/barrio resources who could be helpful to them in navigating a societal infrastructure never intended to serve them, but to give them full permission to love these members of their familias—blood or chosen—without shame or explanation, and to more deeply love themselves for all the shadow parts of themselves and their stories that they’ve been able to move through, constantly pushing toward the Light of a new day.
Personally, I’m not inspired by my grandmother’s success in completing 20 plus years of work as cafeteria staff for San Francisco General Hospital or my grandfather’s slow but steady climb in the furniture industry. I commend them for making a life for themselves, but their conformity to the AmeriKKKan way proliferated the internalized racism that had begun for them in U.S. Marine and Navy Seal-occupied Central America. They became materialistic, ruined their health with American food, and alcohol to numb the painful void of their average lives, beat and neglected their children while dressing them in the finest American fashion they could afford, and all but denied their cultural history leaving no legacy of pride for me or my sister. I’m more impressed and grateful that both my parents were rebellious hippies that supported the Black Panther Party, were artists and bicycle riders and self-taught nutritionists, that were careful to buy us brown dolls, had us watch The Color Purple, and reclaimed our identity as descendants of los Maya.

For me, Aspirational and Resistance Capital go hand in hand for people who have been wounded and are ready to heal and reclaim their dignity and value. When I help young people have a better understanding of the oppositional history in which most systems we and our families interface with have been built, and the very technical ways in which these systems continue to overtly and covertly try to negate our value, dignity, and basic human rights, they embrace this history as proof that their struggle is not their fault and yet entirely within their power to overcome, and to me this is the most aspirational and resistant response one could have. They may not necessarily aspire to graduate from a university, and they may not be moved to resist through direct action and organizing, but they do aspire to love themselves and their histories for all its laughter and tears, and to make a better way for their people—and nothing could be more resistant to the imperialist agenda than that. Like my elders have taught me, la cultura cura, and the shared values and traditions of our cultures prior to colonization are the greatest tools we have to take back our freedom.

**Nick Easter’s Testimonio**

Ask my mom to tell one of her favorite stories of me as a child, and she’ll probably mention the time that I screamed, “Fight the Power!” at a White lady in the grocery store. Now I can’t say that I was all that socially aware at the age of four but what I can tell you is that for better or worse, I was raised on the likes of Public Enemy and Tupac. So I guess the seeds to a combative spirit were planted well before I could even read. Anyhow, the lady smiled and
laughed like, “oh, how cute.” A microcosm of her people’s position. What a privilege it must be to not be the punch line of America’s sick joke. By the time I finished elementary school, I had many reminders of my place in society. It was only the beginning of the continuous attacks on my identity. From my kindergarten days when they tried to shove me in a special education class for being shy even though I could read better than most students… To my fourth grade teacher who told me not to speak out or else I’d end up like Malcolm X (shot dead). Or the time I got called Nigger in the 6th grade and was yelled at by a White teacher after reporting what was said to me. As a matter of fact, he reprimanded me with, “I have a problem with YOU for using that word!” I guess I should have lowered my head and said “sorry massa” and got on with my day. Then there was that time in high school at a business competition in SoCal where my bro and I presented a marketing campaign to a judge who ignored us the entire time. We’re sitting face to face with this guy, and he’s looking to the side and even turned his neck to look behind him as we presented our pitch. He did happen to leave some very valuable feedback on the evaluation: “earrings are distracting.” I knew we weren’t supposed to be at that conference, and they made sure that I knew it even though I mastered enough of their linguistic capital to earn various ribbons on the written exams. I mean there’s also the micro-attacks like being asked to read the Black dude’s lines in Huck Finn during class or being the only one in my group that was handed a cue card to read from instead of my own prepared slides for our group presentations because the Black dude wasn’t going to have anything prepared, right? Like, how is he even in Honor’s Lit? Best believe I read my own damn slides! So many reminders of my place in society during my K-12 years, man. I mean it even followed me to my first job at the Finish Line shoe store. I would be in full uniform with a nametag and still be asked if I really worked there or, when they would mistake me with my bro, Tyronne. Yes, we were both Black, but it was like comparing Will Smith and Idris Alba. By the time I was done with K-12 schooling, I had enough material for about twelve greatest hits albums and a couple of novels about racism. The crazy part is that as forward thinking as I thought I was, I had not yet developed the lenses to begin understanding the complexity of the attacks I had faced. But I knew I was mad.

From day one at San José State, I was introduced to higher level struggle. My classes were on lay-away, and I had a few weeks to pay before they were dropped. I had no idea what was going on with my financial aid or how it worked. Of course, when I went to the financial aid office, I left feeling lost, confused, and overwhelmed. This was not my realm and no one
seemed eager to allow me to join. By the grace of God, on the way to my dorm, I crossed paths with two older Black students who sought me out in a sea of White. They introduced themselves and then proceeded to share with me some statistics about the Black male survival rate at the school. I cannot remember the numbers but the odds were clearly against me in terms of graduating so if I were to take a semester off, forget about it, Black males hardly ever come back. But these brothas genuinely asked to see how I was doing. I told them about my financial aid situation and one of them directed me to another Black lady who worked in the financial aid office. Upon meeting her, there was an unspoken but felt truth of, in order to survive, we have to look out for each other with whatever resources and knowledge we have. She got me the answers I needed and allowed me to save my classes, but I still carried the feeling of, I'm not really supposed to be here, but it motivated me to stay in spite… In spite of the expectations of my classmates shocked to see me score high on assignments; in spite of all the times I was asked if I had just finished smoking; in spite of numerous battles with the financial aid office that shut off my meal plan and tried to starve me off campus. I was so prideful, but eventually I did fall. The final straw was being thrown off a bus for absolutely nothing. In fact, I was sleeping. I still don’t know what it was that I was doing wrong, but I woke up to five police cars waiting at the Great Mall transit stop. I called my mom who repeatedly told me to calm down because she knew all too well how this could end up. After the ordeal, they finally let us go and luckily, a Black bus driver called up to the BART to have the train wait for us since it was one of the last departures. During that same time, I had the audacity to also have personal struggles with finances, an unhealthy relationship, and overall uncertainty. Things were snowballing and while sitting on BART, I painfully decided to withdraw from my second semester. Next thing I knew, I was working part-time in a warehouse when all the while my family was thinking I was in school. Some days, I would go to my empty apartment that I could barely afford even with roommates and after hours of cleaning an already spotless place with no furniture, I would just lay on my back on the carpet in silence. The hurt was deafening. I would just lay there and cry on mute. Thinking about my addition to the statistics they told me about. I reached a point through listening to Lupe Fiasco’s Food and Liquor album and gravitated to the line, “Struggle… Another sign that God loves you.” I won’t say that the song alone brought me back, but I began to cling to artists who were hella unapologetically Black and proud. Though secular, I know God finds us where we’re at and delivers messages of hope or whatever we may need. I can’t say my flame was back, but I had enough of a flicker to get up and walk again. By faith, I quit my
job, enrolled back in school, changed my major to African American Studies and defied the seen and unseen enemy. I had mentors/professors who acted as second parents. Dr. Milner and Dr. Wilson did just as much “raising” as teaching. Dr. Milner literally lectured us about punctuality, attire, and how to carry ourselves. Sometimes, he made you want to cry with just the thought of disappointing him. He was like a father, and we loved him. And love is what brought me back. Anger and rage, though not absent, was not enough to allow me to sustain. Alone, it damn near killed me. I was so busy with attacks that I never really took the time to love myself. When I fell, on the way up I began to discover a new love for me and my people. I still had multiple run-ins with racial profiling from the police and the daily micro racist attacks, but I just couldn’t let them win. I do still wonder though, can we truly “fight the power” if we’re still playing by their rules?

Farima Pour-Khorshid’s Testimonio

I am the daughter of a Muslim, Iranian man and a Catholic, Nicaraguan woman that both immigrated to California because of U.S. imperialism and war. My parents fell in love, in spite of the opposition from their families for dating outside of their race and religion, which led them both to be disowned for some time. Their radical love also inspired the births of three beautiful biracial children. Five months after my baby brother was born, my father was murdered and my mother was left to care for three children in a country where she was still read as “illegal” by Eurocentric standards any time she’d have the audacity to speak her broken English in her Nicaraguan-Creole accent. I grew to hate the term “broken English” I’ve always loved her accent, to this day it gives me life and makes me feel whole every time she speaks to me in Spanish, English, or the beautiful creative mixture of Spanglish with a touch of Creole. Growing up, however, I felt torn between multiple worlds. I can remember when people would tease me about looking middle-eastern; being read as Iranian seemed to be synonymous with alien in my surroundings. My bonds with Iranian relatives were painful because they mostly only spoke Farsi, and I constantly carried guilt for learning my mother’s language but not my father’s; I felt like I let him down. Even my Spanish felt crippled each time my teachers corrected me with their cold, stale standard Spanish accents and vocabulary in classes. The confusion drove me crazy as I tried navigating English Learner classes for most of my schooling as a child. Language, in several ways compounded my identity development. I felt that because I couldn’t speak Farsi I was not Iranian enough, and I felt disconnected to my father’s family and culture as a result.
Likewise, because I could not speak Spanish well enough, I didn’t feel very Latina either. And, according to the public education system, apparently my English didn’t fit their criteria to be placed in non-ELL classes, so I didn’t feel very “American” either. This confusion and pain followed me throughout my K-12 academic experience. At one point, I refused to identify myself by my last name or by my parents’ ethnicities because I grew tired and stressed by the labels that inevitably led to internalized racism. I can remember praying and asking God to lighten my skin, shrink my nose, and to somehow make me look and sound more “American,” though I wasn’t quite sure what that even meant.

I have vivid memories of my academic struggles and fears that I would not graduate high school. I never thought I would go to college. During my senior year, however, a Latina professor from a local university came to recruit seniors who might be interested in becoming bilingual teachers since there was such a severe shortage in California. Meeting her changed my life. Somehow, she convinced me that I was not only capable of becoming a bilingual teacher but that I was also desperately needed in the profession. Just like that, my multicultural and bilingual background, which had triggered deep identity struggles throughout my adolescence, were suddenly assets that would help me garner funding and support for college. Through her program I began volunteering in schools in my neighborhood. I started to understand how critical it was to serve in my own community by becoming an advocate for students like me; I was determined to become the kind of teacher I always wished I could’ve had, unapologetically utilizing all of my complex multicultural and Bay Area swag that I embody. Becoming an educator became my life’s purpose and the belief that I could become an agent of change and potentially impact the lives of students and families in my community made me feel a sense of empowerment I had never felt before…until I was quickly caged by the bars of our education system.

My first few years of teaching felt like a novela, only the drama was way too real. Upon finishing my credential, I was immediately hired late into the school year because there was an overflow of ELL kindergarteners at the school, so I was given the staff lounge as a classroom. I had very few materials or books, I racked up hundreds of dollars on my credit card buying classroom materials, and I’d always stay hella late working in my classroom until the janitor would finally kick me out. I wanted so badly to make the staff lounge look somewhat like a real classroom for my babies. One day during a read-aloud I glanced at the window and realized my car was getting broken into in the school parking lot, so I quickly dialed 911 while trying to
remain calm for my kindergarteners. I remember exhaling deeply that night as tears flowed
down my face, thinking that if I could make it through the rest of that year, then I knew I could
make it through any year.

My second year teaching, I had to move into a brand new school, so while I was ecstatic
that I was no longer teaching in a staff lounge, I was given a Kindergarten/First grade
combination Dual Immersion classroom. I felt completely lost in terms of how to work the
percentages of English/Spanish out pedagogically, especially considering that some of my
students were on a kindergarten half-day schedule with a specific percentage of Spanish
instruction, and the others were on a full-day first grade schedule with a different percentage. I
thugged it out, because I was fearful that the administration would confuse my need for support
with incompetence. I always carried the fear of being judged as a poor brown girl from the
hood that wasn’t smart enough to figure things out herself. I decided that instead, I would reach
out to my students’ parents, who for me, felt like my tías every time I would talk with them
before and after school. One day I asked some of the mothers if they wanted to volunteer in
our class since I knew many of them were not working because they were undocumented. The
mothers became like honorary teachers in our class, and the love we all shared fed my spirit
through the madness, well, that and the tamales, flan, pupusas and so many other foods from
their countries of origin that they’d always bring me.

That year California’s budget cuts and massive teacher layoffs resembled the evictions,
displacement, and gentrification in the Bay Area today. When I received my pink slip, I felt so
devalued by my school district especially because I was a product of it. I went to elementary,
middle, and high school within this school district, and I even went to junior college and
graduate school in my community, too, but that didn’t matter. The lay-offs were based on my
seniority—I was a second year teacher, so I was disposable. I wept in my classroom like
someone had died. I didn’t know how I was going to tell my students and families that I would
not be coming back the next year. When I did finally tell them, their rage touched my heart.
Some of the parents organized and brought their kids to the school board meeting and spoke
out against my pink slip advocating for my rehiring. I felt so humbled and empowered by these
parents and their kids, our kids, right by our side holding protest signs, some that had their tiny
hand prints, their large shaky backward-written letters and colorful drawings of me smiling next
to them. The same parents that were often silenced, disregarded, and disrespected in this
country were now unapologetically advocating for me in their vibrant English, because their
words were far from sounding “broken”. It was their love and courage that reminded me of why I couldn’t quit. That radical love is what pushed me to get back up, wipe my tears and keep fighting. Although I didn’t get hired back at that school the next year, I’m still teaching in the community that I belong in, despite the powers that be which almost pushed me out. I’m here to stay, and I vow to inspire more students of color like me to experience the gift and power of teaching in their own communities, too.

**Our Collective Testimonio**

Each *testimonio* shared within our Critical Professional Development (CPD) space sparked deep emotions and created a sense of unity, support, and compassion in ways that allowed us each to travel to each other’s worlds with playfulness and loving perception (Lugones, 1987). While there were many other *testimonios* shared among our group, these three serve as examples of the deep, raw, painful, and empowering racialized experiences we carry as educators of color. Through sharing our individual *testimonios*, each of us identified the various forms of cultural capital in our collective *testimonio*. For example, each of us experienced structural racism and maintained aspirational capital to thrive within inequitable systems and institutions, despite the obstacles and barriers. From Katina’s work with, “system involved, system tracked, system attacked youth on the margins of society,” to Nick’s experiences navigating K-12 schooling and college with racist educators and peers, as well as racial profiling by police, all the while trying to survive economic and academic hardships to thrive and graduate; to Farima’s experiences being pushed out of the profession despite the bilingual teacher shortage within a predominantly Latina/o, low-income, underserved public school district in her own community. Even in the face of systemic injustices that disproportionately impact people of color, all of us aspired to overcome these obstacles by utilizing our community cultural wealth, individually and collectively. The critical dialogue that was sparked by our *testimonios* led us to the realization that as educators of color, we also possess transformative resistant capital because we embody the first-hand knowledge of the structures of racism and the motivation to transform such oppressive structures (Freire, 1970; Pizarro, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Our lived experiences shaped by structural oppression led us to draw on our community cultural capital to take different forms of action in order to resist and transform the spaces we operate in.
Our H.E.L.L.A Educators of Color study group intentionally sought to disrupt the “professional” in professional development because as we learned about critical theories, we unapologetically brought our whole selves and all of the intersections of our identities, all of our traumas with systemic and internalized racism, and all of our dreams and aspirations that dismantle White Supremacy, to engage in collective healing while reimagining what education can be. As we engaged in personal storytelling and critical dialogue, we were also workshopping lessons and plans to manifest our visions and commitments to social justice in our practice. As educators of color committed to the radical notion that education can serve as a tool for liberation, we believe that we must create the spaces we need to empower ourselves, to sustain ourselves, to heal ourselves in solidarity with others through the reflexive praxis necessary to build collectively in love. We created the kind of professional development space that we needed and that we cannot get within institutions. This space allowed us to share our fears and tears, our anger and love-uncensored and in community with other people of color that we have built relationships with. Our space is anti-hierarchical and allows for each of us to share our expertise while learning that critical academic theory is just as important as our collective homemade theories (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2000). In our space, our lived experiences carry power, they inform our perspectives when we feel tensions with oppressive educational practices, curricula, standards, and reforms and they remind us of why they are poisonous to our collective spirit. Our stories remind us that we are not alone. Our stories are healing, empowering and resurrecting. Our stories matter.
References


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Receta del Testimonio Mole:  
A Value-Rich Recipe for Folklórico Resilience Testimonio

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Abstract

This testimonio explores the story of three hermanas and their connections to comunidad, familia, and self-esteem through Mexican folklórico. Each testimonio is positioned within a Latin Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) framework and further explored through Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth framework. The stories within this paper allow each hermana’s Truth to take shape in a way that is authentic to their experience through the voice, structure, and tone of each testimonio. In this way, testimonio is used as methodology in radical storytelling (Cruz, 2012). The hermanas explore their relationship to ethnic identity and cultural heritage as Mexicanos who have a relationship to traditional Mexican folklórico. Within their stories, each of the hermanas testimonialistas discuss the unique ways in which their ethnicity intersects with other aspects of their identities, including gender, sexuality, and nationality. These stories are examples of testimonio as both a product and a process. More importantly, these testimonios illustrate the ways in which marginalized communities make sense of the world around them in a way that empowers and uplifts the MindBodySpirit.

La Receta del Testimonio Mole: A Value-Rich Recipe for Folklórico Resilience Testimonio

1 barra de chocolate  
3 cuentos de amig@s  
1 Google Hangout after dance practice  
1 bunch of giggles about oral history  
Un pellisco de café con leche  
3 chiles tatemados  
1 hermana’s failed entrance to la música de Lady Gaga  
1 coming out testimonio  
4 hermanas  
Best served bien caliente.
This article highlights folklórico resilience testimonios as a value-rich process, which I cariñosamente refer to as “la receta del testimonio mole.” This recipe frames the key ingredients for the Truth of the queer Mexicanos within this testimonio. This recipe is also a tool for sense making and a script for understanding their stories. In order to learn about how to acquire the aforementioned key ingredients, you must start from the beginning. This testimonio begins with a queer Mexicanito from Sacramento who started dancing traditional Mexican folklórico over twenty-years ago. Folklórico is a traditional dance form that tells the history of the Mexican people through dance, song, and movement. Folklórico has always been a way for me to make sense of my identity. Through my adolescent, teenage, and young adult years, I grappled with how my ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation intersected and collided with one another simultaneously. My perception of what I believed to be the socially acceptable thing for good Mexicano boys to do was overwhelming. The one place that provided me relief from my stressful overthinking was folklórico, or danza. I had always been curious about Mexican history and culture. This interest was coupled with a growing curiosity in what it could mean to be both Mexican and queer. In her research on community cultural wealth, Yosso (2005) challenges the perception that students of color come to education at a deficit with no valuable skills and resources to enhance their student success. Moreover, Yosso (2005) illustrates the contradictory nature of schools to promote education and empowerment that directly and indirectly fosters oppressive spaces for certain communities. Within educational institutions, students of color often learn about their identities from a lens that marginalizes their narratives to the fringe of the dominant narrative. In my experience I learned about my culture and identity within my community and outside of school.

Folklórico became an essential element to my schooling beyond the classroom. Folklórico became a moment of liberation in which I was able to learn about my ethnicity and cultural heritage in a space that embraced my brown skin, that welcomed my Spanish/English/Spanglish, and that provided a brave space for me to explore my sexuality. As I moved through my education in the classroom, I read stories of historical characters who did not have names that sounded like mine, who did not speak the languages that I spoke, and who did not live in spaces or barrios like mine. In his research on Latino family epistemologies, Hidalgo (2005) highlights the value of conducting research that is inclusive of the various intersections of identity and that give rise to a Latino consciousness. An awareness of Latino
core values and familism reveals the success strategies and skills that Latinos use to overcome barriers, especially within the educational system. This research is embodied within the values and objectives of Mexican folklórico. In many ways, folklórico became the way that I learned more about myself as a queer Mexicano. This education beyond the classroom helped me to envision a harmony amongst all aspects of my identity.

In this article, I highlight the testimonios of three hermanas who turned to folklórico as they moved through various stages of their lives. These three hermanas identify as male, masculine-of-center, queer, and Mexican. Through their bonds of amistad and closeness, these three hermanas have framed their friendship as a sisterhood. As adults, the hermanas reflect on their past and current experiences moving through educational systems, while maintaining a connection to folklórico. In this article, I will first explore how testimonio as a methodology helps to excavate and highlight the unique experiences of the hermanas in a way that honors their voice within the narrative. Next, I will offer a brief background on our relationship to one another and to folklórico before sharing their testimonios. Lastly, I will weave their testimonios with emerging themes from their own cuentos.

**Testimonio as Resilience Methodology**

This testimonio of resilience and orgullo gives voice to the intersections of identities that exist within Mexican folklórico. As such, this testimonio is a cuento that tells stories in English, in Spanish, and in Spanglish. Italics have historically been used to identify language that is not part of the dominant language and is a visual reminder to the reader that the language is different and foreign. The relationships within these folklórico testimonios are born of Spanish, English, and Spanglish tongue. They are home. They are not foreign. This language choice is The Story, is Our Story. These testimonios are their Truth. In honor of this Truth, I do not use italics to distinguish any part of this testimonio that is not written in English. Their testimonio was shared authentically in the name of hermandad. Thus, their testimonios of power and resilience will stay true to their original form.

In this way, testimonio as methodology allows for risk-taking in incorporating the MindBodySpirit into the research process. Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012) describe testimonio as product and process and as a way for the mind, the body, and spirit to
be sources of knowledge and transformation. In his research on testimonio from a postmodernist lens, Yudice (1991) takes on the role of researcher in testimonio. Yudice (1991) argues for the elimination of the scholar researcher as the spokesperson for the voiceless. Instead, testimonios should tell the story—the cuento—of the testimonialista. The literary components of testimonio provide stories about identity that is not shared solely for the purposes of self-defense and survival, but also for the aesthetic. In this sense, testimonio is artful resistance.

In an exploration of testimonio in urban classrooms, Cruz (2012) refers to testimonio as a tool for radical storytelling. Cruz (2012) paints the image of testimonio as a visceral process that is healthy, nourishing, and necessary for the subversion of dominant narratives. Cruz (2012) asserts that the testimonialist is not so focused on story-sharing for an individual gain. Rather, testimonio is methodology that transforms and uproots the narratives that so often exclude the voice of the marginalized. Testimonio provides a space from which the reader can position critical self-reflection.

I would argue that it is not the goal of testimonio to parallel dominant structures. As Cruz (2012) asserts, testimonio challenges, invites, and reminds readers to practice a constant critical consciousness. Yudice (1991) also posits to preserve the aesthetic and transformative literary value of testimonio within academic research. Testimonio is dynamic. Testimonio grips at the center of a story to transform the landscape of contested truth for the writer, the reader, and the testimonialista in the construction and reproduction of the testimonio. In this spirit, the goal of my research is to present the following testimonios in a way that honors the voice and authenticity of the storyteller. I also hope to create a space for testimonio to honor the history of our cultural identities and also invite new third spaces from which to witness folklórico testimonio as resilience (Anzaldúa, 1987).

**Hermanas en el Folklóre**

For purposes of this research, I invited three dancers to share their testimonios of multiple intersecting identities and of the relationships that each of them have with one another as hermanas. All identify as gay, Mexicano folkloristas. Two of the hermanas are current members of folklórico performing companies in Northern California, and one of the hermanas paused his folklórico dancing in 2010. All testimonialistas, including myself, shared several years
of dancing in the same performing company in Northern California from 2006 through 2010. The testimonios of each of the hermanas were collected in multiple ways: in-person meetings, one-on-one meetings, virtual video meetings as a group, and via independent email submissions of testimonio stories. Each of the hermanas was given a brief overview of testimonio as methodology. They were also provided a prompt to respond to: *folklórico is educación beyond schooling.*

In the following section, you will read accounts of how each of the hermanas chose to introduce themselves within the framework of their testimonios. This section is immediately followed by a group dialogue that all three hermanas had with one another relative to folklórico as educación beyond schooling.

**Mario Dasaev – “Dasa”**

*Yo soy Dasa.*
*I am Mario.*
*Yo bailo folklórico.*
*I dance traditional Mexican regional dances.*

My name is Mario Dasaev Sosa Mendoza. I only allow my family and people from mi rancho to call me Dasa, a shortened version of my middle name, Dasaev. I love identifying as both Mexicano and American, Mexican-American. I have the privilege of loving two countries equally. I am a graphic designer because of my love for the visual and I am a dancer because of my love for performance. And I am pretty bad ass.

I started dancing so that I could be more social. I think that folklórico also satisfied this need that I had to perform. When I was younger I always had three aspirations: to be an artist, a dancer, and a teacher. I joined dance when I was fifteen or sixteen. It helped me to fulfill ideas about myself that I had had since I was a young boy. I remember living in Colusa and being four or five years old and having these same aspirations. Dancing has helped me to achieve all of these things. I actually get restless when I’m not dancing. I miss the movement of my feet. I miss my friends. Both of the companies that I’ve ever danced for have accepted me for who I am—I am lucky.

I did take a break from dance for about five years. When I came back for the second time, I came back because I was on a break with Fernando, my ex. I remembered folklórico. I
wanted to go back to it. I remember Fernando asking me, “Why did I need to go back to dance?” I just remember thinking, “. . . because I want to.” It’s been such a consistent part of my life since then. It’s a part of me. It’s cute when they tell my little nephew to “dance like DASA.” It gives my family another characteristic of me that’s very special to me. I’m good at these things and I feel good doing them.

I consider you guys my best friends. We just get along so well. Folklorico brought us together. You and I, we are gays from the ranch. We never talked about it. We never mentioned it. It was awkward. But with dance, the door opened up. Let’s keep it real: we were ranch acquaintances . . . I laugh so much when I’m with you. Me, being the diva. Luis being the enabler. You are the leader. The humor that comes out of us makes me laugh out loud randomly sometimes. We all have a goal to hold on to our culture. Ozzy came from Mexico and that’s how he expresses his background. You are very academic and you always want to research everything. I love things that represent where I come from and my culture. If I didn’t go back to dance, then I don’t know where I’d be today. I refer to folklorico for lots of things. I refer to folklorico in job interviews, to help explain context. It makes me stand out. Folklorico is such a part of me that I can never take a break. It’s a support system. It’s just there. It can drive me crazy, but I know in my heart of hearts . . . that it stabilizes me.

Osvaldo Ramirez Vidales – “Ozzy”

Yo soy maestro, bailarin, y amigo.
I am an educator, a dancer, and a friend.

Yo bailo cuando siento que la música me hace moverme dentro de mi.
I dance when I’m thrilled to hear music that makes me move.

Buenas tardes, good evening, my name is Osvaldo Ramirez Vidales. I’m originally from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico raised up to the age of 13. I moved to Sacramento, California where I have lived ever since. I’m fully bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English. I began my college career at the age of 17 in which I completed an A.A. Degree in Arts-Social Sciences at Sacramento City College in 2003, a B.A. in Psychology with minors in Anthropology and Spanish at UC Davis in 2006, and a M.S. in Career Counseling at CSU Sacramento in 2009. I have worked as an Academic Advisor assisting undergraduate students with their GE and graduation requirements, and I still currently work as Faculty Lecturer with the Department of
Theater and Dance teaching Mexican Folklorico Dance, both positions at CSU Sacramento. Moreover, I’ve been a dancer for 13 years and 4 of those as Instructor and Co-Artistic Director. The last 3 years with my colleague and one of my best friends, Manuel Perez. Last, but not least, I identify myself as a gay Mexican male who is still developing/shaping who I am today.

I first started dancing folklórico because I missed seeing it danced on a regular basis. Being in Guadalajara, next to la Plaza Tapatia, watching the holidays, the festivals, the Teatro Degollado to see Amalia Hernandez’s dance company, to see la Universidad de Guadalajara at mariachi festivals, the fiestas de octubre . . . there was a lot going on back then. I enjoyed watching. Then moving to the U.S. I missed that. It was like, now I’m here. I’m Mexican I need to speak Spanish. I need to keep everything in tact about my culture. El Son del Gusto is the first song that I learned to dance with full choreography and I loved it.

I’ve made some of the best friendships ever in my life in the U.S. through dance. I have come to embrace performing in front of people—I used to be really scared. I enjoy the complexity of dances and movements, thinking of choreographies. It’s like a feeling of belonging and wanting to belong. I don’t know what life would be like without dancing. I don’t think I would have done anything else too much more productive. In our home videos, we have folklórico performances from elementary school, memories that have stuck with us. We would go to Tlaquepaque at least once a month to see mariachi and dancers with cousins and family. Folklórico has been a very crucial aspect of my family.

Luis Navarro – “Luis”

I am Mexican, Latino, gay, American.
Yo soy Mexicano, Latino, gay, American.
I dance because I am proud of my culture.
Yo bailo por que me emociona.

I started dancing because I wanted to feel more connected to my culture. I started in college. It was a difficult time for me—it was an identity thing for me. I was having a really hard time being openly gay. In high school I used to call myself Louis. In college, is when I really started referring to myself as Luis. I learned to admire my culture and it wasn’t through a class or anything. I remember going to an event at UC Davis and I remember seeing the danzantes
performing and I loved it. I said ‘OH MY GOD’ and that’s why I joined. I loved it and that was in college. Then I realized that I was trying to find myself so I stopped dancing. I joined a fraternity and I don’t know . . . but then I started realizing that I needed to explore and connect with my culture, my community, which is why I think I joined our dance company. I think I saw more people there that did it for their passion. I also saw people who were gay. I saw Ozzy and I knew he was gay. Then you came back from school and joined the company too. It all worked out. I am passionate about dance, but I don’t think I’m as passionate as you or Ozzy are. I really admire the passion that you all have for it, more than I do. I feel connected in so many ways.

I think about returning to folklórico all the time. It’s hard. It’s a part of me. It’s my cultura. I have a little bit of that through my job now and I enjoy it. When I relocated to Southern California I had seriously considered returning to dance. I really missed dancing. However, I was in a different place when I went to visit a different company at the time. If I wasn’t in such a transitional period, I would be doing that now. You all are my extended family. Folklórico is where I feel the most comfortable. It’s home. I miss it. We have similar goals. We have similar interests. Being around each other and having a good time—it’s exciting. I love performing. I hate dancing socially, but I love performing. Isn’t that funny?

. . . and having you there . . . you were definitely more of the encouraging people that I met. You definitely helped me out with parts of my life that you know about. You pushed me not to give up on many things. I really appreciate that. I joined when I was going through a really difficult time. I was trying to get over my first boyfriend. I needed to feel something. I was really depressed. I needed to turn to my family and I didn’t have my family. I remember one of the days that my ex had been such an asshole to me. I remember that I called my mom and they were actually in Hayward that day. I was so depressed. I called my mom and I just went over to be with my family. I mean I was depressed with them too, but I didn’t tell them why. I was resistant. I think that’s about the time that I turned to folklórico again to avoid depression and it really helped. I mean, we became amazing friends. I remember that my friends from SF were always saying that my dance friends and I were always hanging out, that we were so close, and that we were always together. It was true. We were very close and it was very comforting to me.
I do carry it with me, what you told me that day about not giving up. I think about that often. I don’t know if you know that, but I do, and it’s meant a lot to me. I want you to know that. Remember my old job at KVIE? I feel like the dance group was a networking opportunity for me too. I would have never known about that job had it not been for the networking that dancing folklórico offered to me. I feel like that’s something that our White counterparts always have and that’s not something that I ever had growing up. Had I not known about these jobs then I never would have made it to where I am at now in my career. In a way, folklórico was a form of networking career wise. It’s done a lot for me.

Las hermanas

For each of the hermanas, folklórico played an important role in shaping their identity, strengthening their voices. Their stories detail the unique ways in which their experiences were impacted by their connection to folklórico. Their collective testimonio as hermanas is also evidence of the value traditional Mexican folklórico had on their relationship.

Una Platica Entre Danzantes

Each of the hermanas’ folklórico testimonios represent the resilience found within each of their individual cuentos. As each of the testimonialistas came together to reflect on their friendship as folkloristas and hermanas, the value of their relationships was even more evident as they discussed the experiences that they shared with one another. Through this collective testimonio, the strength of their connections to one another, as a value added to each of their individual journeys in identity, is clearer. The following excerpts of dialogue are a product of their conversation together.

LUIS: I think, for me, folklórico was more of a cultural dance kind of thing. It was more about learning about my Mexicanidad. That is what folklórico was for me— it was historical. Kinda like how we learned about Danza de los Parachicos, we learned about the European settlers and the indigenous communities in Chiapas.

DASA: There’s a historical reason for what we learn—like for example when we learned about how the slave trade got to Veracruz in México. A lot of the movements of the dance come from this blending of history. There’s a reason why we do what we do . . . from
the dance style, the dress that we wear . . . it’s Cuban, Caribbean, and from Africa. It is educational for us as performers. It shows on stage when we are performing.

OZZY: I think folklórico has a lot do with relearning and reintegrating one’s self back into aspects of our own culture that we never knew existed. Then we try to pass this on to other generations. We learned these dances from our ancestors and now we’re trying to pass it on to other generations. Folklorico seems more to me like a lifestyle and a way to pass on tradition. It teaches a lot more . . . beyond schooling. It teaches me to be responsible. It helps me with my memory.

DASA: I compare it to an oral history that is passed on. Like, for example, you and Ozzy are going to Durango to learn a specific set of dances. There is no specific or super strict curriculum . . . you’ll be with maestros who learned it from their maestros and they learned it from other maestros. Folklorico is like the tradition of oral history.

LUIS: For me, folklórico was more about community. It was a place where I can be with like-minded people, a place where I could be accepted by my peers. Obviously I came out when I was in the dance company—that was a huge step for me. Folklorico allowed me to be proud of my culture but it also opened the door for me to be a gay Latino . . . a princesa.

DASA: I think that you kind of go through life looking for your people . . . your tribe or whatever. For me being born in México and growing up here, I could never really relate to Mexicans because I was different. I was the one who grew up in U.S. We were different. I am not American either though because I was born in México. You seek out the people you relate to most . . . that’s what I found with you guys.

LUIS: I don’t think I would have been able to have found that with other dance companies though. I think it’s also about the people . . . other companies were just at different levels of understanding.

DASA: They just weren’t at your level of understanding at that specific moment in time.

LUIS: I think there’s a group of us that assimilated in American culture, but also keep Mexican culture. We were college educated at the time that we were dancing or we were pursuing higher education. It’s not that other dance companies were not, but I didn’t see any of that. We were all continuing to evolve on a regular basis.
DASA: I can add that our dance company was very unique in that we all desired to pursue more than just a high school degree or diploma. We had Bachelor’s, Master’s, or Ph.D.’s. With my current performing company, I haven’t seen that same thing. I think that speaks to the dance company, but also to us individually.

LUIS: I think that could be a function of all of us being there in the company at the same time. Nos hemos apoyado en diferentes maneras. I mean everything that you said to me, Manuel. I mean when I was looking for a job you asked me, “What thing do you want that you have not achieved or gotten?” You said that to me. We support and encourage each other in different ways. We help each other to excel.

OZZY: I want to add two things that I’ve observed about folklorico. One thing is that some companies are more Americanized, speak more English. Others are not Americanized and not yet fully Mexican, but speak more Spanish. I think the fact that we’re bilingual, speaking English and Spanish, had a lot do with our connection. We were able to share those experiences of coming from México and the U.S., talking about dance, and also helping each other to be successful. Being bilingual, bicultural, biliterate (bisexual?) . . . well, maybe some people, but who knows . . . we were able to shift our mindset through dance. In our dancing we processed everything in two languages. Being bilingual was an important aspect of schooling through dance. I’ve seen how not many other groups do that.

LUIS: In our company, I saw people in the same situation as me. I saw young guys, my colleagues, my peers, in the same situation as me and living the same experiences I had, and who were openly gay and were still surrounded by other people who were completely ok with it. I thought the environment was welcoming and warm. I thought, “If they did it then I guess I’m going to be ok.” It then became a family outside of my own family. I think that’s also a really big thing . . . for our culture it’s hard to come out to our family. It was hard for me to actually tell them. It was easier to tell my family once I had told you guys. You guys are like my extended family.
La Receta: Extracting the Flavor and Meaning of the Testimonio

DASA: So hold up, let me see if I got this right and then you let me know if I got it. So testimonio is kinda like how our moms make mole, yeah? So, Ozzy’s mom makes mole a certain way, my mom makes mole a certain way, and then your mom makes mole another way. Our moms all make mole but it’s different. Then, the internet will have a recipe for mole that will claim to be the “right way” to make mole. So all of these versions of mole are like testimonios, yeah?

In the aforementioned passage, Dasa has taken the concept of testimonio as methodology and placed it within a context that makes sense for his lived experience, and that of Luis and Ozzy, by relating testimonio to Mexican cuisine. It made sense for the testimonialists. Moreover, each of the dancers identified themselves in ways that reference their ethnicity and culture, their identities, their language, and their relationship to folklórico. Testimonio as a product and method of LatCrit Race Theory allows for the exploration of identity through ethnicity and race. LatCrit Race Theory also transcends ethnicity and race to include such things as language, sexual orientation, gender, immigration and citizenship status among many more identities (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Thus, testimonio as a methodology allows for these rich descriptions and intersectional identities to play a vital role in informing the reader about the factors that influence the lives of each testimonialist.

Testimonio cultivates the essential elements of our intersectional identities and allows for three themes to emerge. Through the aforementioned testimonios, the dancers have discussed folklórico as educación sobre comunidad, folklórico as educación sobre la familia, and folklórico as educación sobre el auto-estima, or self-esteem. Through the use of story and personal narratives, the testimonios supercharge the landscape of dominant narratives in academia with powerful cuentos that expose tensions and highlight cultural capital in various languages and formats. Testimonio provides a space for the voice and story of multiple Truths—life as primary text.

In her writing about critical race theory and community cultural wealth, Yosso (2005) highlights six distinct elements of cultural capital that students of color bring to the classroom from their home environments. These elements comprise community cultural wealth and are often unrecognized or unacknowledged. Folklórico embodies each of Yosso’s (2005) elements
of community cultural wealth. Each of the elements—aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital—can be found within the three folklórico testimonio themes of comunidad, familia and auto-estima. The dancers address coming out as gay men, finding friendships, and learning about cultural history through a lens of community cultural wealth and in a strengths-based approach to understanding their lived experience.

**Comunidad, Familia, & Auto-estima**

The theme of comunidad within the folklórico testimonios bears a striking resemblance to Yosso’s (2005) linguistic, social, and navigational capital. The testimonios are delivered in Spanish, English, and Spanglish. In one instance, Ozzy credits the solidarity of their friendships and relationship with the fact that they can switch between each of the languages effortlessly. This multilingual communication created a distinct flavor within the context of the dance company for all three dancers. This dynamic then consequently made their relationships stronger.

This linguistic capital then made it easier to utilize the skills that each dancer brought to the performing company relative to social and navigational capital. Through these relationships, each dancer’s access to skills and resources for navigating social systems was enhanced. Consequently, this additional layer of shared community cultural capital positively impacted each dancer’s resilience in the face of obstacles such as disclosing their sexual identity to their family, similar to what Luis shared in his testimonio.

In their testimonios, each of the dancers also highlighted the importance of the folklórico company serving as an additional family structure away from home. Family is a strong element of community cultural capital. Each of the dancers referenced the development of a familia within folklórico which positively impacted the development of strong and healthy identities for each of the dancers. With a familia-based model of performance, folklórico provides an additional outlet through which youth can accumulate additional cultural capital away from the home, but still within a familia structure. This outlet can be beneficial as youth of color push up against social systems that displace their lived experience and make student success more challenging—additional family structures are valuable.
Lastly, folklórico inspires a strong sense of auto-estima in the dancers. The physicality of the movements, the technique of the footwork and styling, and the cultural history component cater to the dancers’ aspirational and resistant capital. Folklórico gives youth the opportunity to experience cultural pride in both physical, physiological, and mental contexts. All dancers spoke of the inspirational elements of folklórico, that it just felt right.

In her research on performance pedagogy, Roberts (2011) offers the concept of dance as a critical site of encounter for dancers and their audience in which the pedagogy reflects a raising of awareness, reflection, and social action. In this way, dance becomes a contested site of social action. This consciousness-raising is evident in the testimonios that discuss the personal awareness that comes as a result of folklórico training. In their introduction, each of the dancers began their testimonios with “I am” poems, which borrows from the critical consciousness and praxis elements of Barrio pedagogy (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). Through these poems, the dancers were able to position their identities in a critical moment of self-reflection for the sake of empowering their stories. Dancers are shown a variety of ways in which to find inspiration and cultural pride within themselves.

Conclusion

Folkloristas make sense of the world through our cultura. We touch, we sing, and we dance our way to making sense of the world around us because that is how we have come to experience the world around us. We are born of a cultura that embraces, breathes, ebbs, and flows with the expansion of a canvas, the pages of the libro and the rhythms of our movement. For dancers of folklórico, and specifically for these three hermanas, the struggle to find their self and develop a positive identity as they journeyed through education is easier when you can return to a familiar space. More importantly, systems are much more easily navigated when this familiar space capitalizes on the skills and voice that youth of color have always had, but perhaps have not had as many opportunities to practice outside of their home or family structures. Folklórico provides an additional space outside of the home through which youth can practice and strengthen their valuable cultural capital in an effort to create healthy and robust identities.

Folklórico positions the lived experiences of Mexicanos throughout history as central to the story. Through this cultural art form, dancers are instilled with cultural pride and are
encouraged to continue fostering environments that welcome comunidad, familia, and strengthen auto-estima. As evidenced through the testimonios of the dancers, folklórico then provided additional foundations through which to practice bringing their cultural capital into other environments, such as the workplace.

Folklórico teaches dancers to use their bodies, their face, their eyes, their voice, and their rhythm to learn about the past, to learn about the history that informs their brown skin, their dark hair and eyes, and their Spanglish tongue. Anzaldúa (1987) asserts that this contextualizing of the past within current contexts is key to the development of a mestiza consciousness. This consciousness in turn generates a landscape for people of color to thrive within a third space that is neither here, nor there. This third space exists within the borders of contested and multiple identities. Folklórico resilience testimonios create this third space, in what Anzaldúa would consider a Borderland. I call this series of folklórico resilience testimonios “la receta del testimonio mole,” for it is indeed a recipe for Truth as we know it, and it was introduced by the testimonialists as a tool for sense-making and as a script for understanding testimonio in a way that made sense to them.
References


Documenting the Undocumented:  
*Testimonios as a Humanizing Pedagogy*  

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**Abstract**

This article delves deep into the story of “illegal” immigration, while humanizing the issue of those who experience it and its enduring consequences. In so doing, this study seeks to look beyond the broadly articulated claims about undocumented immigrants and shed light on what it really means to be unauthorized in America. This body of research challenges current immigration discourse through personal accounts, by exposing the areas of immigration where understanding is most needed. I use the methodological approach of *testimonio* to conduct, collect, and analyze four *testimonio* interviews of current undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Towards the endeavor, this article seeks to create a rich narrative of human survival and about the struggles and obstacles undocumented immigrants face within our broken immigration system.

**Introduction**

*Migration is fundamentally the story of the human race from its origins to the present.*  
*Migration is an integral aspect of life on this planet. People move to survive. They move in search of food. They move away from danger and death. They move towards opportunities for life. Migration is tied to the human spirit, which seeks adventure, pursues dreams, and finds reasons to hope even in the most adverse circumstances. (Parker, 2011, p. 3)*

For as long as we have known, people have migrated in the world. From one village to another, one city to another, one country to another. The United States of America was founded and settled by immigrants. This is a significant part of the demographic history, known as the land of opportunity where newcomers can, through hard work and determination, achieve better lives for themselves and their families. Numbers of foreigners throughout time have traveled to American shores to escape
famine, poverty, political and religious persecution, environmental degradation, and even war. The country itself has always been a beacon to people from across the globe seeking economic opportunities, safety, freedom, and a chance at the proverbial American Dream.

Up until this day, people continue to cross borders, despite the dangers. Over the years, traversing the U.S-Mexican border illegally has become increasingly dangerous and expensive. Migrants wanting to cross into the United States pay thousands of dollars and face kidnapping, rape, and sometimes even murder at the hands of violent drug cartels and ruthless human smugglers. Others are killed in accidents or die harsh deaths of heat exhaustion and dehydration in remote and perilous stretches of scorching, waterless desert (Sterling, 2010). Nevertheless, the cost of coming to the United States without documents is more often than not a very difficult and traumatic experience for immigrants attempting to cross the border.

Invisibility

Undocumented immigrants have no way to tell you what they have experienced, or why, or who they are, or what they think. They are by the very nature of their experience, invisible. Most of us pass them by—some of us might say a prayer for them, some of us wish they would return to their countries of origin. But nobody asks them what they think. Nobody stops and simply asks. (Orner, 2008, p. 5)

Despite their contributions, undocumented immigrants continue to live in the shadows of our society. Much of the public discourse around immigration reform either criminalizes or dehumanizes the undocumented population. Both the media and politicians repeatedly use derogatory terms such as “illegal” and “aliens” when describing those without proper documents. National and local immigration policy has only stigmatized and discriminated against migrants, further alienating them from the majority culture. Today’s debates over immigration simply revolve around economic and political aspects, while ignoring the human perspective. In his introduction to Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives, editor Peter Orner (2008) writes, “We hear they are responsible for crime. We hear that they take our jobs, our benefits. We hear they refuse to speak English. But how often do we hear from them?”
Journalist, David Bacon (2009) in *Illegal People* also echoes these concerns: “Those who live with Globalization’s consequences are not at the table, and their voices are generally excluded” (p. 14). Lacking from mainstream politics is the human face to the immigration debate, the voices, the stories, and the testimonies of those living “illegally” in the United States.

Immigration is not purely a political issue, but a humanitarian one. The reality on the ground is much more complicated than the simple contrast between legal and illegal that characterizes mainstream policy and discourse. Undocumented immigrants are human beings and integral parts of our society and economy. These men and women cannot be summed up by the jobs they perform, countries they come from or even immigration status. These immigrants are people; people with families, people with dreams, and people with desires. Their voices and testimonies need to be at the forefront of immigration reform discourse and policy. To present only the facts, is to miss those aspects of how migration policy actually affects the people it is intended to regulate. If we are to find our way to a solution on immigration, we must examine the social complexity of the problem and bring the voices of undocumented immigrants out of the shadows of invisibility, silence and shame.

**Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This study is grounded in one main theory: Critical Race Theory (CRT) with an emphasis on Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit); an overarching branch of Critical Race Theory that examines forms of subordination specifically related to the Latina/o community based on immigration status, language, and ethnicity (Huber, 2010). LatCrit theory, like critical race theory, emphasizes the multidimensionality of oppressions, while claiming that race is central in understanding how individuals experience societal structures and form identities accordingly (Fernandez, 2002). In this context, LatCrit allows for specific examination of the ways Latinas/os experience issues of immigration status, race, language, ethnicity, and culture. Thus, LatCrit enables researchers to better articulate the evolution and challenges of the undocumented, through a more focused analysis of the unique forms of oppression this community encounters.
In this study, CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color, specifically Immigrants of Color, as legitimate, appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination. Looking through a CRT lens means exploring some of the critical race methodological and pedagogical approaches that can help one understand the contemporary experiences of Latina/o undocumented immigrants in the United States.

CRT in immigration research unapologetically centers on challenging dominant ideologies and disrupting dominant perceptions, understandings, and knowledge about undocumented immigrants living in this country (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012). For this field, CRT contributes to the centrality of the experiences of immigrants through personal counter-histories and narratives, as a tool for empowerment. These stories challenge the governing historical narratives and current political platforms of exclusion and continue to give a voice to those that have been silenced by white supremacy. Finally, Critical Race Theory serves as the unifying framework in this study because it places the oral histories, cuentos, and testimonies of immigrants in the contemporary and historical contexts, while exposing racism as a main thread in the fabric of American society.

Guided by a LatCrit framework, this study employs testimonio as the primary research methodology. A shared definition of testimonio is a revolutionary Latin American literary genre that has been used by individuals to tell a collective story and history of oppression through the narrative of one individual (Beverly, 2004). I account for the "other" voices that continue to be consistently excluded from mainstream discourses in our culture through testimonio. A testimonio can define a life story; yet, at the same time, it can explain the collective history and spiritual struggle of not only one, but of many. The principle of testimonio is the phrase: “Tu eres mi otro yo,” “you are the other me,” our struggle is collective, our voice is one. This form of methodology holds particular importance because it allows researchers to document and inscribe into existence narratives reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often ignored in dominant discourses.
"Testimonios"

The significance of this work lies within the compelling stories—the testimonios—of the shadowed lives in American society. From a macro and micro perspective of this work, I examine the experiences of undocumented immigrants as individuals trying to survive and settle into a society that, in many ways, rejects their essential humanity. I explore how the media and legal system both portray and affect this population, and utilize testimonio as a tool that challenges the morality of our current immigration discourse that continues to oppress these specific people. This article hopes to put a face to the immigration debate and bring awareness to the large-scale impact immigration reform has on individuals, while also providing an alternative perspective to policy makers and the general public, who might be misinformed about the issue or have conflicting views on immigration. Perhaps the opinions of policy makers and others cannot be changed, but counter-narratives to their views can and should be provided. More importantly, this article aims to move public conversation beyond the polarized frames associated with illegality, and position the voices, experiences, and stories of undocumented immigrants at the forefront of research and analysis.

Esperanza
Emmanuel Garcia

"The journey towards you, Lord, is life. To set off... is to die a little. To arrive is never to arrive until one is at rest with you. You, Lord, experienced migration. You brought it upon all men who know what it is to live who seek safe passage to the gates of heaven. You drove Abraham from his land, father of all believers. You shall remember the paths leading to you, the prophets and the apostles. You yourself became a migrant from heaven to earth." -- 'The Migrant's Prayer'

After my father died in 1999, I had to drop out of school and work for my family. I started working in Mexico City, cleaning taxis and recruiting passengers for the drivers. I was 15 years old at the time. I also started hanging out with the wrong people on the street. I began to buy drugs, do drugs, and even sell drugs. I was hustling and making that money. Before I delved in too deep, my mother suggested I leave Mexico and head to Phoenix, Arizona with my tío Jose. She worried and wanted a better life for me. I
think I wanted one too. My uncle Jose was headed to Phoenix to find work. He had three kids and a wife that he needed to provide for. During that time, Mexico didn’t have many good jobs available, especially for those without an education. My uncle was a carpenter and had some experience in construction. He loved building and designing things. He once told me that if he could have studied, he would have been an architect.

In the winter of 1999, my uncle and I boarded an Estrella Blanca bus in Mexico City to a town further north. We didn’t have the money or time to apply for an American visa, so we planned to cross into Texas illegally and travel to Arizona. Before we left, my mother gave me a *librito of Santo Toribio Romo Oraciones del Migrante* (a small prayer book of the Saint for Immigrants); she said it would protect me and bring me back to her. Even now, I carry the little booklet with me, everywhere I go. Our journey to the United States took more than a week. We rode a bus, walked some many miles and hopped on a train for two days. Once at the border, we were smuggled across the line in a van and transported to a drop house in a taxi. The journey itself was horrible. I witnessed a lot of things that I never thought I’d see. I would hear woman and young girls scream at night to “stop,” while the coyotes raped and abused them. I saw families and individuals give up mid-way because they couldn’t go any further. I remember seeing a lot of things like snakes, scorpions and even human remains as we walked. And we walked for hours that felt like days. I had my feet full of blisters and lost some of my toenails from walking so much. There was a time that I think I started hallucinating. But we kept going…

Once over the border, we were dropped off at the Rio Grande in South Texas at night and we swam across. The water seemed freezing at the time. There was a group of about seven of us. When we got to the other side, a car that was painted like a taxi awaited us. We were driven to a house in Texas, where we slept for a few days. There were a lot of people at the house. I am talking like hundreds of people, a lot of women and children, but mostly men. We slept in a room like sardines. On the fifth day, we paid our dues and were on our way. From Texas, my tío and I took a bus to Phoenix that same day. We arrived three days later. I hated Phoenix. The city was hot, noisy, impersonal, and lonely. I started school (even though I didn’t understand one word of English), then worked at a local Mexican restaurant bussing tables. When I didn’t work,
I was often alone. My uncle worked late and I didn’t have any friends. I yearned for my life in Mexico, especially on the holidays. In the United States, the holidays were sterile and lonely with no family celebrations or good home cooked food. Christmas in America was nothing like the festive celebrations in Mexico.

Three years later, I graduated high school and spoke enough English to get a job waiting tables. I wanted to be a computer technician, but the lack of papers kept me from going to college. My life changed, when I met a blue-eyed blonde named Tara. I met Tara while waiting on her and her friends one summer day. She was sixteen, the daughter of an unemployed truck driver and a stay-at-home mom. She lived in a trailer park with her grandmother and two other sisters. Her father was a drunk and her mother, unfortunately, a drug addict. We married six months after we met at the Arizona courthouse. We didn’t have a party. We didn’t have a cake. The only person who attended our wedding was my uncle Jose. It didn’t matter to us. We were happy.

My marriage to Tara didn’t change anything. I remained undocumented, of course. Since I entered the United States “illegally,” my marriage didn’t change my status, but I was fine with it. I had Tara and to me that was all I cared about.

Tara and I rented our own apartment in central Phoenix. She graduated high school and began working at Ross as a cashier. I took a series of low-paying jobs to provide for my wife. I sometimes used her social security to work or bought fake documents to land jobs. I assisted carpenters, painted houses, flipped burgers, and washed dishes to make ends meet. In 2005, I was hired as a painter with a crew that painted public funded projects. I painted hospitals, casinos, fire stations, multimillion dollar homes, restaurants and Phoenix’s Sky Harbor airport. I made about $2,000 a month. It was good money, I thought. That same year, I became a father to my first son Miguel. By then, we owned a condo and two cars. I really felt like I was living the American Dream. I had a job, a home, and a small family of my own.

In 2007, Tara gave birth to our second son Mark. She stopped working permanently and became a stay-at-home mom. With me personally, something started to change. I felt tired a lot of the times. I would call in sick at least once a week. My back ached and I felt nauseated most days. One morning, I couldn’t even get out of bed, that Tara drove me to the emergency room. After a series of tests, I was diagnosed
with renal disease. I didn’t know what the doctors were talking about when they mentioned kidneys. All I knew was that it seemed serious and I needed help. A social worker explained to me that it was necessary for me to receive emergency treatment if I wanted to live. I couldn’t afford the treatment needed. The treatment for renal disease was about $36,000 per year, not including doctor visits. State laws and my undocumented status, unfortunately, prevented me from receiving any financial assistance. Undocumented immigrants were banned from getting any public funded health services in the state of Arizona. I also had no insurance. For most of my time in the United States, I avoided the doctor and hospital at all costs. If it wasn’t serious, I wouldn’t go. But sadly, there was no avoiding this.

Later that year, my social worker called me and said that I was eligible for emergency medical service, regardless of my status. Apparently, the state of Arizona was forced to pay for my dialysis indefinitely under a disability law because it was a life-threatening emergency. The doctors told me that I could survive on the dialysis for about five years. But after just a few months, I needed a kidney transplant to stay alive. Of course, the state would not pay for a kidney transplant for an undocumented immigrant like me. Plus, transplants weren’t considered life-saving emergencies under health regulations. It was then that I realized the gravity of my illness. I didn’t have much time to live without a transplant. I had lost control of my life. Nothing seemed easy now. My wife was working two jobs to keep us afloat. My eyesight was failing and my weight dropped from 250 to 200 pounds. We lost the condo. We lost our cars. With less income and more medical expenses, our financial problems mounted. My American Dream had evaporated. No kidney transplant. No condo. No health insurance. No documents. And soon no money.

After just a year of dialysis, collection agencies called every day. Without me working, we weren’t making the bills on time and couldn’t afford to live in Phoenix anymore. I decided I was going to move back to Mexico to be with my mother. In Mexico, transplants and dialysis were free. My mother and sister were also willing to donate a kidney to me. Everything seemed more hopeful in Mexico City than in Phoenix. My family and I would take our $4,000 in savings and move to Mexico. In April of 2009, I went to my last dialysis before leaving for the airport. I knew that if I didn’t
have a dialysis before I left, I risked dying. I had a plan. We were going to go to Mexico, get a transplant, save money and come back to Phoenix. That was the plan.

Once in Mexico City, my plans began collapsing. I had no transplant donors. My mother, sister and wife were no match. Because I never worked in Mexico, I didn’t qualify for funded medical assistance. I had to pay for my dialysis and medicines. And it was too much. Our savings had dwindled from $4,000 to $1,800 because of my medical costs. There were days that I wondered if I was going to make it. With the money we had left, we decided I’d go back to Phoenix to get the medical help I needed. I couldn’t get a transplant, but I could still get dialysis. I felt like a fool. Why hadn’t I just stayed in Phoenix in the first place? Now I had to go back and leave my family behind, to stay alive. I set out to cross the border through Nogales, Sonora. I called my tío Jose to make arrangements to be picked up. I did make it to Phoenix again.

A few months after I arrived, Chandler police and federal agents conducted a raid where I had started working, arresting all undocumented immigrants. At that time, I was working at a local car wash in Phoenix, cleaning cars. The raid terrified me. I was told that the people of Arizona wanted “illegal aliens” gone and I too would soon be deported...I was taken to a county jail at first, then transported here, to this detention center. It didn’t take long for them to learn that I was ill. I passed out in a van, as they transported me to the detention facility. Since being detained, my treatments have dropped down to twice a week with little medication. I sleep a lot. I feel worse than before, but try to hang on. I want to see my family again, even if it’s for the last time...
Mario/Marisol Guerra

La Vida Loca

Conocimiento Común

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Nací en 1977 en Tehuacán, Puebla. My parents owned a carnicería, a meat market, which supported their three sons and two daughters. We lived comfortably in Mexico. We weren’t rich, but we weren’t poor either. I would say my family was working class. Our house had 3 bedrooms and one bathroom. We lived just a 10-minute drive from the main city. As a child, I attended a catholic private school, played fútbol and helped out with the family business.

Growing up, I knew that I felt different. I felt different in the sense that I wanted to wear dresses, play with dolls and spend time with my sisters instead of my brothers. I was also very close to my mother. In a sense, I really felt favored by her. She always confided in me and defended me against my father. My father and I, on the other hand didn’t have much of a relationship. He called me lazy and sometimes would say that I was worthless. I felt as if my own father hated me because he knew. Although my parents never mentioned it, I think they knew, I think they knew that I was gay.

For years I kept my feelings to myself. I hated myself because I was attracted to boys, partly because I was catholic. At school I was told that being gay was a terrible sin and could mean in spending your afterlife burning in hell. At school, when other students would ask if I was gay or queer, I denied it. I tried to partake in “masculine” activities by playing sports and joking about girls. Sometimes I even told myself, “I will like girls someday.” But deep down inside, I worried about myself.
I had my first sexual encounter with another man when I was 14 years old—with a 19 year-old neighbor. I never viewed this particular experience as child sex abuse, but rather a pleasurable awakening. I had crossed my first border into a forbidden world, which I would never leave. It was the high point of my human experience up to that point. *Era un joto, I was gay.* Still, though, I didn’t tell anyone about my new-found sexuality for a long time.

When I turned fifteen, I dropped out of school to work at a blue-jean *maquiladora* (factory) in my hometown. I worked nine hours a day, six days a week sewing jeans that would be shipped out to the United States. I was paid about three to four hundred dollars a month. It wasn’t much, but I was still living at home, so it worked. After work or on my days off, I would spend my nights in la plaza eyeing other gay men and sometimes even married men. I called them *mayates*.

By the time I was nineteen, I’d had several sexual experiences with other men: gay, straight, bisexual, and married. However, I felt empty. I still felt as if something were missing. I was bored, I yearned for something more. It was then that I crossed another border. At twenty, I began dressing up as woman. I’d take the bus to a nearby town, where my friend Alicia lived, and dress as a woman there. I became Marisol. With my long black hair, revealing dresses and platform heels, I worked part-time as a prostitute. I hung out in local bars and recruited my clients from there. A lot of my clients were married men or guys with girlfriends.

It wasn’t easy being Marisol. I was taunted on the street with insults like: *maricon, pinche joto, puto joto.* Some of my transvestite friends were raped and beaten up. Being a homosexual or a transvestite was looked down upon in Mexico. People weren’t very accepting. I managed to escape most of the violence, until one day I was almost stoned to death…

One night, I volunteered to work at a booth in a carnival dressed as a transvestite. A gang of boys began throwing stones at me and calling me names. I managed to get away. After that incident and because of my mother’s health, I decided to go to the United States. My motivation was twofold. I needed money to help pay for my mother’s medical bills and was tired of all the persecution I was experiencing for
being gay. I had heard that the United States accepted homosexuals. They were treated with dignity and respect... even transvestites.

In 1998, I decided to go to the United States. I had a friend in Phoenix, who said he would help me with lodging and work if I made it across. I am going to the United States, I told my mother. She must have sensed my reasons because she didn't ask me any questions, but simply gave me her blessing. I promised her that if I made it over, I would send money and return to Mexico to visit.

One day early in April of 1998, I traveled by bus from Tehuacan to Agua Prieta, a town in Sonora, where coyotes smuggled immigrants across the border. I was picked up in a ranch on the Mexican side of the border with 13 other immigrants. The ranch was a staging area for human smugglers. A couple hours later, I found myself on the other side of la línea. Arizona was dusty, full of cacti and rock, but more than anything hot. I was delivered to my friend (Gus), who waited in a car off highway 80 for $1,200 American dollars. Gus paid the coyote and we drove to Phoenix that same night.

Early the next morning, I went straight to work. Gus already had a job awaiting me to pay off the debt that I had owed him for the coyote. I worked as a painter for about seven dollars an hour at the time. I was paid in cash because I had no legal papers or identity really, except my passport from Mexico. I earned twice as much in Phoenix than in Mexico. It amazed me how much I was able to make in just one month. For me, making two thousand a month was a lot of money. As soon as I paid off my debt, I was able to begin my life in Phoenix, Arizona.

I fell in love with Phoenix. It was a different world than that of Mexico. Compared to Mexico, Phoenix was new, big, and exciting. It was also culturally segregated. Latinos, Blacks and Whites lived side by side, but in different worlds. I didn’t feel the need to learn English because most of my community was the undocumented Latino people. Everywhere I went people were hired without papers. Hundreds of establishments in Phoenix hired undocumented immigrants for work. It was never an issue finding a job or living in Arizona “sin papeles.” All my close friends were undocumented. Personally, I no longer had to be the closeted gay prostitute. In America, I was able to announce that I was gay and no one seemed to care. I still dressed like a woman and went to bars, but this time I didn’t have to sell myself for
money. I dressed up for the fun of it and because I liked being Marisol. Most of my encounters as Marisol were with migrant men, who were miles away from their wives and girlfriends. I, unfortunately, ended up falling in love with one.

I met Pancho one night at a bar in Phoenix. His real name was Francisco, but he went by Pancho. He was an undocumented immigrant (like myself) from southern Mexico and worked in construction. Pancho was a married man. He lived in Phoenix with his wife and three kids in a trailer park with two bedrooms. Sometimes he invited me to his house for dinner with his family. Pancho would tell his wife that I was a good friend from work. I don’t think his wife (Yolanda) ever suspected of our affair. Over the years, I fell madly in love with Pancho. We saw each other as much as possible for over 5 years. He was tall, slender, handsome, dark hair, light hazel eyes, and dressed like a vaquero. He took me out and bought me gifts, both as Mario and Marisol. He told me that he loved me and promised that he would one day leave his wife for me. I believed him and promised to wait for him.

My life in Phoenix seemed to be a dream come true. I had a good job as a painter and an apartment that I shared with another friend. I was able to send money to Mexico to my family. I was able to be freely me with no shame and I was in love. It wasn’t until 2007 that I received a phone call from Pancho. Pancho was picked up by the police and would soon be deported back to Mexico. He was asked for his legal papers by the cops and had none to show. His status was an “illegal alien.” He was deported to Mexico within days. At first, Pancho would call me every day and say that he would come back to Phoenix. He promised that we would be together again, one day. After a few months, the phone calls stopped. Sometimes, I would bump into his wife, Yolanda and ask her about him. She herself was struggling to make ends meet working at a local Jack in the Box. She would say that Pancho was trying to come back, but that it was too expensive. That’s the last I knew about him.

In 2008, I lost my job in Phoenix because of the Employer Sanctions Act against hiring undocumented immigrants in Arizona. I applied for different jobs on a daily basis. I was turned away from fast-food restaurants and construction companies. I had no proof of papers. The state of Arizona seemed to have turned against all undocumented immigrants. I could go nowhere without fearing deportation. I hated the so-called racist
Sheriff Arpaio’s raids and attacks on immigrants. I felt trapped without a job. My savings began depleting because of my monthly share of rent and food. Like all other undocumented immigrants, I began living in the shadows. I didn’t leave my house, except for food. I wanted to leave Arizona, but had no money to go anywhere. After 10 months, I moved in with another friend because I could no longer afford the rent for my apartment. There were days that I thought of prostituting myself again for money and returning to Mexico. I hoped for immigration reform instead.

In July of 2009, I received a phone call from Pancho. He was in Tijuana and wanted to see me. He was on his way to Texas, where he had heard that there was work for undocumented people. We could be together again he said. I was still in love with Pancho. I thought about moving to Texas, but then I changed my mind. I never thought that I would react the way I did. I decided to stay in Phoenix instead. Why should I be with someone who was never going to leave his wife? Or with someone who was ashamed of his sexuality? I deserved better. Maybe one day, I would meet a man who really loved me…

As I sit in this detention center now, August of 2014, I am grateful for all the opportunities and experiences that I’ve gone through. I feel so fortunate of having had the chance to come to the United States. It has been good to me. More good than bad I like to think. I won’t get into the details of how I ended up here, but here I am. I’ve been here for almost one year and still now, I have no legal representation. I haven’t been deported; I haven’t stood in front of a judge to determine my fate, so here I am. *Aquí estoy, esperando.* Still hoping for immigration reform…

**Conclusion**

*In Lak Ech*

*Tú Eres mi otro yo! You are my other me.*

*Si te hago daño a ti! If do harm to you,*

*Me hago daño a mí mismo! I do harm to myself;*

*Si te amo y respeto! If I love and respect you,*

*Me amo y respeto yo! I love and respect myself.*

- Quote by Luis Valdez
The purpose of this study was to go beyond the myths and stereotypes and acknowledge the full humanity of undocumented immigrants. Much of my research efforts were to give a glimpse of the complexity of their stories, the richness of their narratives, and profoundness of their experiences. Like all people, they have dreams and sometimes even make mistakes. Their lives are much more than the potent images and broad claims circulating the media and popular discourse. When they are not being detained or deported, abused or dehumanized because of their status—they are (like you and me) working hard every day to provide and keep their families safe. Their story is a testimony of the unified struggle of what it means to be an illegal immigrant within this country. Undocumented immigration is not solely an issue tied to corrupt foreign governments and policies, but a humanitarian one. Until then, we cannot begin to understand the issue of unauthorized immigration, unless we begin listening to these “illegals” directly.
References


Throughout my life I have come home to Modesto, California more times than my heart can remember; it is my heart that remembers and keeps my hometown ever present. Today, I am an Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco. Yet, who I am today is profoundly intertwined with the little girl who grew up in the Central Valley as a daughter of working class Mexican immigrants. This is my testimonio—my truth-telling story—of how I learned from the sacrifices my parents made as Mexicano immigrants pursuing a dream of a better life for their children in Central Valley California, and it is the story of learning from my family’s knowledge, strengths, cultural resources, and Community Cultural Wealth.

**Keywords:** Testimonio, Community Cultural Wealth, Immigration

* A mi hogar en Modesto una y otra vez/Coming Home to Modesto...Time and Time Again

Throughout my life I have come home to Modesto more times than my heart can remember; it is my heart that remembers and keeps my hometown ever present. No matter where I live, I always say, “I'm going home” when I head towards the Central Valley. As I write this testimonio, I am in Modesto—home once again. Perhaps it’s meant to be that I’m visiting my parents and sleeping in the house that has been our family home since I was thirteen. I’m no longer a teenager—to an outsider, I am a long way from the little girl with the boyish haircut who lived in “the projects”. I am now an Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco. Yet, who I am today is deeply intertwined with that little girl—my upbringing as a daughter of Mexican immigrants in the Central Valley shaped my educational and life trajectories.
I was born and raised in Modesto, from 1974 until the summer of 1992 when I turned 18 and attended UC Davis. After graduating with a double major in Spanish and History, I moved to Los Angeles and spent five years teaching social studies in a Latina/o immigrant community. Thereafter, I started a Masters program in Latin American Studies followed by a Ph.D. in Education—both at UCLA. In 2010, I was offered my first academic job and moved to Arizona. In 2014, I returned to California with as an Assistant Professor in San Francisco. Before, after, and in between these life chapters, I have either lived in Modesto or visited my family there numerous times a year.

On paper my journey may appear fluid, but each of these life chapters was marked by great struggle. Life in and beyond the Central Valley has been one of intense juxtapositions—oppression and resilience, pain and transformation, poverty and cultural richness. Yet, they are never binary; they swirl together, overlapping into a process of continual border crossing—physical, metaphorical, cultural, spiritual, and political (Anzaldúa, 1987).

My testimonio is comprised of memories, journal entries, audio recordings, and transcripts of pláticas (talks) I’ve had over the years with my parents Concepción Reynalda Chávez Escobedo and Germán Jiménez Vásquez. From a young age, my parents instilled wisdom, knowledge, and values in their three children. We grew up learning from our pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal, 2001) and my parents’ knowledge of the world through real life stories—our pláticas. My father has a love for words, storytelling, and social analysis; my mother used our talks to give us consejos (advice), love and encouragement.

I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) and testimonio to understand and frame my lived experiences. Critical Race Theory originates in legal studies and is an increasingly salient framework in social and educational research for examining racial subordination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lynn, 1999; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006). CRT’s central tenets include the intercentricity of racism with other forms of subordination, a challenge to dominant ideology, a commitment to social justice, validating experiential knowledge by People of Color, and using transdisciplinary approaches (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Osegura, 2005; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Testimonios are examples of experiential knowledge; it is a person’s truth being revealed as they recount the events of injustice, violence, or exploitation that they have experienced and witnessed. Testimonio is also defined by urgency; there is a need for telling stories from the past, to reclaiming the past, to give
testimony to the injustices of the past, to reinscribe local knowledge, to resist and to counter domination (Anzaldúa 1987; Latina Feminist Group, 2001 Delgado Bernal, 2001; Ramos, 2003). This is my testimonio—my truth-telling story—of how I learned from the sacrifices my parents made as immigrants pursuing a dream of a better life for their children in Central Valley California, and it is the story of learning from my family’s knowledge, strengths, and cultural resources.

Mi crianza en el valle central/Growing up in the Central Valley

I am a product of the San Joaquin Central Valley, from a neighborhood mired in poverty and many social ills, but I am also the product of a family and community who are holders and producers of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002) with Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2006). Both of these realities—pain and power—and all that lay in-between characterized my upbringing. Like Prieto (2001) in her testimony of life from the Central Valley to the Ivy Walls, I draw strength from memories of tears and laughter, for myself and for reimagining the educational possibilities of Latina/o immigrant youth (Jimenez, 2012).

The Central Valley is the agricultural heartland of California—many immigrant families work in the surrounding fields picking fruit and vegetables, and in the fruit canning factories; my parents worked in both. Modesto is a semi-rural city of 200,000 in California’s San Joaquin Valley, often simply called the Central Valley. Modesto is approximately 90 miles south of Sacramento, the state capital, and 70 miles east of San Francisco. The racial makeup of the city is approximately 49.4% White, 35% Latino, 4% African American, 4% Asian, 7.6%, Other (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

My parents left their homeland of Ameca, Jalisco, Mexico in 1972—like many Mexican immigrants—in search of work and life opportunities for their family. They immigrated to Modesto because they had family; social networks helped them find work, a home, and make a life in America (Durand, Telles, & Flashman, 2006). The economic aspects of poverty included my parents’ struggle in grueling, low paying, and physically exhausting work. We sometimes didn’t have much to eat, but we never went hungry. Sometimes our health care was minimal—

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1 White alone, not Hispanic or Latino.
when my sister and I had our wisdom teeth removed, we endured additional pain because we didn’t have the extra hundred dollars for a more sedated procedure. Paying for rent, gas, food, and household bills were a constant tension throughout our lives. To make ends meet, my father often held two jobs or worked double-shifts in the fields, in factory work, and as a bricklayer. As the eldest daughter, I had many responsibilities at a young age to support the household—I helped my mother cook food for my siblings, washed laundry daily including my parents’ work clothes, prepared my father’s lunch for his nightshift, cleaned the home, and helped out as my parents’ translator (Dorner, Orellana, Jiménez, 2008). There was often a feeling of survival on the line and economic desperation, which caused great worry and tension.

In 1986 as I entered junior high, we bought a house and we moved closer to the center of town. It was a dream come true for our parents—to become homeowners. It was in a more peaceful neighborhood and felt worlds away from the public housing projects even though it was maybe two miles away. Our new home was still west of the train tracks; these tracks divided the poor, the working class, the immigrant, the People of Color from the downtown hub of city government and businesses. Beyond the downtown were neighborhoods where middle class and wealthier white families lived.

As kids, we rarely went downtown except with our parents to pay an electric bill or go to the post-office. Instead, we often headed to West and South side Modesto to Spanish speaking businesses and grocery stores with Mexican food products. There, my dad could haggle in his own language with the mechanics to fix a problem our car was having—our cars always seemed to break down and need repairs. I learned how to ask for a “jump-start” and use battery cables at an early age. We often ran into friends or family during our weekend outings to the flea market, Don Juan Foods where we picked up carnitas (fried pork), or La Perla Tapatía, which had the best tortillas de harina (flour tortillas). These Latina/o owned businesses provided vibrancy, were places for our community to obtain the goods and services we needed, and which welcomed our culture and language. It was comfortable and warm, like home.

El trabajo adentro y afuera de casa/Work In and Out of the Home

My mom and dad are both from the same small Mexican town of Ameca, Jalisco, Mexico. In fact they were neighbors, yet they were from two distinct social classes. My maternal grandmother was a successful moneylender and educated my mother in elite private
catholic schools throughout her life. My father was born into an extremely poor family from a long line of campesinos (fieldworkers), and in his family it was a privilege to obtain a sixth grade public education. My mother has a Masters degree in education and was an elementary teacher in Mexico before marrying my father. However, she left her teaching job when she immigrated to the U.S. When we were old enough to attend pre-school, she joined my father working in the factory and worked in low-skilled manual labor for the rest of her life. As I got older, I asked her why she didn’t pursue a different line of work. She shared that she didn’t have the English language skills or understand how to navigate the systems in America to use her degree. Because there was also a social class difference between her and my father, gender and social roles may have played a big part in her decision.

My father worked in U.S. fields picking fruit for several years, but el campo (the fields) had deep historical roots—it was the work he was born into. My grandfather spent all of his life as a campesino (fieldworker). It was not simply an occupation—though it was how they sustained themselves—it was a way of life. My father’s connection to the Earth and maíz (corn) was one I would only learn to appreciate later through his stories. Corn was a part of their everyday lives and it was sacred—there was a lengthy, rigorous process to prepare the land, plant and harvest, thresh the corn, and bundle it for sale. It was also the staple food in his home with a meticulous preparation process for use in tortillas, tamales, atole, posole, and much more. I often saw my father’s eyes well up when he talked about el campo, corn, and life in Mexico.

Throughout my life though, the cannery was their primary work. Both of my parents worked in the fruit-canning factory for over 30 years. One of my chores as a little girl was to wash my dad’s uniform everyday because he worked ‘clean-up,’ hosing down all the machinery with steaming hot water. He wore a bright yellow coat and overalls made of rubber, black rubber rain boots, a hardhat and plastic visor. My mom worked picking the bad fruit from the assembly line, so only the ripened fruit would be canned. As a young girl, I heard the stories my mom’s elite upbringing, but it was hard to register since I always saw her in factory work clothes—a hairnet and hard hat, older comfortable blouses that looked like tablecloths under an apron to take the bulk of the fruit splatter as it rolled in the assembly line. One day I asked my mom if she hated the cannery. She laughed and said, “No hija, es lo que nos da la vida” (No
sweetheart, it’s what gives us life). It was arduous work under difficult conditions, and I’m sure it contributed to many health conditions in their later years, but they viewed work as a gift.

I remember both of my parents missing their family and their way of life in Mexico. Though they always respected what the US provided our family, they experienced the pain of living in a foreign land. As a young person I witnessed how people in authority demeaned them and questioned my parents’ intelligence because they did not speak English, for being immigrants, or perhaps for being Mexican; I wasn’t always sure the reason, but their talk revealed a disdain for their presence. I remember countless visits to English speaking public spaces (i.e., paying bills, the DMV, the post office, and doctor visits). These experiences from my social interactions as a child were reinforced with my experiences in school. When I told a teacher that my mother had a college degree, she retorted, “but not in America” or I’d see judgmental looks when my parents couldn’t attend my parent-teacher conferences because they were working. Wittingly or unwittingly, school actors communicated deficit perspectives of my parents, my family, and consequently, of me. Yet, I could not reconcile this with what I knew in my heart and experience to be true—both my parents held profound wisdom. My father is not an “educated” man in the formal sense, but he is one of the wisest and talented people I know. I have often wondered what kind of life my dad would have had if he had educational opportunities afforded to him—would he have become a politician or savvy lawyer with his oratory skills and keen ability to discern people’s hearts and souls. Had they not immigrated, would my mother have gone back to teaching or had she not been looked down upon for her accent when she spoke English would she have leveraged her education in the U.S? Nevertheless, her education was not wasted; it was poured into her children. She spent time reading with us, going over our homework, ensuring we were doing well in school, instilling in us dreams beyond our everyday realities or “aspirational capital” (Yosso, 2006). She taught us her love for reading and to recognize the beauty of learning. My parents also taught us to preserve our maternal language and to value our bilingual identities or “linguistic capital” (Yosso, 2006). Both of our parents instilled in their children that we were smart, beautiful children of God with a wonderful purpose in life.
Las escuelas y mis experiencias/Schools and Schooling Experiences

Before I ever read a book about cultural alienation and long before I knew what it meant, I knew what it felt like. I was a child of working class Mexican immigrants and labeled an English Learner (EL) in school. It would be a long journey towards countering the mis-education in K-12 that had also dealt me cultural shame and ignorance of my own history (Woodson, 1933, 2000; Villenas & Deyle, 1999).

As early as pre-school, I learned to strip Spanish from the pronunciation of my name. “English-Only” was the language I learned in school, which for me translated into “don’t speak Spanish,” and lamentably “don’t be Mexican.” The next year, I entered Kindergarten with the only Latina/o teacher I had throughout my K-12 schooling. She was one of the most influential teachers I had that affirmed my cultural experiences. I often wondered though, why I never again had a teacher who looked like me. At the start of the year, I thought I would garner her praise when I clearly articulated my name with an English pronunciation as I was taught in pre-school. She asked me, “Mija, how do your parents say your name?” This time, I said my name with a Spanish pronunciation, naturally rolling my “R” a few times the way my mother did. My teacher responded, “That’s how you say your name mija, in English AND Spanish.” When I told her my preschool teachers taught me to say my name in English, she told me, “They were wrong”. I thought about this for a long time and years later, I vividly remember this moment and the lessons learned—that I could be proud of who I was, my language, and my name. Incredibly, my teacher was socializing me into a pedagogy of Latina/o knowledge, cariño, and modeling a social critique of schooling in a way that made sense to me at the early age of five (Freire, 1970; Yosso, 2006).

I had a handful of great teachers throughout my K-12 education to which I am deeply grateful—my 5th grade teacher and my music teacher who saw my brother and I grow up and counseled us throughout the ten years we played the violin. Orchestra class was an integral part of my socialization and identity formation. For the most part, I did well academically in elementary school. In third grade, I was labeled “gifted” and placed in the Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program, which meant I would now be bussed across town to a wealthier mostly white school; I would later learn this was another way students are sorted and stratified with disparate educational opportunities (Oakes, 1985). I was transplanted from the school and
friends I knew into an educational context with middle-class norms that were foreign to me. I felt different and alone. For a class play, our parents had to make (or buy) ornate butterfly costumes for us. My mom was working and we didn’t have the money to have them professionally made so my teacher helped me make cardboard wings with glitter. I wore jeans, a pink top, and slipped my arms through of the loops of yarn to put on my butterfly wings. At first, I thought they were beautiful. Yet, when all the other kids showed up with black leotards, bodysuits, and life-like butterfly costumes made of shiny colorful fabric I wanted to hide; my cardboard wings paled in comparison. The aesthetic differences in our costumes symbolized marked social class differences. In my old school I was smart and outgoing; but here I became shy and silent. A year later, I was thrilled when my mom agreed to let me return to my neighborhood school where I would rejoin my friends from my neighborhood. In time, I thought about why I couldn’t get a high quality education that was affirming in my own community. This theme resonated with me throughout my schooling experiences and shaped my future life’s work as a teacher and educational researcher.

Junior high was a blur—my teachers didn’t know me and I was lost in the shuffle. I got into trouble often for talking during class and was constantly sent into the hallway. This baffled me. In elementary school my talkative and questioning nature was construed as inquisitive and participatory rather than a distraction. High school started off similarly. My life trajectory may have been very different had it not been for my high school counselor. During one meeting with him my freshman year, he looked over my academic cumulative file and exclaimed, “Wait a second you’re gifted!” I was perplexed. I told him I was gifted in elementary school, “but not anymore.” He laughed and said it wasn’t something I could lose. My “gifted” label prompted him to take an interest in my academic journey and enroll me in Advanced Placement and college preparatory classes. High school counselors are in unique positions to facilitate (or constrain) educational success with direct access to all academic programs, Advanced Placement and college-bound programs, and insider knowledge about financial aid and scholarship opportunities (Martin, 2002; McDonough, 1997). I am acutely aware that I was granted access to educational opportunities that were unjustly denied to many of my peers. In one day, a change in my course schedule dramatically altered my educational trajectory. Overnight, it seemed like I was attending a different high school—what Oakes (1985) referred to as schools within schools. That is, different educational tracks within the same school, which
structure disparate schooling for different groups of students. I applied to college when everyone in my A.P. classes was doing so. My father supported my education, but didn’t want me to go away to school. After many talks and with the help of my mother and cousin, my father gave me his blessing to attend UC Davis.

**La licenciatura y estudios posgrado/My Bachelor’s Degree and Graduate Education**

I have two UC’s as alma maters—my undergraduate B.A. degrees in U.S. History and Spanish were from UC Davis, and my M.A. in Latin American Studies and Ph.D. in Education are both from UCLA. Both of my siblings were also educated in the UC System—my brother at UC Berkeley and my sister transferred to UC Davis during my third year there. My brother went into pharmaceutical sales after graduating and later pursued a graduate degree in school psychology. My sister became an elementary teacher and returned to the Central Valley to teach in our community.

The first time I laid eyes on UC Davis was when I was starting the Special Transition and Enrichment Program (STEP)—a summer program for first generation or economically disadvantaged college students. It was an amazing and much-needed introduction to college life. My first year was extremely difficult—academically, I was not getting the grades I had in high school and socially it was a vastly different world. I found solace in close friends and other working class Students of Color who helped support me through the academic, social, and cultural challenges. I also enrolled in Spanish courses for heritage speakers and it changed my life. Professor Francisco X. Alarcón taught us the Spanish language in a way that was intimately connected to our cultural knowledge, Chicana/o history, poetry, political activism, and affirmed our personal experiences as children of immigrants.

Shortly after graduating, I moved to Los Angeles and became a social studies teacher. I sought to incorporate students’ life experiences in their academic learning using oral history and family migration projects. During my teaching years, I was also constrained by high-stakes testing, a narrowing of the curriculum, and de-skilling of teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004). These tensions coupled with my nagging feeling that I wanted to engage in educational issues with greater freedom led me to seek another path. I decided to return to graduate school to merge my interests in critical and culturally relevant teaching and research.
El doctorado/The Ph.D.

In 2004, I began my Ph.D. in Urban Schooling Education at UCLA. My graduate studies in urban schooling, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory resonated with my own experiences as a daughter of immigrant parents and as a teacher of Latina/o immigrant students. I was drawn to investigate how to translate critical pedagogies into the K-12 classroom for transformative educational experiences.

The UCLA campus was majestic; I could hardly believe I had been accepted. Yet, when I started the program, I felt like I was in the third grade again, being bussed across town—out of place. The constraints associated with a working class background and unequal schooling experiences continued to rear their head in graduate school, what Prieto (2001) terms “the stings of social hierarchy.” There was an academic language spoken in graduate school and social norms I had not yet learned. My peers seemed well versed in this new world. During a phone conversation with my parents, I shared my struggles about my journey through the doctoral program. I questioned whether the Ph.D. was for me. Was I selfish to pursue lofty dreams that required elite graduate school training? Would this pursuit be what I had hoped for? Would I be able to give back to my community in a way that was meaningful? My mom said, “Tú puedes…sigue adelante” (You can do it…keep moving forward). My dad repeated it and added, “Sigue adelante…nuestro camino es más largo” (Keep moving forward…our journey is much longer). My dad’s words revealed the depth and breadth of how different my path was—not only was it longer, but had twists and turns, hills and valleys making it immeasurably more challenging. My parents talked to me about their journey leaving their families behind in Mexico to work in the U.S., the linguistic and cultural barriers they faced, threats of deportation, the belittling and dehumanizing experiences they encountered. My pláticas with my parents were one of countless times where they supported me, reminded me where I came from, and inspired me to keep going.

I used these pláticas to inform my research where I investigate how K-12 teachers can affirm and access Latina/o students’ everyday life experiences for in-school learning. In my dissertation, I drew from critical pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Morrell, 2004) and oral histories to develop and implement curriculum with a sixth grade teacher about Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2006)—the array of skills, talent, and resources within students’ families and
communities. My research documented the ways youth wrote about their family histories of migration, and drew upon their Community Cultural Wealth for developing academic and critical literacies. I learned to use storytelling and CRT counterstorytelling as pedagogy in K-12 schools and simultaneously use it as an analytic tool in my educational research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

A family emergency prompted me to move back home and finish my Ph.D. degree from the Central Valley. Once again, during an integral point in my life, I came home to Modesto. My father was in a terrible car accident and suffered a traumatic brain injury coupled with a swift onset of dementia. He would never be the same again…and neither would we. Once an independent hardworking man working the nightshift at a fruit-packing factory and a masterful bricklayer by day, he had become completely dependent on full time care. His quick-witted nature became dormant; his dynamic oratory skills that brought our family stories to life were lost within the deep recesses of his mind. His visual spatial giftedness that made his brickwork an art form had morphed into cognitive and physical difficulties with daily functions like walking, talking, eating, dressing, and showering. I immediately felt committed to help my family, which meant I changed my academic plan and moved back home.

While this decision was right for me, it proved harder to accomplish than I had anticipated. Every time I tried to write, I hit a wall. I decided to revisit my own family stories. My dissertation was after all about family histories as pedagogical tools. I listened to old tapes of my pláticas with my father, relishing in his vibrant witty voice with his unique intonations, dramatic pauses, hand gestures, passion and humor. That is how I came across the excerpt below; it provided me the inspiration I needed to breathe life into my writing and reminded me of why I had started my Ph.D. in the first place.

Tu abuela nunca escuchó alguien decir “Yo quiero ser…”
Mucho menos alguien decir “Yo soy…”
Ojalá que algún día pudiera ver por lo menos el comienzo de un sueño
Sus circunstancias no le brindaban ese lujo.
Tú ya no vas a decir como ellas, “Quiero ver uno que es…”
Vas a decir, “Cuántos somos?”
Your grandmothers never heard anyone say, “I want to be…”

Much less someone say, “I am…”

I wish she could have one day seen even the beginning of a dream. Their circumstances did not afford them that luxury.

You will no longer say as they did, “I want to see someone who is…”

You will say, “How many of us are there?”

Germán Jiménez Vásquez

In this conversation, my dad talked to me about the lack of opportunity dealt to my grandmothers in Mexico and the social responsibility I had with a university education. He reflected on her life to convey that she didn’t grow up hearing people say they wanted to be doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, artists, etc.—let alone see anyone who actually became those things. He said dreams were a luxury not granted to the poor; instead of looking for people who could lead our community, we would now be among the leaders asking, “How many of us are there?” Through our conversations, I came to understand my life as one of having the opportunity to dream, to attain an education, and to inspire hope to (and with) our communities. I learned to use my education in the service of others, that my father had much wisdom to share with me, and to recognize that my journey began long before me—it has deep roots that extend to my parents, my grandmothers, and ancestors.

Mí carrera en la universidad/My University Career

After graduating with my Ph.D., I moved to Arizona to begin a career as a researcher and university professor. I struggled deciding whether or not to take the job—I had never lived outside of California and the anti-immigrant climate was increasingly hostile in Arizona. I asked my mom for advice. She shared her story of moving to America, “Pues claro, mija era difícil. Pero se va donde está el trabajo y sabíamos que sería lo mejor para ustedes” (Well, of course sweetheart it was hard, but one goes where the work is and we knew it was best for you). I spent four years in Arizona during the height of SB 1070, with experiences for a future testimonio. My life as a Chicana professor in Arizona was tumultuous, but it served to crystallize my commitment as a scholar-activist. A few years later, I accepted a position at the University of San Francisco; it was the fulfillment of a dream and full circle moment—being close to Modesto (and my family) while pursuing my career with colleagues dedicated to social justice.
As I finalized this testimonio at my parent’s kitchen table in Modesto, I was surrounded by memories—our UC degrees hanging on the living room walls next to my mom’s diploma from Mexico, my high school only a few blocks away, and the physical presence of my parents with a daily pláticas—all of which reinforced the beautiful struggle of my journey from child of Central Valley immigrants to the professoriate. It’s been nine years since my father’s accident and onset of dementia. I’ve learned to see him with new eyes. He may speak anxiously, with muscle spasms as he slowly enunciates his thoughts, he may mix up the dichos, at other times he’s almost as lucid and witty as his former self. Through it all his immense heart and wisdom will always be a part of him. And through his stories, he’ll always be a part of me.

My life experiences were wrought with many difficulties, but they also fueled and inspired me. I am no longer that little girl with the boyish haircut growing up in Modesto…but I’ll always be a daughter of Mexican immigrants who settled in the Central Valley, whose parents worked in the fields and fruit canning industry, whose dad’s hands created masterful brickwork, who experienced the pain of poverty and racism, whose mother’s education nurtured a love of learning, whose dad’s family stories permanently etched his wisdom and strength in her heart, who was nourished by her mother’s love and perseverance, who crossed (and crosses) multiple sociocultural borders everyday, and who weaves together the educación her family gave her, her experiential knowledge and her formal schooling for transformative power with Latina/o communities. I am a daughter of West Modesto, a daughter of the Central Valley, and a daughter of Mexican immigrants turned professor in the academy. My journey may or may not lead me to the Central Valley, but Modesto will remain and forever be home.
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Call to Action: Speaking to Educators on the Praxis of Testimonio and the Nopal Metaphor

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We may literally be too busy to notice or too concerned with the myriad tensions and needs in front of us—this is only normal. Yet, we can still provide Latin@ and Chican@ students and other students of color with moments (great and small) where an educator speaks to the very essence of their humanity and makes them believe it. That is what you can do. And that is what you can commit to doing after our time here together.

Hello and good morning. It is an absolute pleasure to be here with you today. I have been an educator in high school and university settings for a very long time and when offered this opportunity to speak with fellow educators who are interested in critical, anti-oppressive pedagogy I jumped at the chance. But I must apologize as I do not have a speech, at least not the one I planned on giving. Two recent events have made me question what it is that we actually do in the academy, and I thought that perhaps we might be able to make some sense of this together.

In the fall 2013 it was reported that a black, undergraduate student at a local public university had been the victim of hate crimes and systematic bullying at the hands of roommates and floor mates while on campus. On different occasions he had been harassed, tackled, had a bike lock closed around his neck, and was forced to live alongside a Confederate flag in the common area of his dorm (Murphy, 2013). The university president promised justice and attempted to acknowledge the obvious: "By failing to recognize the meaning of a Confederate flag, intervene earlier to stop the abuse or impose sanctions as soon as the gravity of the behavior became clear, we failed him. I failed him" (Kearny, 2013, para. 2). But it was soon discovered that the same president worked to hide “an in-depth study [that] found black students experienced troubling and sometimes racist behavior from
professors, coaches and other students” (Murphy, 2013, para. 1). A floor mate of the victim claimed that the abuse was not racist at all, but mere pranks and that she "grew up in the era where it (prejudice) doesn't seem present to us, it's just in the books. It doesn't seem like a big deal for us to do things like this...he's an easy target and he takes it well" (Bulwa, 2013, para. 16).

At roughly the same time of these revelations we learned about the passing of Nobel prize-winning author Doris Lessing. Lessing privileged and revered the story and the storyteller. Moreover, she identified their connection to the maintenance and constitution of our lives:

A need to tell and hear stories is essential to our species — second in necessity apparently after nourishment and before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home, almost none in silence...It is our stories, the storyteller, that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the mythmaker, that is our phoenix, what we are at our best, when we are our most creative. (D. Lessing, Nobel Prize acceptance speech, December 7, 2007)

However, as I stand in front of you today the words from Lessing’s (2008) preface to her novel, *The Golden Notebook* resonate too clear and painful for me to utter while alone:

It may be that there is no other way of educating people. Possibly, but I don’t believe it. In the meantime, it would be a help at least to describe things properly, to call things by their right names. Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this: You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself—educating your own judgment. Those that stay must remember, always and all the time, that they are
being molded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society. (p. xxi)

Lessing’s passage depicts a struggle that exists inside many students and scholars of color. She does not speak for all, I understand and accept that, but her words so graciously pay homage to those of us who struggle, remain, or vanish and reinvent when faced with an education. It is difficult to be and to learn in this world. Hegemony and supremacy make difficult educating towards critical awareness, and sometimes along that path bad things do happen. It is more than enough at times to make someone give up. At other times we simply fold our hands as we whisper, “How can I possibly begin to make sense of this?”

You see I prepared a speech but that one will no longer do. Knowing what I now know, we are in need of something different. We need to discuss how we begin to make sense of what happens and occurs while on the path towards an education. Since I am always grappling with the particular issues of race, place, and higher education, I thought it best to share what I know—what I have gathered, so that we may construct a better understanding of what is possible for our students and each other within the academy and beyond.

I am interested in discussing what it means to stand and teach in critical-solidarity with one another so that students who are traditionally marginalized might be better able to flourish the elements of their own humanity. I will do so by utilizing and explicating my research in testimonio, both as a process and product, as well as make suggestions as to what we can do, here and now, to begin to better meet the needs of Latin@ and Chican@ students.

**Why Testimonio?**

*Testimonio* is the intentional and rhetorical act of speaking and sharing one’s story, history or narrative with a specific focus towards that which is experienced in and around issues of bias, prejudice, oppression, otherness, marginalization, resistance, and survival (Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012; Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). In doing so it is also the practice of attempting to raise a critical consciousness by depicting the ways in which we are interconnected among related and seemingly unrelated narratives (Bernal et al., 2012).
With roots in “oral cultures and in Latin American human rights struggles” and Chicana/Latina movements (Bernal et al., 2012, p. 363) testimonio is a process, product and pedagogy where “we are able to hear and read each other’s stories…with the goal of achieving new conocimientos, or understandings” (p. 367).

Listening towards reflection and action are also fundamental to testimonio (Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, & Muñiz, 2012; Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). Reyes and Rodriguez (2012) further suggest that an objective of testimonio is to flourish critical listening and reflection as a means towards liberation (p. 527). This particular positioning of the audience/listener/observer is what Cruz (2012) identifies as an opportunity to “travel,” where the “listener or an audience member is given the opportunity to become complicit as an observer and as a witness…[w]ithin this methodology of travel, it is important to contextualize testimonio in a critical multiculturalism that is concerned with the praxis of anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies” (p. 462). Thus, it is not enough to simply hear, but one must be willing to (at least philosophically and critically) re-make hegemonic notions that fostered the realities of these testimonios to begin with. Negron-Gonzalez (2009) reminds us that conceptualizing hegemony and a narrative of counter-hegemony, is a continual process of making and re-making sense—“that consciousness is also dynamic and ever-changing. One of the key ways that this tension is worked out is through the personal-political practice of testimonios” (Negron-Gonzalez, 2009, p. 32). Perhaps a working-through is what is needed here today.

I tell you this because my hope is that through our time together perhaps we can begin to foster what scholars (Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, & Muñiz, 2012) who utilize testimonio have called reflexión:

*Reflexión* entails an examination of the inner self and sharing that inner self with a trusted dialogue partner. Through reflexión we move beyond self-reflection and self-inquiry toward a shared experience where our dialogue partners reflect our truths back to us as they share their own life journeys… reflexión helps us situate and explain how our lived experiences exist within a broader set of social and institutional structures. (p. 445)
I cannot enact this literally, of course, as I cannot have an individual conversation with each of you in attendance here today. Instead, I am interested in what might come from the sharing of two specific testimonios from Olvia and Axel, their actual names at their request. I will also share my general reactions and sense making in response to these testimonios.

And Then There Were Two

Recently I invited two wonderful and beautiful people, Olvia and Axel, to share their testimonios. Olvia identifies as Chicana and Axel as Latino. I asked them to share their experiences with education. I was intentionally vague about the definition of education as I am more and more interested in education that happens outside the walls of a classroom. What follows are excerpts of what they shared as well as thoughts I have about how we may be able to move towards productive pedagogies.

Olvia, 27

I met Olvia years ago at the offices of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund (HSF). I was a scholarship recipient and volunteer at HSF, and I quickly grew to like being around Olvia. A self-described smartass, she freely speaks her mind and often has me rolling in laughter. Olvia spoke about the guidance and messages she received about going to college:

My high school counselor discouraged me from going to college, because she didn’t think that I would be able to go to college. So she was one of those. And if anything that motivated me more. I totally coped an attitude with her. I was like wow, because she had said, and I had told her, after I had gotten my acceptance letter to SF state I handed it to her and said, “oh look, you know I got in and I was able to complete the application process by myself.” And I was really proud to show her. And she said something like, “Wow I didn’t think you were uhm, gonna get accepted.” And I was like typical smartass Olvia, you know, in high school and I was like, “I can’t wait to tell my Mom about your reaction.” She didn’t really say much after that.

So that was the kind of guidance I got during high school, but luckily I had a very supportive Mom, a very intuitive Mom because she’s a teacher so she
knew the ins and outs of the system. And she always told me don’t take any bullshit from your teachers. She was always there for me. She helped me a lot. She’s definitely my rock and she always encouraged me. I mean not going to college was never an option for me at home. She was a single mom and she went back to school as a single mom after she got divorced so she knows how hard it is. And she didn’t want me to go through that so she always encouraged me to go to college and follow through with everything I had to do at school.

Having that bit of background from my Mom, being told to not take any bullshit from my teachers, or anything like that, you know that kind of, that was always in the back of my head when I was in school. So I know, I know it kind of, it was good in that situation, but it probably wasn’t that good, because I really didn’t take a lot of my teachers seriously, but I did well academically. For me, I think it was the lack of motivated teachers, not all of them were like that, but the majority of my teachers in my high school were not very professional and they were, they were…burnt out, I mean I have to say. They were just burned out. They were there because they had to be there. And I mean, it was, it was one of those things where, you know you just did your work to get your good grades or you didn’t and the teachers just really didn’t care. It’s kind of like it just…it was a poor high school, uhm…in San Diego and the teachers really didn’t care. I had some teachers that were really engaging and did care, but the majority of them just didn’t—they were there but they weren’t present. You know what I mean?

Olivia embodies a can-do attitude that she attributes to her mother’s guidance and support. This attitude saved her from the clutches of an inept counselor and possibly others that might have derailed her high school and undergraduate education. She attended San Francisco State University where she says she took advantage of every opportunity available.

During our interview she described how she had recently been laid off from HSF due to downsizing and was currently temping and looking for work. She said she’d like to return to school to earn a teaching credential, but she is having a hard time justifying the cost of tuition. “The [local private] university was my top choice. I went to one of their open
houses and everything, but...the cost is so high. I just can’t afford that tuition at all.” I ask Olvia if she thinks that hard work and determination still pay off—if youth and young adults like her can still be all they can be, regardless of circumstance. “Of course we can. I have to believe we can, I mean...If we work hard enough anything is possible.” Her answer is strong and self-assured. The friend in me is with her: anything is possible. But the teacher in me, the teacher who happens to be a professor at this private university begins to think, “I will not have her in our class, in our department.” Through no fault of her own, Olvia is not able to pay the tuition for our program. She has done everything right and still become an example of what happens to good, hardworking people during a recession and on the path towards higher education. It is not her fault. But I begin to think about what we will miss out on in regards to the benefits of having students like her within our university. Olvia will find a program and earn her credential—that is not the issue—I know enough about her to see that nothing will stand in her way. But I am selfish, and I think about what we are missing out on, by pricing-out students like her. Are we then less successful in fulfilling the mission statement of our university and college?

Axel, 25

Axel and I met through mutual friends. I was immediately struck by this beautiful and sweet young man. Axel radiates love and positivity. Axel believed in paying for school himself and was able to leave his hometown in Arizona and attend school at a state university in Northern California. He refused to take out loans for fear that he might default and ruin his credit. During his junior year he was no longer able to afford tuition, room and board and he decided to drop out. His parents drove from Arizona to pick him up and they brought him home.

If you were to tell me, or if I were to of thought back then when I was 18, going to school, high school—actually I was 17 I hadn’t turned 18 yet, I’d always get phone calls from recruiters and I was basically like, “Fuck you guys. I’m never gonna go that route. I’m going to school, I’m going to college.” Oh little did I know, I went to school, I went to college...life’s a bitch. It’s hard. And like five years later went into that recruiting office ready to do this. I never thought I would be where I’m at. Uhm, my mom begged and pleaded with me to not join,
don’t do it, don’t do it. What do you need, what do you want? Like, I already
made up my mind, I already…I’m gonna do it. The day before I signed my
contract my mom sat me—she’s like, we’ll pay for your school.

Now, fast forward you know we struggled a lot, uhm…a lot, a lot growing up,
financially, uhm. Now it’s not…my parents aren’t very well off, they’re
comfortable. They’re not rich by any means. I mean they still drive old cars and
stuff but they live comfortably, uhm can travel and do what they want. So my
mom sat me down—you can finish school, you can finish your degree, you just
have to live at home and I was like, you know…I love my parents but I cannot
live at home any longer than I already had. And part of it is not that I don’t
want to live at home because I don’t want my parents to tell me what to do—
it’s not that. It’s the fact that I’m the youngest child and I don’t want to be living
at home. I’m like, you guys have done your job raising us, like you should enjoy
each other. You know, like my mom and step-dad they should enjoy each other.
They shouldn’t have to worry about this, you know, kid still trying to figure life
out. I was like I already made up my mind and this is what I’m gonna do. I
went in and signed my contract on the day of my birthday, my 23rd birthday.
We all celebrated by going skydiving. I’m 25 now. But I feel old, especially in
the military, because I came in, you know, roughly 5 years after most people
join. They join right out of high school. So we’re in boot camp and I’m like holy
cow these kids are so young. Like, you don’t realize how young 18 looks until
you’re in a room of 50 of them.

You know that was the first time I failed at something. When I left school and
dropped out, I felt like I let everyone down, I let myself down. And it took a long
time to get over it. Definitely being in the military helped me get over it. I feel
like now I am happy because I am doing something positive. I’m having a direct
impact on people. And now, everything I have gone through, everything that has
gotten me to the point where I am today, has helped me be able to help
someone else. Now, I’m a Corpsman [medic] in the Navy and these Marines
depend on us…they trust us with their lives.
Axel said he succeeds and fails on his own terms, but he is also very aware of how money and resources make different choices easier for some other folks. He sees his current situation as empowering and beneficial, especially when seen in relation to the rapport that is generated between a Marine and a Corpsman. Axel says, “You aren’t just given the nickname ‘Doc’ outright. And Marines don’t like us, they don’t like the Navy, but when you stick with it and like you hear them say, ‘Hey, here comes Doc,’ you know you’re in and that’s it.” Axel, like Olvia, seems to embody a persistence and commitment that (although it may not fit a traditional, hegemonic idea of what educational success looks like) enables self-assuredness and the discovery of the benefits and accomplishments to one’s own circumstance. He does not feel sorry for himself and he most definitely is not asking for pity. Instead, he sees how all that has transpired to get him to his current situation is actually a good thing. He takes care of injured soldiers in some of the most dangerous of situations, and he does so as an openly gay Latino. I don’t think I have ever encountered a more resilient spirit than he.

**Analysis and Suggestions**

Axel and Olvia are not failures and they do not see themselves as failures. Things may not have worked out as they had both planned, but they each view themselves as either doing something worthwhile or on the path towards realizing a better future for themselves. Olvia’s *testimonio* depicts how although one might encounter a gatekeeper such as an academic counselor, one is not beholden to that person’s biased notions of ability or deficit. Axel describes so beautifully how true fulfillment and empathy are able to flourish, even without a bachelor’s degree, as he helps Marines recover and repair themselves after injury. These elements from both *testimonia* are in part what makes perseverance and resilience possible. The ability to bounce back ‘cause you’re made like that—the ability to authentically recover from difficulty and adversity in ways that enable future success is key to keeping one foot in front of the other. So how can we take this and place it within situations so that Latin@ and Chican@ students and other students of color can feel empowered to be all they can be? As teachers we hold the key. And I think we hold a phenomenal amount of power when it comes to helping students feel heard, valued, and respected.
Praxis, Pedagogy and People-Skills

It is not an easy thing to be a teacher, no matter the grade level, even in lesser trying times. Politics, policies, and people seem to increasingly adversely encroach upon and threaten any holistic approach to educating and education for reasons that we are not always meant to understand. Sometimes educators aren’t listened to when it matters most. And even as many of us are asked to do exponentially more with significantly less, we do it. We show up. We do what we do not because it is easy but because it is fundamental, necessary work. Being present and facilitating a classroom when all things are attempting to pull us apart is what makes the teacher necessary in a time of doubt, disagreement, and danger. Violence, power, privilege, and access intersect with all things and suppressing dynamic conversations leaves us all in peril. The teacher is a facilitator, not a saint. Moreover, I believe they are something better. Teachers are wonderful, fallible, capable human beings and at their best they are weavers of critical thought, comprehension, and reasoned action. Simply put, teachers help people to help themselves. Moreover, “[t]o teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks, 1994, p. 130).

Pineau (1998) beautifully depicts the classroom as “spatial and temporal sites where bodies rub up against one another literally and metaphorically. Despite our best efforts to inhabit that space democratically, our bodies always, already, are molded by our different social and institutional status” (p. 131). The teacher as facilitator faces an immense task in working towards a holistic pedagogy, and our reach is never, always perfect. For those of us who “get it” and want to “get it,” we are reflexive to a fault as we strive towards equity within the classroom and beyond. These actions of making and re-making to teach away from marginalization, otherness, and towards inclusion is “[t]eaching as a performative act” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). It is the material manifestation of thought and communication in realness and reality. Imagine then what is possible when we teach towards the agency of our students of color. Imagine what we could achieve. Yes, sometimes “teaching is seen as a duller, less valuable aspect of the academic profession. This perspective on teaching is a common one. Yet it must be challenged if we are to meet the needs of our students, if we
are to restore to education and the classroom the excitement about ideas and the will to learn” (hooks, 1994, p. 12). The question now becomes, what do we do?

Testimonio as pedagogy means that the act of listening to and witnessing one’s narrative and testimony can lead to new understandings (Bernal et al., 2012) and that also requires a doing on your part. And I offer you a challenge. Many times as young scholars and teachers interested in equity and social justice we might get tired of just sitting and talking. I myself have fallen victim to this misplaced emotion. Calafell (2013) encourages that for scholars of color, simply being and existing within the walls of academia is intellectual activism and presence in itself. If we then absorb the testimonios that were shared today, in this academic space, what then is possible if we allow ourselves to think differently about how we view these particular groups of students? I am not letting you off the hook by simply encouraging you to ponder. No, instead, I am arguing that any informed and reasoned action or micro-praxis that we make today must first come from beginning to understand the particular realities and existences that have brought the Olvias and Axels into fruition. For if they are already whole and not broken, and if they are already amazing and wonderful while they are simultaneously discovering what the world has to offer them, then how can we as teachers navigate through our critical consciousness so that we see our time with students of color, no matter how brief, as pivotal in adding to their repertoire of critical thought, agency, and humanity. What can we do to help shine and not hinder their light?

Let me be clear with you. There are systems of hegemony and supremacy that have and will continue to make difficult, painful, and unrealistic the path towards education for our students of color. It may seem odd for me to tell you this. The system is broken in many ways, but all is not lost. Even amid color-blind racist policies and campus climate surveys that “prove” all is fine, there is a wealth of tools at our disposal as teachers within higher education. And I believe with every fiber of my being that we here today can make a difference with our own communicative actions.

The Nopal Metaphor

As I have been speaking with you today I have talked about students of color and specifically Latin@/Chican@ students, sometimes interchangeably. I want to focus in on our
Latin@/Chican@ students not only because I used to be one, a student that is, but I recently had the privilege and honor of working with a few colleagues on just this one thing. Sometimes the problems of this world are too big to handle, so at times it is best to begin by sitting down to work on one thing and that is what we did. We set out to create a method of approach that teachers could use in helping Latin@/Chican@ students conceptualize their agency and their success, without these things being tied to someone else’s definition or notion of who they are or what they could be. We generated what we call the “Nopal Metaphor.”

The Nopal Metaphor (Figure 1) is a symbol and visual representation of the intrinsic wealth within our Latin@ and Chican@ students. It is also a tool for better understanding the situated complexities within their educational experience, from a standpoint of assets and not deficits. It is made up of six tenets that in sum speak to how Latin@ and Chican@ youth and students can resist, persist, persevere, and remain resilient while on their educational path, no matter where the education takes place. Lastly, the Nopal Metaphor is a concept that allows teachers and students to begin to conceptualize that which is already intrinsic to every single child.

![Figure 1. The nopal metaphor. Image by Ricardo Sandoval](image)

**Tenets and Structure of the Nopal Metaphor**

1. The *nopal* as representative of connection—that by virtue of its architecture and shape, the *nopal* is constructed with multiple connections, interconnections, and overlays. So, too, are the realities and identities of Latin@/Chican@ youth as they simultaneously navigate issues of race, place, ethnicity, citizenship, gender-sex
identity, sexuality, socio-economic class, ability, and with differing degrees of power, privilege, and access. In this way there is a privileging and understanding of the critical intersectionality of identities that exist individually, socially, and institutionally.

2. The nopal as (re)generative—the nopal itself can be moved, split in two, or can donate a part of itself and that piece will be able to take root and flourish even in the harshest of conditions. This does not mean that systems, policies and practices that seek to separate and displace our youth are acceptable, but this tenet addresses how our youth need not be broken to the point of obliteration or beyond repair. Especially salient when looking at issues of nationality, citizenship, and the fracturing of families due to undocumented immigration, and although a fractured family is not ideal in the least, it is still a family and there is always the potential for nurturing and growth, even in the harshest of conditions.

3. The nopal as self-protective—picos and spines work to keep away major predators and harm, but nothing that grows in this world is ever completely safe. Instead, we can teach our young to enact brave spaces—situations and realities where one looks for support, affinity, and guidance among self-identified networks that teach and enact practices of critical self-care. Again, this does not imply that pain from inequity or bias be accepted, not at all. Instead we encourage Latin@/Chican@ youth (and adults) to seek out and nurture collaborations that grow strength and resilience in numbers.

4. The nopal as resilient—it may lay dormant, but it is never dead. Often times the nopal must conserve energy and resources when the environment has turned hostile. But with time, added water and room to grow the entirety of the plant itself will not only return to its previous size, but it can continue to grow and prosper. Not all environments are conducive to the growth and holistic nurturing of our Latin@/Chican@ students, as many of them have already experienced. But this does not negate their ability to adapt and thrive even in small and meaningful ways. A hostile environment does not define who they are and who they can choose to be.

5. The nopal as fundamentally and intrinsically unique—fundamental to its structure and growth is the reality that there will never be another one like it. And with time, the great uniqueness of the nopal is evident as it grows, completely and fundamentally
unique, like a giant fingerprint. Enabling our youth to see themselves as beautifully unique, especially within our collaborative and collectivistic cultures means that their variance can be seen as positive and not a threat. Whoever they choose to be and whatever their results, no one else could ever replace who they are and what they bring into this world. In essence, they are magical and quite real.

6. The nopal as the bearer fruit— the nopal is meant to flower and fruit, a celebration of what it takes to exist and thrive in this world. No fruit and no flower is ever exactly the same. Latin@/Chican@ students can begin to determine what success looks like and feels like for themselves. It is not about preconceived notions of perfection and success, instead, they are able to see themselves and their movements through this world as part of a path towards and through education (inside the classroom and out) as successful accomplishments in a world than can be of their own making. They can blossom and thrive and this should/will run in direct counter to dominant hegemonic discourses.

Your Call to Action

As educators you must teach, speak, listen, interact, console, encourage, push, and facilitate in line with what this metaphor dictates in regards to the potentiality of every Latin@/Chican@ student. I am asking you to see your praxis, pedagogy, and people-skills used consistently in ways that do not diminish the light within each of these students. I used to believe this kind of work was impossible, but it is not. Let me explain. What I am asking of you today, my fellow educators interested in critical, anti-oppressive pedagogy—especially and specifically at a time when bad things continue to happen on our campuses, between students, staff, faculty, deans, and presidents—is to begin to see that every movement you make in this world is an opportunity to constitute a living example of your moral politics (hooks, 1998) as you treat and teach others in-line with that which is socially just and severely interested in diminishing inequity. These micro-movements and small actions that I term micro-practices are valuable, because as teachers we do not always know how long we have our Latin@/Chican@ students—not all of them. Simply put: some stay and remain while others dissipate, disappear, or vanish. Some never even make it to our office or classroom. And some interact with us in moments that are as fleeting as hummingbirds. We
may literally be too busy to notice or too concerned with the myriad tensions and needs in front of us—this is only normal. Yet, we can still provide Latin@ and Chican@ students and other students of color with moments (great and small) where an educator speaks to the very essence of their humanity and makes them believe it. That is what you can do. And that is what you can commit to doing after our time here together.

Axel and Olvia’s testimonios are testament to how once students leave our halls, they are out in the world whether we consciously remember it or not. We owe it to our students and to one another to use our everyday interactions as fodder for authentic, humanistic, and altruistic communicative practices so that every student, and especially our students of color, moves through this world feeling validated, encouraged, respected, and heard.

It is true. The world does not always make sense. And bad things do indeed happen. But all is not lost, ever. You can use your voice, your presence, to speak towards someone’s humanity. I leave you with that gift and with that challenge.
References


Testimonios Informing a Human Rights and Social Justice Education Framework

Linda Prieto, Ph.D.
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I have written testimonios (politically urgent life stories) alone, and in collaboration with others, as a method and political tool that conveys my own and others’ lived and professional experiences (Alarcón, Guardia Jackson, Prieto, Rodríguez-Arroyo, 2011; Prieto & Villenas, 2012, 2015; Prieto, 2015 a, b, c; Prieto, Chapa, Castro, G., Castro, N., Araujo, forthcoming; Prieto & Niño, 2016). The recalling and documenting of testimonio “as a conceptual and methodological tool that transforms cultural and personal narratives into critical social analysis” (Fuentes & Pérez, 2016) is not an easy process. Often tears, coraje (both courage and rage) and laughter accompany this process—a transformative healing process in of itself from which one can draw strength and agency.

Gracias Dr. Emma Fuentes for your kind invitation to put forth a concluding essay for this special issue on testimonio for the Association of Mexican American Educators’ journal. I have enjoyed reading all of the pieces and through this process of reading and holding space with the testimoniantes I have also, cried, laughed, and healed. In the introduction, Fuentes and Pérez (2016) make a stellar contribution to our understanding of testimonio as methodology and pedagogy; they bring forth the notions of sanctuary and creative resistance as two additional frameworks of testimonio. They also identify how “transformative movements are weaving together a collective story, or testimonio, that makes the impossible possible by humanizing those whose stories are not told, whose realities are not seen, and whose lives are too often disregarded” (p. 7).

With Chandler’s (2016), “A call to action,” I revisited the difficult process I underwent last spring as I decided to leave my position in the academy as a tenure-track professor to return to my home state of California and forge a new chapter in my life where I currently serve as the Vice President of Programs at a nonprofit committed to delivering high-quality mathematics and college readiness programs to middle and high school students from low-income backgrounds who will be the first-generation in their family to attend college. Many times I questioned what others would think of my leaving the academy, but like Olvia and Axel,
I too am at a place where I no longer judge myself by others’ standards and am fulfilled knowing that my work continues to positively impact the lives of underserved youth. Chandler describes Olvia and Axel’s testimonios as examples of perseverance and resilience and highlights their “ability to bounce back ‘cause you’re made like that—the ability to authentically recover from difficulty and adversity in ways that enable future success is key to keeping one foot in front of the other” (p. 87-88). The nopal metaphor and accompanying six tenets strengthen the author’s charge for us all to help others recognize, name, and foster similar talents in the students and communities of promise that we strive to serve.

“Nuestro camino es más largo” by Jiménez (2016) pulls and draws me in through our parallel experiences of growing up en el Valle Central—the Central San Joaquin Valley—de California. My hometown is Reedley, about 120 miles, o dos horas, southeast of Modesto and about ⅛ its population size. I first published my own (2009) experiences as The stings of social hierarchies: From the Central San Joaquin Valley vineyards to the ivy walls. To fully understand Jiménez’s testimonio, she invites us to witness her parents’ experiences in the U.S., including threats of deportations which illustrate “the pain of living in a foreign land.” Their experiences of working in the agricultural fields and fruit packing sheds echo my own families’—our testimonios entwine. Jiménez and I also share similar reasons for pursuing graduate studies and careers impacting the educational opportunities afforded to others from like backgrounds. I too (Prieto, 2015 a, b, c) describe the ways our camino es más largo in the academy, not only graduate school. The sharing and documenting of our testimonios as mujeres, Chicanas/Latinas, and academics from working-class backgrounds is essential to informing various educational policy issues, such as those that inform teacher and campus leader preparation and college access and completion programs. As Jiménez returned home during her doctorate program to help her family after her father’s traumatic brain injury, I also returned home during my program when my mother required surgery and full-time care. Jiménez recalls a conversation with her father and eloquently states, “Through our conversations, I came to understand my life as one of having the opportunity to dream, to attain an education, and to inspire hope to (and with) our communities” (p. 75). It is not until we voice our testimonios that we allow ourselves and others to find solace, strength, and learning a través de nuestras vidas, penas, y alegrías. I look forward to reading her future work documenting her testimonios como scholar activist. ¡Arriba Valle Central!
Ochoa’s (2016) piece beautifully and respectfully sets forth to “explore how the media and legal system both portray and affect [the unauthorized immigrant] population and utilize testimonio as a tool that challenges the morality of our current immigration discourse that continues to oppress these specific people” (p. 52). Esperanza Emmanuel and Mario/Marisol’s testimonios of their experiences cruzando la frontera, living in fear of immigration raids, and deportations remind me of the many shared by my own family—parents, tíos, tías, primos, primas y abuelos. On one occasion my sister and older brother who were born in the United States cruzaron la frontera como indocumentados because my parents were unauthorized to live or work in the United States at the time and were unable to cross them any other way. I was still developing in my mother’s womb at the time. “I grew up in California during a time, much like the present, when immigration raids were common. For me and other children of immigration, the raids presented fears and frustrations that did not enter the classroom discourse” (Alarcón et al., 2011, p. 378). Our experiences remained, as Ochoa states, “in the shadows”—invisible to our classroom teachers.

I remember the immigration raids in the fields, my parents running into the adjoining orchards and fields as they sent us to hide in the tall grass until the migra disappeared and took other youth Mexicano immigrants. The raids reminded us of our lower social status. I was afraid and disgusted. Why would anyone want to take our parents from us? Didn’t they see we weren’t doing anything wrong? We were simply working, trying to make a living. (Prieto, 2009, p. 72)

I too hope our experiences and narratives “position the voices, experiences, and stories of undocumented immigrants at the forefront of research and analysis” (Ochoa, 2016, 52).

In "La receta del testimonio mole," Pérez (2016) presents the resilience testimonio of three folklórico dancers.

Within the three folklórico testimonio themes of comunidad, familia and auto-estima [emerge]. The dancers address coming out as gay men, finding friendships, and learning about cultural history through a lens of community cultural wealth and in a strengths-based approach to understanding their lived experience. (p. 44)

The testimoniantes highlighted here share how their ties to dancing with and participating in the folklórico group allowed them to construct an hermandad from which they could be true to themselves and also reimagine a new sense of self. Dance is also recognized as “an expressive
medium through which humans externalize their feelings towards the supreme energy, sending symbolic messages through corporal movements and thus creating a harmonious link with the earth and the universe” (Lara, 2004, p. 61, translated by Claeys and Prieto as cited in Prieto, Claeys, & Lara, 2015, p. 131).

During my own undergraduate career at Stanford, I held leadership positions with and participated in organizations (e.g., Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (M.E.Ch.A.), Ballet Folklórico, Project Motivation) housed in El Centro Chicano, which provided opportunities to learn and share Chicana/Latino culture, history, and traditions. These spaces and experiences underscored my identity as a Chicana and raised my consciousness to act for social justice (Prieto, 2009, p. 78).

Our responsibility then becomes to be mindful of how schools and community-based organizations can tap into this strengths-based approach present in folklórico and danza to help students of color, especially young queer Latin@\(\text{s}\), learn about their identities, develop a sense of cultural pride, gain leadership skills, improve their mathematics skills through counting and rhythms, and provide them with a safe place to belong.

Pour-Khorshid’s (2016) article invites us to “travel with [the H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color] as [they] engage in deep, reflective, and powerful storytelling that bridges [their] lived experiences to theory, love, healing, and transformative praxis in teacher professional development” (p. 20). Similarly, other testimonios by engaged educators of color in K-12 teacher and campus leader preparation programs (Prieto & Niño, 2016; Prieto & Villenas 2012, 2015; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013) examine who we are, how we “know,” and how we teach for wholeness, social justice, and liberation. “We highlight the powerful and fruitful tensions of these interconnections in addressing our curricular struggles and innovations, professional identities and scholarly trajectories” (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013, p. 514). Here, Katina, Nick, and Farima share their commitments to young POC (People of Color) and how they draw from their own lived experiences to understand the inequities and injustices the youth they work with face on a daily basis. “These three [testimonios] serve as examples of the deep, raw, painful and empowering racialized experiences we carry as educators of Color” (p. 28). The testimoniantes identify love—radical love and collective liberation—as central to their urgent stories:
“they do aspire to love themselves and their histories for all its laughter and tears,”
“the love we all shared fed my spirit through the madness,"
“love is what brought me back,”
“It was their love and courage that reminded me of why I couldn’t quit.”

Likewise in research where I explore how aspirantes—Spanish/English bilingual education teacher candidates—(Prieto, 2014) and maestras’ (Prieto, 2013)—Latina bilingual education teachers’—testimonios shape their beliefs, values, and approaches to teaching, amor (love, including a pursuit for social justice), surfaces as one of the six cultural strategies they draw upon to employ “what I term, una conciencia con compromiso—a process by which they understand, nurture, and develop their commitment to community” (p. 167).

The process of testimonio involves at least two individuals, the testimoniante who must be strong enough to make themselves vulnerable in their sharing and reliving of their experiences, and the witness who must both be willing to hold space as the testimoniante shares and then commit themselves to working towards alleviating the social injustices the testimoniante has experienced. This process is usually painful to both re-live and witness, but it is also a necessary part of our healing and recognition of our shared humanity and perseverance. In doing so we situate “individual narratives within a larger collective experience simultaneously marked by oppression, agency, and resistance” (Fuentes & Pérez, 2016, p. 7).

As Alarcón et al., (2011) state:

To read and to listen to these stories is to commit to another kind of understanding—one of solidarity—of the challenges of language and assimilation, of gender and race and the violence of patriarchy, of the experiences of being treated as an “alien” in one’s own country. Testimonio requires a deep learning, necessitating an openness to give oneself to the other. It requires what Emmanuel Levinas (1994) described as “receiving the lesson so deeply [that] the lesson of truth is not held in one consciousness. It explodes toward the other” (p. 80). (p. 370)

Our educator “testimonios and Latina/Chicana feminist perspectives can rearticulate pedagogies of nepantla—a space of frustration, discomfort, and always improvised visionary modes of teaching and learning” (Prieto & Villenas, 2012, p. 412). It is my hope then that they can also help us continue to address the teacher of color shortage through purposeful recruitment,
induction, and retention as well as how to better prepare all in the field to become culturally efficacious educators.

The poems included in this special issue by Hang and Muñoz are courageous examples of borderland testimonios. Hang highlights notions of belonging and longing to belong, of countering the invisibility many of us from diverse backgrounds experience here in the U.S.—in and out of schools, of being questioned and simultaneously dismissed, and of the relationships between naming, identity, and culture. I see you, Rhummanee.

Muñoz’s poem resonates of a similar strength. Her testimonio centers around her madrina—a fictive motherly kin—who answers her call with encouraging prayers filled with generations of hopes and dreams. She reminds us to draw upon our ancestral wisdoms; something every testimoniante does. For a testimonio is never crafted in isolation, never a representation of just one person or one voice. Muñoz (2016) writes,

Trust me when I say that your story
yours and yours
belongs to all of us (p. 109).

I write of my own ancestral connections, “Sometimes I am like the breeze that carries my abuelita’s (grandma’s) untold stories across the lands and whispers them in my ear” (Alarcón et al., 2011, p. 378). My testimonios and the testimonios of others that I try to represent are always laced with reflections of the present and past to inform the future.

In 2015 my sister published her first book titled, An (im)possible life: Poesia y testimonio in the borderlands. It is a collection of bilingual poems and short stories where she, as the testimoniante, retells her own “life recuerdos (memories) with the intention of creating spaces of light, love, and healing for individuals and community” (Prieto, E., 2015, n.p.). Sharing of the creative literary craft indeed carves out spaces for healing—sometimes like torrents crashing against rock, but nonetheless we must continue to release so others can relate—knowing that with each passing day we can all heal.
References


I once used to feel I didn't belong
My name singled me out
So I let go of something I didn't even understand for a while
I know now
My identity is my story
My name is more than just a Sanskrit Buddhist word
My name is more than a cultural marker
My name carries with it
Who I am
Khmai, Southeast Asian, American
My name is Rhummanee

And upon meeting me
As soon as they hear “Rhummanee”
Their curiosity peaks
“What are you?”
I actually like the guessing game that follows
This bit of information
You think
Could give you insight to who I am
I'm more than a simple answer

SEA, me
I feel for those who feel that
Parents just don’t understand you
Cuz my family just doesn’t understand me
No, really
Sometimes they can’t understand
English was not my first language
But now its rhythm
Bounces off my tongue like double dutch
I never miss a beat
I do communicate in Khmai
But I am the daughter of a daughter
Of a peasant
So I'm limited by the big words
Of educated people
Grandma,
I don’t know how to tell you what I studied in college
But I am a speaker of my native tongue
And you can bet I'll say and spell
Khmai with an “-ai”
Instead of an “-er”
Then give you its Romanized equivalent
My own resistance to
White faces who colonized my people’s land
I promise you won’t colonize my speech too
I am Khmai, Cambodian
I hang its red, white, and blue
Proudly from the rearview mirror of my car
But knowing
There’s another red, white, and blue
That made Cambodia a country in the first place

SEA, her
From the moment
She stepped foot on this soil
She worked to find better days
Promising her children
They’d live better lives
Hopefully never having to struggle
To survive like she did
Her children,
What’s left of them,
Glimmers of hope
In her eyes,
Are now her only chances of
Keeping that hope alive
But no one said it would be easy
Tears down her cheeks
Form rivers of sorrow
As she remembers just tryna live til tomorrow
And the sounds of the Killing Fields
She escaped
Still echo on Oakland streets
She still works to find better days
Through jobs that pay
Just enough
Just to get by

SEA, him
He dropped out in the 9th grade
And found family in friends then
School was hard
But protecting himself was harder
His second refuge became the colors he lived by
And the letters he claimed
It’s not his fault he got caught up
It’s not his fault he was brought up
Feeling like there were no options
Been to more funerals
Than school dances
Now wishing ICE gave second chances
Before being sentenced
To a home he’s never known

SEA, us
We are no model minority
Nor do we benefit from the title
Our motherlands
Raped by French faces
And left in unstable dust
Gave birth to Secret Wars
And Killing Fields
Shattered homes
Shattered hope
Those who lived through it
Relive it in their dreams daily

And after all that
They survived
And we’re still surviving

See me
Tryna lift up my CAMmunity
I have seen adversity
but it won’t even get the worst in me

I once used to feel I didn’t belong
My name singled me out
But I’ve reclaimed what I now understand
SEA, me
I know history
I know herstory
And this was part of my story
SEA, me
See Rhummanee
My identity is more than a simple answer
My name is Rhummanee
Nice to meet you
“Viento”

By Olivia Muñoz

I visit my madrina
and she says
‘When I pray for You
I pull right down to earth
all
the saints
from the sky’
I imagine her a superhero
gusts of wind billowing in her bata
blowing back her dangling earrings
and of course I know exactly what she means

An ancestral power has been cemented between bricks
and has eroded mountains and
has faded the overwhelming shallowness of paint
That thing we do—
that forming of sweet words—
has turned our teeth from gates to light

Trust me when I say that your story
yours and yours
belongs to all of us
That curl that escapes
from your heart to
your tongue
it is ours
a resonant ovation
So let out a llanto
or a breath or a whisper—
it is already part of a storm
being called upon
by my praying godmother
already un viento eterno
it is necessary

We are bound by locked eyes
and once you
gasp.

speak.

I will braid your words into my hair
Author Biographies

Vincent Chandler
Vincent Chandler is adjunct lecturer in communication studies at City College of San Francisco. He attended San Francisco State University to earn his B.A. and M.A. in Communication Studies. He has taught courses at the intersection of communication studies, rhetoric and composition in high school settings for JCYC/Upward Bound, Tall Ship Education Academy for Girls and at San Francisco State University, Berkeley City College, UC Berkeley and at the University of San Francisco. Vincent’s pedagogy and praxis are borne from Black feminist thought and critical, anti-oppressive pedagogies.

Emma Fuentes
Emma Fuentes is an Associate Professor and Department Chair of the International and Multicultural Education in the School of Education and the University of San Francisco. Her research encompasses the areas of urban education, critical race praxis, social movements, educational anthropology and participatory action research. As an educator and researcher, she is engaged in understanding how race, gender, socio-economic status, language, power and privilege intersect to shape experiences in and out of school.

Rosa Jiménez
Rosa M. Jiménez is an Assistant Professor of International and Multicultural Education in the School of Education at the University of San Francisco. The Spencer Foundation has funded her research, which examines K-12 classroom pedagogies and theoretical principles necessary for enacting critical language education and culturally responsive learning. She centers her research on family stories and autoethnographic counterstories with Latina/o youth, immigrant students, and ‘English learners’. She has twenty years of experience working with K-12 public schools and Latina/o communities in various contexts as a bilingual social studies teacher, literacy coach and educational researcher.
Laura Ochoa

Laura Ochoa obtained a B.A degree in International Relations and Spanish from San Francisco State University in 2008. She pursued her Master’s Degree at the University of San Francisco in International and Multicultural Education and is in the process of applying for her doctoral degree in Ethnic Studies. For the past years, Laura has taught Spanish/ESL classes in different parts of the world. Her current research interests are in human rights, women’s rights, gender equity, and notions of perspectives located in the borderlands of Latino cultures. Laura Ochoa currently lives in San Jose and is a passionate traveler.

Manuel Alejandro Pérez

Manuel Alejandro is a doctoral candidate in the International and Multicultural Education program at the University of San Francisco. His research explores testimonios of identity, agency, and comunidad at the intersection of art, danza, and higher education. His prior degrees are in intercultural communication and Ethnic studies. Manuel Alejandro is the Dean of Equity Programs & Pathways at American River College in Sacramento, California. He is also a founding member and co-artistic director of Grupo Folklórico Los Alteños, a Sacramento-based non-profit performing company. His scholar practitioner framework is informed and supported by the luchadores, amantes de revolución, and lovers of justice within our comunidades.

Farima Pour-Khorshid

Farima Pour-Khorshid is a grassroots social justice teacher organizer, bilingual kindergarten teacher, and PhD student in the department of Education at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). Her research focuses on the teacher-student diversity gap in public education and grassroots, critical professional development approaches to support and sustain teachers of color committed to social justice. She received a Masters of Science in Education with an emphasis in Childhood Studies at California State University, East Bay and a Masters of Arts with an emphasis in Language, Literacy and Culture at the University of California, Santa Cruz.
**Linda Prieto**

Linda Prieto is the Vice President of Programs with ALearn, a nonprofit providing college readiness programs to middle and high school students from low-income backgrounds who will go on to become first-generation college students. Prior to ALearn, Linda served as a faculty member preparing aspiring teachers in the areas of bilingualism and biculturalism. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Sociology from Stanford, a Masters of Education from Harvard, and a Ph.D. in Curriculum & Instruction with an emphasis on Cultural Studies in Education and a Graduate Portfolio in Mexican American Studies from the University of Texas at Austin.

**Rhummanee Hang**

Rhummanee Hang is a performance artist and educator who was born and raised in Oakland, California. Since the age of 13, she has honed her dance, theatre, and spoken word skills as part of performance and dance companies in both Oakland and Sacramento. Rhummanee is currently pursuing her Masters in International & Multicultural Education at the University of San Francisco. She now serves as the Community Health Specialist at Banteay Srei, an Asian Health Services program that works with young Southeast Asian American women who have been or are at risk of being sexual exploited.

**Olivia Muñoz**

Olivia Muñoz is a doctoral student in the International and Multicultural Education program at the University of San Francisco. Her research examines the ways in which undocumented college students use the arts for political action and social change. Olivia has worked as a student affairs professional in residence life, including the Fall 2016 Voyage of Semester at Sea. A former news reporter, Olivia has a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from Central Michigan University and a Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from California State University, Fresno.
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