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The Power of Testimonio Pedagogy: Teaching Chicana Lesbian Fiction in a Chicana Feminisms Course at a Predominantly White Institution in the Midwest

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Abstract

In this essay I extend Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies to demonstrate using testimonio pedagogy to teach Chicana lesbian fiction: *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* opened up dialogical spaces for students as pensadores to critically examine the impact of racialized gender and sexual normativity within Chicano culture. Exploring the significance of students as pensadores using testimonio pedagogy cultivates pathways of epistemic disobedience that should be understood as responses to institutional power. I suggest testimonio pedagogy mediates marginalization by breaking down the false dichotomy between students and teachers, cultivates feminist consciousness-raising, and refuses hegemonic conceptualizations of schooling.

Keywords: Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies, testimonio pedagogy, Chicana lesbian fiction, Chicana feminisms

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Caminos of Testimonio Pedagogy: Theorizing the Flesh

Testimonio pedagogy is my praxis that serves as a compass for teaching and learning with my students. Rather than a compass that directs north, south, east, or west, testimonio pedagogy directs cartographies of non-dominance, non-hierarchy, reclamation, and solidarity. “*Testimonios* focus on collective experiences of conditions that have contributed to oppression, as well as the agency of those who suffer under these conditions. As such, *testimonio* is a pedagogical tool that lends itself to a form of teaching and learning that brings the mind, body, spirit, and political urgency to the fore” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 367). Therefore, testimonio pedagogy offers a way to not merely document my experiences and share practices of *sobrevivir* and of getting there *cuando no hay camino* but also to claim my own epistemic disobedience in a theory of the flesh. The telling is political (Blackwell, 2011). My use of testimonio pedagogy is informed by Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) conceptualization of a mestiza consciousness that is “reimagining a theory of feminist practice that is enacted by a Chicana lesbian whose movement between and among different worlds generates a subject with agency rather than subordinate abject positionalities” (Diaz-Kozlowski, 2015, p. 89). I contribute to scholarship that breaks down false dichotomies between teachers and students (Cortez, 2015; Cruz, 2012; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003; Love, 2019; Torrez, 2015), refusing students as consumers, teaching as transactional, and the academy as a marketplace wedded to hegemonic standardization (Giroux, 2011; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000). I do this by putting into practice theories of the flesh to re-center voice and agency in the relationships between teachers and students, curriculum and pedagogy, and learning and community.

A theory of the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience:

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.

We are the feminists among the people of our culture.

We are often the lesbians among the straight.

We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words.

(Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 23)

Through testimonio as pedagogy I offer insights that build upon the socio-political historical interventions of fellow Chicana/Latina feminists that continue to reimagine equity driven research, teaching, and learning and theorize from those standpoints:

Testimonio is and continues to be an approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one's life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising. In bridging individuals with collective histories of oppression, a story of marginalization is re-centered to elicit social change. (Delgado Bernal et. al, 2012, p. 364)

Using testimonio pedagogy in this essay bridges the epistemic disobedience I witnessed my students cultivate in my Chicana Feminisms course with my own. Walter D. Mignolo (2009) articulates his argument for epistemic disobedience in this way:

My humble claim is that geo- and body-politics of knowledge has been hidden from the self-serving interests of Western epistemology and that a task of decolonial thinking is the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued, and decolonial options to allow the silences to build arguments to confront those who take 'originality' as the ultimate criterion for the final judgment. (p. 160)

Mignolo's scholarship in conversation with Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies have helped me recognize the significance of using testimonio pedagogy to teach Chicana lesbian fiction in a Chicana Feminisms course at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Midwest. Using testimonio pedagogy enables my epistemic disobedience as an ongoing practice that uproots hegemonic conceptualizations of schooling by affirming the brown body is a source of knowledge, the linkages between marginalized subjectivities and experiences are productive tensions, and theory is mediated through everyday experiences. Testimonio pedagogy showcases my epistemic disobedience as embodied resistance that must be understood as a response to white heteropatriarchal institutional power.

Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies (Cruz, 2006) are particularly significant as it relates to epistemic disobedience because they challenge Eurocentric conceptualizations of schooling that pervasively use deficit theories to normalize the experiences of Chicanas/Latinas and other marginalized groups within education as lacking. Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies specifically contribute to refusing and challenging deficit theories of Latino students in education by

reimagining culturally specific ways of organizing teaching and learning in informal sites such as the home and community that embrace Chicana and Latina ways of knowing and generating knowledge that go beyond formal schooling (Darder & Torres, 2013; Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011; Elenes, 2000; Valencia, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). Using testimonio pedagogy to theorize the significance of my students becoming pensadores teaching Chicana lesbian fiction in a Chicana Feminisms course demonstrates queer modes of disruption with Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies is the insistence that the everyday experiences of survival, resistance, compliance, and dis/identification must count as knowledge. Therefore, testimonio pedagogy mediates marginalization², my own and my students, by breaking down false dichotomies between teachers and students so that we confront loss, alienation, and powerlessness and restore connection to ourselves and one another that points towards a practice of healing and learning rooted in the body.

Catalysts of Testimonio Pedagogy: The Pieces I Am³

On the morning of August 5th, 2019, I was sitting at my desk grading final exams. Suddenly the Twitter notifications on my cell phone began to ping. I glanced down to see at the age of 88 Toni Morrison had died. I sat in disbelief. I fell backwards into a memory, recalling a significant trip to the public library when I turned eleven years old.

Sometimes I shuffled up and down the aisles of books, head titled sideways, reading every title, fingers touching every book's spine. Other times I marched to the center of the library, pulling out the drawers of the catalog acting like I knew what I was looking for. This day was special. At eleven years old my mom and I walked together to the library. I was running. My mom was walking. But because I have such a short stride it all evened out. I normally walked to the library by myself which if you think about it was both transgressive and remarkable. Where else could an eleven-year-old brown queer girl go without being accompanied by her little brother, her step-dad, or her mom? I had been waiting for this day since before time existed in its colonial construction. I walked into the public library with a swagger that would

² Marginalization is a process by which members of a certain community have historically been and continue to be denied access to dominant decision-making processes and institutions; stigmatized by their identification; isolated or segregated; and generally excluded from control over the resources that shape the quality of their lives. Marginalization occurs in part when some observable characteristic or distinguishing behavior shared by a group of individuals is systematically used within the larger society to signal the inferior and subordinated status of the group (Cohen, 1999).

³ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9358206/>

have made the baddest Chingona want to take off her hoops. I signed my name in cursive on my first library card.

Initially, I turned to books out of escape from abuse, but that changed after I got my own library card. My stepfather physically beat me throughout my childhood and adolescence because I had the audacity to repeatedly question his absolute authority as a white man. Pero, soy lo que soy. Books became my respite, nourishing my spirit while tempering a rage that seethed. Words became my fuel, reading my superpower. During my adolescence the library became my homeplace—a site of resistance and liberation struggles (hooks, 1990). Books became a place where my imagination, my curiosity, and my body could soar. I read and I wrote to save my own life. Yes, my life. Soy chingona, y que? I found Toni Morrison's fiction at the public library as a brown queer girl, but I didn't understand the depth of her writing. But when I read, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison, 1973, p. 92), I wanted to make Sula Peace a mix tape and ask her if I could hold her hand. None of my high school teachers or college professors incorporated Morrison's writing into their curricula. Defiantly reading Morrison's books on my own led me to literature written by Chicana and Latina writers such as Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Isabel Allende, Julia Alvarez, and Helena Maria Viramontes. The writings of Black and brown women exposed me to a genealogy of women of color that I did not have the vocabulary to name as feminist until decades later. Reading fiction by Black and brown women taught me writing is a way to name the conditions that contribute to nuances of oppression and cultivates agency for women of color under those conditions. They taught me that writing is power. I stopped grading final exams, logged into Hulu, and watched the documentary *The Pieces I Am* for the rest of the morning.

It took a week to make the epistemic connections between Toni Morrison the writer–editor and Tanya Diaz-Kozlowski the teacher–scholar. Midway through the documentary, Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin and Hilton Als both point out when Toni Morrison worked at Random House as an editor she strategically published the writing of Black women writers such as Gayle Jones, Lucille Clifton, Toni Cade Bambara, and Angela Davis. I kept coming back to Toni Morrison's strategic decisions as an editor at Random House to publish the writings of Black women and the significance of her writing throughout my life as feminist consciousness-raising. Two things came into focus: do what you can where you are and the power of fiction. I grabbed the copy of my Chicana Feminisms syllabus. I realized I needed to make a change. Here's why.

Do What You Can Where You Are: Feminist Consciousness-Raising

Toni Morrison's strategic decision as an editor to publish the writings of Black women challenged me to reevaluate the conceptual framework of my Chicana Feminisms course. Toni Morrison's writing and strategic decisions as an editor are linked to a genealogy of women of color writers whose larger project of epistemic disobedience I know well. The Combahee River Collective along with the authors of *Some of Us Are Brave* and *This Bridge Called My Back* refused the hegemonic notion that gender is the primary analytic of oppression for women, illuminating how gender subordination is produced, represented, and resisted among women. It was women of color writers who first challenged the notion that *woman* is a universal category of analysis and identity while unmaking the embedded racism within hegemonic feminism, refusing the claim that all women experience sexism in the same ways. This genealogy of women of color writings effectively re-conceptualized *difference*⁴ as a feminist concept that must be applied to the power relationships between and among women, not merely between white cisgender heterosexual able-bodied men and white cisgender heterosexual able-bodied women. These women of color genealogy writings are the foundation for what Brittany Cooper (2018) writes in her book *Eloquent Rage* as intersectionality, "the idea that we are all integrally formed and multiply impacted by the different ways that systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy affect our lives" (p. 99). In this way Women of Color writers reclaim and reimagine feminist consciousness-raising that is attentive to difference, employs intersectional analyses of power, commits to political activism, justice, and equity, and contends the body is a site of knowledge and agency.

I reviewed my Chicana Feminism's course reading list and wrote down four names: Ana Castillo, Emma Pérez, Cherríe Moraga, and Carla Trujillo. I decided to incorporate Emma Pérez's book *Gulf Dreams* and Carla Trujillo's book *What Night Brings* because I knew their fiction could compliment the non-fiction essays⁵ I already used in the course. I had a hunch that reading fiction written by these two Chicana lesbian feminists would create opportunities for

4 Audre Lorde's (1984) essay: "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" is integral to teaching feminist theory because of how she challenges hegemonic feminism and re-conceptualizes difference.

5 Already in the Chicana Feminisms course reading list were: Carla Trujillo's (1991) essay "Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community", Carla Trujillo's (1998) essay "La Virgen de Guadalupe and Her Reconstruction in Chicana Lesbian Desire", and Emma Pérez's (1991) essay "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor."

my students to partake in the power of *sitios y lenguas*.⁶ Teaching *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* could fundamentally change the essence of my Chicana Feminisms course by *showing* my students instead of *telling* them *how* Chicana lesbian feminist writers cultivate intellectual tools as theories of agency (modes of acting upon their world) to respond to multiple forms of oppression happening simultaneously. The classroom is a dialogical space where we would be able to collectively investigate these questions: What can we learn about the conceptualizations of racialized gender normativity and heteropatriarchal power from the fiction written by Chicana lesbian writers? Whose voices and stories have we been taught to value? What role do institutions play in normalizing the devaluation of Chicanas within Chicano culture?⁷ How do Chicana lesbian fictions reimagine and attempt to decolonize Chicano culture? My students would be able to witness how Pérez and Trujillo as Chicana lesbian feminist writers cultivate in fiction Chicana lesbians as agents in their own lives queering the sites/discourses/places/tongues within and of Chicax imaginaries.

Teaching Chicana Lesbian Fiction: Cultivating Pensadores

Re-evaluating the conceptual framework of my Chicana Feminisms course⁸ was my attempt to engage with the example Toni Morrison set as an editor. In November 2019 my students and I read *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* chronologically over a three-week period. After completing both books, the students read articles in which Lisa Cacho (2012), Cristina Herrera (2009), and Ellie Hernandez (2003) offer concise analyses of *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings*. I had the students read both books consecutively to experience the depth and diversity of Chicana lesbian fiction unmediated by scholarly voices. The only instructions I

6 Emma Pérez's (1991) essay "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor" introduced 'sitios y lenguas' as a conceptual framework that "attempts to create space and language amid an occupied (read colonial patriarchal) space," (Ikas, 2001, p. 13).

7 The scholarship of Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Dolores Delgado Bernal (1998, 2020), Maylei Blackwell (2011), and Calderón et. al. (2012) documents the myriad ways knowledge produced by Black Feminist Thought and Chicana Feminist Thought have resisted subjugation within academia. This archive of scholarship chronicles the power of Black Feminist Thought and Chicana Feminist Thought as potent political projects that offer us roadmaps towards decolonization.

8 In the Illinois State University course directory, the course I teach is not listed as WGS 391: Chicana Feminisms. The course is listed as "Women's and Gender Studies Seminar Course: WGS 391, credit hours: 1-3, course approved for graduate credit, no prerequisites. The way the course is catalogued by the university serves as a chronic institutional barrier (Ahmed, 2017) to enrollment because accessing the course information is convoluted and thwarts cultivating interest in a Chicana Feminisms course. Enrollment in WGS 391: Chicana Feminisms has varied over the last 4 years between 5-19 students, primarily women of color, Humanities and Social Science majors, and range from sophomores to graduate students. During the fall term I teach WGS 391: Chicana Feminisms and during the spring term I teach WGS 391.001 Latinx Popular Culture.

gave my students prior to reading each book was: Read each book wholeheartedly. Stay curious. Come to class prepared to ask questions and to read passages out loud from the book that you found significant, confusing, or that made you want to post on Facebook or Twitter. As we made our way through each book, theoretical questions foundational to the course organically emerged. The students read, got lost, and found their way into the Chicana lesbian fictions, creating class discussions that centered on their questions, their interpretations, and undetermined lines of inquiry which collectively positioned Kerime, Shani, Stacy, Esther, and Damaris to see and come to know themselves as *pensadores*, which means they saw themselves as “active thinkers who build on their cultural foundations to form political and practical meanings about learning, knowing, teaching, and power” (Godinez, 2006, p. 24). I witnessed my students come to see and know themselves as *pensadores* in the ways they gave themselves permission to take risks, grappled with contradictions, and closed the distance between teacher and student by co-constructing the classroom as a relational and dialogical space we could learn from each other.

A Pedagogy of Pérez’s *Gulf Dreams*

Students came to class prepared to share and read out loud at least two passages from *Gulf Dreams* (Pérez, 1996) they found compelling, confusing, or worth posting on social media. This encouraged students to read carefully rather than skimming and at the same time gave them autonomy to select whatever passages they wanted, as many as they wanted. Some students shared and read passages they were confused by while others read passages they deemed important to a Chicana Feminisms course. For example, during the first class discussion of *Gulf Dreams* all the students began to have a conversation with each other about how the structure of the book left them feeling disoriented. Students said: I am not sure what to think about this book but I know something important is going on. I am excited but nervous to talk about it with everyone. I keep wondering why the narrator doesn’t have a name. Is it weird to say I want to keep reading this book even though I have no idea what the point of the book is? I am feeling some kinda way. I can’t tell if the book is a dream, a really long poem, a complicated breakup rant, or short stories.

Collectively the students became *pensadores* by recognizing Pérez (1996) is not writing a hegemonic coming out narrative about Chicana lesbian identity that seeks to de-pathologize non-normative sexualities and desires or affirm non-normative sexuality and desires as

tolerable. The pensadores were affectively attuned to Pérez's project of exposing the gendered racialized power dynamics of Chicano/a historiography through the writing of fiction. After a while Damaris spoke up and said,

“*Gulf Dreams* is like nothing I have ever read. To be honest it's hard and confusing, and we've only read half the book. But I get why it's art. Chicano/a art creates un sitio y una lengua, a space and a language, for those who try to fight these colonial norms. It's like, in this world, Chicanas are constantly rejected or pushed to the side, to have this space and language gives other Chicanas an opportunity to speak about their own issues they have experienced. Like Blackwell was so hard to read too. I wanted to give up a lot. Sometimes I think I did. But when I came to class I started to try again. Now I understand that *Gulf Dreams* is a part of that legacy of a Chicana feminist counter public Blackwell wrote about. I know I say this all the time because I am a theatre person, but can you imagine if this book was a play?”

Damaris like her classmates, as pensadores, were developing a vocabulary to articulate:

“The novel itself seems to embody a different historical account of the cultural representation of Chicana lesbian sexuality by making the visible the psychological ruptures of colonial memory in Chicano discourse. By framing historical memory as desire, Pérez makes the aesthetic claim that representing Chicana lesbians in history is next to impossible without summoning the violent tropes embedded in a Chicano/a colonial and nationalistic history.” (Hernandez, 2003, p. 155)

The students' embodied knowledge guided them to collectively trust in their disorientation in order to sit with not knowing why Pérez played with what is real and what is representable. During the second class discussion about *Gulf Dreams*, Esther brought up a passage that led to a deeper understanding of the ways Chicana feminisms are rooted in theories of the flesh that function as de-colonial strategies and tactics. Esther read:

A spring day invited muggy heat. I'm awake. Dew scattered droplets on a rusty window screen. Outside, the wrens that woke me sing. Stumbling I bump into my brother. Through a bathroom door my father shaves his face. I lean against the wall. I doze. Pangs of hunger force gurgles in my stomach, burying the last night's dreams. When pain jolts through me, I double over, arms crossed my abdomen. “What's wrong?” my brother asks. I look up with arms protecting a burning stomach. “Stomach hurts,” I am barely

audible...I wipe my face with a stale towel. Beads roll down my waist and navel to pubic hair. For months, soft curls have begun to poke through underwear. I've wanted to shave, assuming I shouldn't. But in the night once, I snuck a razor into bed slicing tender skin, leaving a scar. Now my hair grows out prickly. (Pérez, 1996, pp. 39-41)

Esther spoke of how struck she was by Pérez's attention to the physical pain the Chicana narrator's body endured during menstruation. Fellow pensadores nodded their heads in agreement and commented about how difficult it is for them to go to class when they are menstruating but friends, roommates, boyfriends, and even parents minimize the pain of it. Damaris responded to Esther, "I marked that passage too while I was reading. I am glad I am not the only one who felt that way." It became more apparent to the pensadores as we got lost in collective consideration of *Gulf Dreams* that Pérez is critiquing the heteropatriarchal violence enacted through the institutions of the family, the law, and religion in the way they distort, erase, and fragment brown queer bodies. The pensadores were uprooting what lies beneath the systemic devaluing of the brown female body. Trujillo (1991) says it best:

Our culture voices shame upon us if we go beyond the criteria of passivity and repression, or doubts in our virtue if we refuse. We, as women, are taught to suppress our sexual desires and needs by conceding all pleasure to the male . . . Moreover, we (as well as most women in the United States) learn to hate our bodies, and usually possess little knowledge of them. (p. 186)

The conversation shifted again when Shani looked directly at Esther and said, "It looks like you have more to say, so you should say it." Esther hesitated then said, "I just thought about shaving. Like we're supposed to shave because you know...guys like it. But maybe we start to do it because we start to internalize a deep-rooted shame we have for our bodies." Laughter then silence. Their silence demonstrated a collective recognition of how hegemonic white cis heteronormative beauty standards become normalized during adolescence into adulthood. Then I asked the pensadores to think deeper about why a Chicana writing about her body was so important. Stacy chimed in and said, "This is what Hurtado (1998) means when she writes the ways gender subordination is culturally specific, right?" I smiled and said yes, drawing attention to how the passage points to the nuanced impact of racialized heteronormative gender and sexual norms upon the bodies of Chicanas. The pensadores snapped their fingers in affirmation. The snap functioned as an ongoing collective recognition of the students seeing and

knowing themselves as pensadores (Ahmed, 2017). It is reclamation. Class discussion shifted again when Damaris spoke up. “I have to be honest. I had to put this book down several times in order to finish it. I have read books about sexual violence before but nothing compares to this. I have never read anything written by a Chicana lesbian in a class before and I am 23 years old. This was hard.” Silence. Damaris looked around and said, “Like I knew there was gonna be violence. How can there not be violence? Right? But when I read, “Her bruises internal, her skin unscathed, the police would lie. She is scarred inner flesh” (Pérez, 1996 p. 78), I lost it. Pérez captured those feelings that never leave a woman if she has been sexually assaulted.” Faces flushed, then deep exhales swirled linking Kerime, Shani, Stacy, Esther, and Damaris as pensadores who were collectively reckoning with Pérez’s project of decolonial memory in the ways gendered and sexual violence endured by Chicanas dehumanize us across generations. The rape of Ermilia is not singular but gestures to the collective rape of colonization as well as informs how through colonization the practice of “the policing of female desire thus extends beyond the sexual act as a form of violation” (Hernandez, 2003, p. 167). The pensadores generated deeper understandings of Pérez’s decisions to not name the narrator, to queer colonial constructions of time and space, and transgress genres opening up opportunities for her to write Chicana lesbians into history and at the same time critique the multiple levels of trauma inscribed upon Chicana lesbian bodies in the multiple forms of institutionalized violence through the law, the family, and the Catholic Church. As students began to see and know themselves as pensadores, the epistemic significance of *Gulf Dreams* became more apparent in how Chicana lesbian fiction challenges hegemonic historiography as truth because it decolonizes the Chicana imaginary.

The Pedagogy of Trujillo’s *What Night Brings*

Once the class finished reading and discussing *Gulf Dreams* and turned towards discussing *What Night Brings* (Trujillo, 2003), a substantial theme emerged. The pensadores became co-teachers of the course material and their uncontrollable excitement and imagination flourished. I walked into the classroom and the pensadores were already deep in conversation. Stacy sat cross-legged on top of the table and was waiving her copy of *What Night Brings* in the air. Stacy exclaimed, “I love this book. I hate reading, but I love this book. I read more than we were supposed to and didn’t read for another class. I don’t even feel bad about it.” Kerime shouted to Stacy, “Bro, I need my cousins to read this book. Actually like my whole family. But I

might have to do certain people first.” I sat down in the circle and listened. Damaris chimed in, her words bursting out, “I love that this book is written through the eyes of a queer brown girl. I think that is so hard to do. Marci is fierce. Honestly, I wish I was as chingona as Marci.”

Everyone snapped. The pensadores settled into their seats and began thumbing through their book for passages to read out loud. While the pensadores searched I went to the board and started writing out pervasive themes discussed throughout the entire semester: the body is a source of knowledge, knowledge is always partial, the *vendida* logic,⁹ gender subordination is culturally specific, and theory is mediated through everyday lived experiences. The pensadores began calling out page numbers that coincided with themes. I couldn’t keep up. Stacy finally said, “Maybe we just start at the beginning. What did you all think about this passage?” I sat down while Stacy read the following passage:

I have to tell you what I need from God. I have to change into a boy. This is what I want and it’s not an easy thing to ask for. Not like wanting a new bike or football. This takes special powers, and let me tell you, I’ve been wanting it a long time. It’s not because I think I’m a boy, although it sure seems like I am. It’s because I like girls. I don’t know how or when it happened. Maybe I was born this way, but the second I saw *chichis*, I wanted them. I couldn’t stop thinking of girls, during the day at school, at night in my dreams, and especially when I watched TV. (Trujillo, 2003, p. 9)

Kerime said, “Yeah I get this. I’m Catholic. Growing up you kinda know how important religion is to being a Mexican girl. It shapes who you are, how you come to know yourself.”

Immediately the pensadores recognized the significance of the knowledge generated from the everyday experiences of Marci’s brown queer body by having Marci tell the reader she has been praying to God to change her into a boy because she likes girls. The pensadores collectively identified the hegemonic role the Catholic Church and the Chicano family have as institutions that maintain the cultural value of patriarchy, as a sociopolitical system that insists men are inherently dominant, normalizing heteronormative gender and sexual norms. Then Shani spoke up: “Yeah but damn.... the constant violence her and Corin experience...and how all the adults in the book basically make excuses for Eddie or pretend they don’t know he’s abusing his daughters...I had a hard time with it. Like I want to be mad at Delia, Uncle Tommy, and the

⁹ Blackwell, M. (2011). *!Chicana Power! Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. The University of Texas Press.

nuns. I am mad at all of them.” Shani’s anger nurtures her articulation of the nuanced ways heteropatriarchal violence marks Marci and Corin’s Chicana bodies. Critically discussing this passage opened up a deeper understanding of the myriad ways gender subordination is culturally specific for Chicana girls and women, challenging a common trope of hegemonic feminists that gender is the sole source of oppression for girls and women. Testimonio pedagogy loosens the shackles placed upon our imaginations through hegemonic conceptualizations of teaching and learning by bridging the body, mind, and spirit pushing us towards new *conocimientos* through feminist consciousness-raising. Trujillo is making a point about hegemonic heteropatriarchal gender normativity in her fiction, articulating the ways mothers teach their daughters to be silent, subordinate, and submissive. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) put it succinctly: “Culture is made by those in power: men. Males make the rules and laws: women transmit them” (p. 19). Shani’s contribution also demonstrates that cultivating empathy is a practice that is never finished because one must commit to bearing witness to the injustice, violence, pain, and trauma inflicted on communities that we may or may not be a part of. Esther responded to Shani, “I want to hate Delia too but I can’t. Delia is being abused by Eddie too and is complicit in the abuse of her daughters. It’s a both/and. As a white queer woman, I know it’s not as simple as I wish it was.” The exchange between Shani and Esther brings to light what underlies the trauma of abuse for Chicanas:

“Herrera-Sobek describes how the marginalization of women leads to their economic and social dependence on men, which also results in a loss of agency and control over their own bodies. She points to how some victims ultimately seek protection from a man because they may be left with no other resource. The dichotomy of men as perpetrators of violence and then as protectors from violence exists in patriarchal societies because overall men are valued, whereas women are not, men have privilege, whereas women do not, and men possess power, whereas women do not.” (Pérez, 2009, pp. 146-147)

Furthermore, the pensadores bearing witness to the injustice and violence endured by Marci and Corin through analyzing the significance of *What Night Brings* cultivated powerful reactions. They realized the danger in having one story because it erases the multiplicity and plurality of Chicanas’ subjectivities, agency, and voices. “In listening to the story of one, we learn about the conditions of many” (Beverley, 2005, p. 557). Finally, pathways for epistemic

disobedience emerged as the pensadores got lost and stayed lost by refusing to make universal claims about why Trujillo did not kill the character of Eddie. The pensadores listened to understand, not to reply, imagining a variety of theories. Damaris said, “Maybe it’s more realistic Eddie lives because most domestic abusers kill the victims rather than the other way around.” Shani chimed in and said, “I don’t think Trujillo wanted Corin to have to live with the burden of knowing she had to kill her dad because he was going to kill her mom.” Kermie thought, “What if Eddie lives because Trujillo is going to write another book that will pick up where this one left off? What if Eddie lives, but he isn’t really living?” Stacy spoke up and said, “Like Corin and Marci go live with Grandma Flor and they are finally around adults who make them feel seen and heard as the Chicanas they know themselves to be, rather than Chicanas the Catholic Church and heteronormative Chicano families what them to become. What if Trujillo is trying to tell us Chicana lesbians know how to live if society would actually let them?” Damaris, listening to her classmates, jumped in at the end of class to say, “Yeah, maybe Trujillo is telling us what we already knew but we needed a chingona like Marci to remind us: Chicana lesbians aren’t the problem. Heteropatriarchy is.” Ultimately, no one left class thinking they knew it all or that they had it all figured out by reading *What Night Brings* because the pensadores came to a deeper understanding of why knowledge is always partial.

There is a power in testimonio pedagogy: You guide your students to cultivate their own internal anchors rather than expecting them to seek your external validation as teacher. Stay curious with them. Listen to them. Find joy with them. Witness their pain. Let them see you. Dare them to reimagine a more equitable world. Wander together. The pensadores realized there is no one right answer, but a multiplicity of possibilities. We got lost in *What Night Brings* and didn’t want to be found, showcasing that using testimonio pedagogy to direct cartographies of non-dominance, non-hierarchy, reclamation, and solidarity to teach Chicana lesbian fiction cultivated theoretical tools and theories of agency that open up pathways of epistemic disobedience. This is what testimonio pedagogy feels like: an appreciation of ambiguity.

Breaking Dichotomies and Feminist Consciousness-Raising: New Conocimientos

Using testimonio pedagogy to teach Chicana lesbian fictions opened up dialogical spaces for me as a teacher–scholar to scaffold Chicana feminisms course material that broke false dichotomies and cultivated feminist consciousness raising bringing about new conocimientos.

We sat in a circle together. We used each other's pronouns. We found language to discuss trauma. We witnessed wounds surface, yet found joy. During some class periods we spent twenty minutes discussing one passage from *Gulf Dreams* or *What Night Brings*, only to spend two minutes on another. When someone started to use negative self-talk, we did not stay silent, yet we did not shame each other. We asked one another questions. We snapped. These facts may seem inconsequential, but they are not. We created a non-hierarchical and non-dominant class community together that refused to emulate or valorize the culture of power (Delpit, 1988) that informs hegemonic conceptualizations of schooling as individual, neutral, and hierarchal. Individual competition, productivity, and objectivity are contributing factors to isolating and alienating students in classroom environments by normalizing white, middle class, heterosexual norms that determine definitions of academic success. Collective practices of listening, solidarity, and curiosity recalibrated teaching and learning so that our Chicana Feminisms course became a site of resistance to institutional white heteropatriarchal power mediating marginalization.

Using testimonio pedagogy to teach *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* in a Chicana Feminisms course weaved ongoing analyses of how racialized gender and sexual normativity inform heteropatriarchal violence within Chicano communities into the curriculum rather than tokenizing Chicana lesbian writers. This allowed us to collectively reckon with rape, sexual harassment, binary gender policing, homophobia, and machismo as violence circulating within Latinx¹⁰ communities. Yet discussing Chicana lesbian fictions dared us to reimagine equitable Latinx communities collectively. As the only Chicana lesbian in the room, the pensadores never put me in a position to speak for all Chicana lesbians. I felt relieved and valued as a Chicana butch lesbian feminist teacher-scholar. Teaching at a PWI in the Midwest, the majority of students and faculty are white, middle class, cisgender, and heterosexual. When I am among faculty or staff of color I am usually the only queer. While I am no stranger to the process of othering at a PWI, the gravity of navigating the multiplicity of otherness has become chronically isolating and alienating. *Mi locura no se cura, y me ahogo con locura.*

10 "Latinx" is an intersectional identity term meant to be used by gender fluid and gender non-conforming people, LGBTQIA persons, cisgender men and women, and those taking a political stance that ethnicity and gender exist on a spectrum and are not dichotomous" (Garcia, 2020, p. 38).

A significant question that came to the forefront through collective analyses of *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* (a question I should have made explicit in the beginning of the semester) is: How can women take responsibility for fighting oppressions they cannot individually relate to? Using testimonio pedagogy to teach Chicana lesbian fiction centered this foundational question rooted in the genealogy of women of color feminist writings (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Anzaldúa, 1983; Davis, 2016; hooks, 1997; Lorde, 1984; Mahmood, 2005; Martínez, 2016), grounding practices of feminist consciousness-raising in political solidarities, not a false sisterhood predicated on perceived shared identities of women. Political solidarity is thinking through structures of power and identities relationally that demand an understanding of the nuances of the socio-political histories of women. It became clear to me witnessing the pensadores collectively analyze Chicana lesbian fiction they confronted why and how women experience oppression in nuanced ways, and sameness can't bring about equity. Esther and Stacy, the two white women in my class, began to confront and grapple with their racial privileges by reading and discussing Chicana lesbian fiction and exploring the culturally specific ways racialized gender subordination for Chicana girls and women functions as a result of the interconnected logics of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Kerime, Damaris, and Shani, the self-identified Latinas in the class, began to contend with their own internalized racialized gender and sexual normativity, prompting them to acknowledge their complicity and commit to challenging racialized heteropatriarchal norms in their own lives. Through collective analyses of *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings*, Kerime, Damaris, and Shani in particular succinctly identified that, "For many Chicanas, our identification as women, that is, as complete women, comes from the belief we need to be connected to a man...We are socialized to undervalue ourselves, as well as anything associated with the concept of self," (Trujillo, 1991, p. 187). Solidarity between the pensadores and I developed as each of us grappled with acknowledging and then confronting her attachments to internalized racialized heteropatriarchy. On the last day of class, the pensadores and I discussed Emma Pérez's (1991) essay, "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor." The conversation was slow going, but halfway through class Damaris spoke up:

This essay was hard to read. I had to stop and go back a few times. But if I had read this before I read *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* I would have been completely overwhelmed and just quit. But I didn't give up. When I got to the last section where

Pérez writes, “We cannot be friends as long as you think you know every part of who I am, as long as you think you can invade my space and silence my language, my thoughts, my words, my rage. *Mi sitio y mi lengua*” (Pérez, 1991, p. 175). I understood that. I’m still lost, but I am not afraid. I see myself. I see all of us trying to learn, to unlearn.

The growth of the *pensadores* demonstrates they were able to conceptualize difference as an asset (Lorde, 1984) rather than a barrier between women through practicing feminist consciousness-raising and breaking down false dichotomies. The *pensadores* reclaimed the classroom, collectively making it clear to me that discussing *Gulf Dreams* and *What Night Brings* cultivated new *conocimientos* that are powerful and politically urgent. They learned to believe in themselves and in each other. Snap. They recognized the plurality of selves alongside a multiplicity of possibilities, which forged deeper practices of empathy, listening, and solidarity, restoring connection to ourselves, and guided us towards a practice of healing and learning rooted in our bodies.

Writer’s Note: Enseño Desde la Herida

Reevaluating the conceptual framework of my Chicana Feminisms course and making the strategic decision to teach Chicana lesbian fiction became an integral part of understanding the power of testimonio pedagogy. Here’s why. Testimonio pedagogy refuses the Cartesian mind/body dichotomy, the teacher/student dichotomy, and hegemonic conceptualizations of schooling steeped in individual competition, objectivity, and learning as commodity. Testimonio pedagogy highlights the fortitude and resilience necessary to mediate pervasive forces of marginalization in the academy rooted in racialized neoliberal capitalism (Klein, 2007; Melamed, 2006; Taylor, 2019). While students may perceive educators as all the same, we are not. Working at a PWI, my brown Chicana butch lesbian body is read and written over, marked with instructions and narratives that are not of my making. I am consistently taken less seriously, my expertise devalued. We must show our students that our humanity is intimately linked with theirs. Testimonio pedagogy cultivates a radical vulnerability that reclaims teaching as a human act, not a business transaction. People aren’t just things you use and toss. This is why I use testimonio pedagogy to cultivate practices of trust and care with my students because:

all parts of people enter the pedagogical space as sharing and memory often prompt all our senses when reliving or listening to the stories. Feelings, emotions, knowledges,

silences, and identities are integral to learning and connecting with testimonios—to enter a new site of knowledge—a space of reclamation. (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 396)

Using testimonio pedagogy, I extend the genealogy of women of color writings by disrupting epistemological boundaries in order to center voice and agency in the relationships between teachers and students, curriculum and pedagogy, and learning and community. The writings of Toni Morrison sembró las semillas, that root my commitment to the work I do as a Chicana butch lesbian feminist teacher–scholar. “The work. To make revolution irresistible” (Bambara, 1983, p. viii). Toni Morrison taught me that we all have a responsibility to act. Por eso, escribo y enseño desde la herida.

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