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**Southwest Borderland Voices and Stories:  
Community Cultural Wealth as Living Literacies**

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**Abstract**

This study qualitatively examines the literacy experiences of three Southwest Borderland Latinos who left high school before graduating. Addressing a gap in the literature that reveals the limited attention paid to how students who left high school before graduating generate and use community cultural wealth (Burciaga & Erbsstein, 2012), this investigation explores the vibrant role and contribution of community cultural wealth in literacy development. Through the frameworks of New Literacy Studies (NLS) and family literacy within the context of the Southwest Borderlands, and employing the tool of counternarratives through a Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) lens, this study provides a platform for validating and affirming the voices, stories, experiences, and knowledges of the research participants. Utilizing portraiture as the methodology illuminates the *living literacies* that transpired when the participants read their world and the word (Freire, 2006).

*Keywords:* community cultural wealth, counternarratives, Latino critical race theory (LatCrit), living literacies, New Literacy Studies (NLS), portraiture

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## Introduction

Andy, a young boy, age ten, walks through a newly cultivated field seeded with the seasonal crop, his grandfather by his side. Andy listens attentively as his grandfather explains the tradition of working in the fields. Andy, now an adult in his late 30s, also known as “Chang,” reminisces on that time, continuing the tradition learned from his grandfather. He describes his process in farmland irrigation:

*It's not as easy as it looks. Everybody thinks you just open the water. "Ah, just sit there and watch it." No, no, no, no, you gotta really watch the water... watch how the water is flowing. And study it. Cuz, either it's gonna take you all day to do, or it can be very fast and you're not gonna be able to control it. So, you have to study how the waves are moving and how fast the water is moving.*

Jenny, a woman in her early 40s, sent a friend of hers a covered dish she prepared as a gesture of support. She reflects and relates to the challenging time her friend is experiencing. Sending food alleviates her friend's added task of cooking for her family to better focus on overcoming her challenges. This act illustrates the reciprocal relationship that Jenny and her friend share. *"That's, you know, she shows her love for me helping me out in all kinds of ways and I return it feeding them. That's what I do."* Jenny attributes this knowledge to what she learned from her mother:

*From how we grew up, our love was shown... in our education, was all manual labor. We showed love that way, by helping each other, by doing things, by always... My mom was very giving, very giving. Whatever she had, especially with food.*

The period is the late 1940s. Geraldo is a young boy hunting through the rugged, Southwestern desert with his grandfather and father when they notice animal tracks in the sand. Geraldo focuses on the tracks and his grandfather's and father's voices as they explain the subtleties in each animal track. Geraldo, now a man in his late 70s, recollects about that time. Using his hands to recreate the print, Geraldo explains, *"Coyote has four, y luego, piquitos at the claws. The rabbit, larguitas."* (Coyote has four and then, little points at the claws. The rabbit, little long ones). *"You could track anything."*

The voices above capture the three participants of this study: Andy, aka "Chang," Jenny, and Geraldo. They describe the learning and the knowledges they hold that have been passed on by family members close to them within the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2006). Furthermore, they elucidate how they interact with different texts in their surroundings when reading their world (Freire, 2006): Chang, the water when irrigating; Jenny the people around her; Geraldo, the tracks in the sand. Another commonality the participants share is that they all left high school before graduating.

Based on the author's research, this article examines and illuminates the rich role and contribution of community cultural wealth in literacy development in the lives of three Southwest Borderland Latinos who left high school before graduating. The individuals' experiences when reading their world, captures the concept of *living literacies* or the multiple literacies and its uses central to the livelihood and survival of individuals from marginalized and underprivileged groups—the literacies at the core of their lived experiences. A study by Burciaga and Erbstein (2012) maintains that understanding the forms of capital in community cultural wealth offers a vital conceptual framework in confronting deficit-based and incomplete portraits of Latinx communities. However, Burciaga and Erbstein (2012) reveal limited attention paid to how students who left high school before graduating generate and use community cultural wealth. Informed by their study, the following research question guided this investigation:

How do three Southwest Borderland individuals who left high school before graduating generate and use community cultural wealth in literacy development?

To frame this study from an assets-based perspective, I purposely refrain from referring to the participants as "dropouts." The intention is to change the negative discourse and deficit thinking stances that proliferate the perception of "dropouts" as apathetic individuals who made poor choices and do not value education. This study also highlights the diverse and equally valid literacy practices that occur in the homes of marginalized families and the multiple ways in which families support their children, bringing value and merit to the knowledges they hold and create (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). Not often considered in academia or public policy are the voices of the marginalized (González, 2001), which perpetuate deficit thinking stances, stereotypes, myths, and assumptions (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2010). Through the frameworks of

family literacy, New Literacy Studies (NLS), and Community Cultural Wealth within the Southwest Borderlands context, this investigation provides a platform for validating and affirming the voices and stories of the research participants, their families, their literacy experiences, and knowledge. The participants' voices and stories provide counternarratives through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latino Critical Race Theory LatCrit (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2006) and the methodology of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) in debunking negative assumptions and stereotypes. Furthermore, this study provides insight and composes portraits into the myriad of ways literacy is enacted at home and through the community while unveiling schooling conditions and educational experiences.

### **The Context of “The Southwest Borderland”**

*The U.S.- Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country-a border culture (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3).*

In this quote, Gloria Anzaldúa elucidates the complex and unique context of living in an area of the country known as “The Southwest Borderland,” which encompasses two countries, the United States and Mexico. Vélez-Ibáñez (2018) refers to this area as the Southwest North American Region, which is “a highly diverse and complex region that encompasses six Mexican and four American states sharing a common imposed boundary” (p. 22). In the Southwest Borderland context, identity, language, and culture emulate in a rich mosaic of creations influenced by facets of each entity on what it means to be “Chicano” and “Mexican” (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bejarano, 2005; González, 2001). Individuals experience the matrix of geopolitical spaces, cultures, languages, citizenships, social hierarchies, and the experiences of Mexicans/os and Chicanas/os, which influence the construction of identity. The borderland breeds politics behind identity that promotes tensions and discourses of monolingualism, bilingualism, nationalism, uniformity, discrimination, and racism. Individual identities converge and diverge, are paradoxically meaningful and meaningless, and often meet in the middle through a passage of shared languages, cultures, and politics (Bejarano, 2005). “The physical border and the metaphorical borderlands serve as geophysical and analytical apertures for scholars to view

how people of all ages negotiate 'Mexicanness' and 'Chicanoismo' while constructing their identities" (Bejarano, 2005, p. 27).

In the Southwest Borderland context, where two cultures dynamically and fluidly straddle, the languages spoken take many forms, which reflect the complex and heterogeneous people of the borderlands. People's complex lives become a factor in how children socialize through language with no simple patterns to how this transpires. Individuals in the borderlands become artful craftspeople in blending an appropriation of words and make sense of the collection of language forms that come their way (Anzaldúa, 1987; González, 2001).

The concept of translanguaging (García, 2011) illustrates the amalgamation of English and Spanish, exemplifying a dynamic and fluid language form experienced by speakers in the Southwest Borderlands. Translanguaging represents how bilingual individuals shift from one language to another. Not to be considered the same as code-switching, translanguaging maintains that bilingual individuals use one linguistic repertoire, from which they strategically select features to communicate with each other effectively. The speakers shift the pronunciation of sounds and intonation patterns from one language to another in natural phrase boundaries, which is not haphazard or careless but rather a complex and intricate process governed by precise language rules (García, 2009). This use in language illuminates the "flexible use of their linguistic resources to make meaning of their lives and their complex worlds" (García, 2011, p. 1). Sánchez, García, & Solorza (2018) maintain that viewing language use from a translanguage perspective, centers on what bilingual speakers *do* with language and how they *do* language with their own distinct and dynamic repertoire of linguistic features. Johnson, García, and Seltzer (2019) use the metaphor of two riverbanks to illustrate the power of translanguaging. One language stands on each side, English and Spanish, with the current or *corriente* representing the dynamic and fluid use of the individual's bilingualism and lived realities. Integrated are the individual's true and fluid language uses with their semiotic resources to make meaning, to be creative and critical, and to imagine. These dynamic and fluid facets reshape and dissolve each of the riverbanks and illustrate a more flexible way of doing language.

These complexities concerning culture, language, and identity found in the Southwest Borderland capture an in-between state defined as *nepantla* where individuals live among and between multiple worlds (Anzaldúa, 1987). Experiencing and being immersed in these complexities as a lived experience served as a criterion for the research participants.

## **On Schooling Conditions: The “Dropout” and Deficit Thinking**

Lukes (2015) contends that the term "dropout" is a quasi-epithet whose goal is to insult the target when used in the vernacular. Freire (2005) describes the term "school dropout" as a linguistic manipulation intended to hide a particular ideology in which particular discourses disguise "concrete situations that in reality 'push out' students from school or prevent them from going to school" (p. 10). A study by Fine (1991) uncovered systems of "silencing" and "exporting dissent" occurring within schools, which disproportionately affect students of color. Examples of silencing include stifling dialogue that centers on social inequality, unjust school disciplinary practices, and complaints about discrimination, racism, sexism, and inadequate curriculum. "Exporting dissent" represents a means to deal with those who would not or could not be silenced, resulting in the banishment of student bodies where dissenters were "pushed out" of school through disciplinary actions and conditions. Other push out practices included actively dismissing students into GED or other alternative programs or encouraging students to abandon school altogether due to lack of credits, behavioral issues, or pregnancy (Lukes, 2015). The "push out/dropout" problem for minority students in the U.S. school system became more severe due to the overemphasis on test-based accountability. The practices that ensued included identifying "low-achieving" students and administratively withdrawing them for reasons varying from lack of interest, academic failure, and poor attendance (Orfield et al., 2004).

However, of the many theories used to explicate school failure among economically disadvantaged minority students, the deficit thinking model has been prevalent for over 100 years (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2010). When enacted towards Mexican-American families, a common myth based on deficit thinking is that these families do not value education or care about their child (Burciaga & Erbsstein, 2012; García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2010; Valdés, 1996). In examining the history of schooling for Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, the purpose for educating Mexican children in the Southwest "functioned as a means of social control, an attempt to socialize them into loyal and disciplined workers, and the instrument by which social relations between Mexican and white communities were reproduced" (Donato, 1997, p. 12). Such practices simplify and remediate curriculum and uphold low teacher and administrator expectations (Donato, 1997; Noguera et al., 2015; Valencia, 2010). These phenomena describe the impact that stems from the negative image inflicted by society and the school system, and proliferates the ideology of “blaming the victim” instead of critically

examining educational institutions (Freire, 2005; Valencia, 2010). “Victim blaming” and deficit thinking are forms of oppression, grounded in racism, classism, and sexism, which represent cruel and unjust uses of power, and exercises authority to keep a group of people in their place (García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia, 2010, 1997).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Living Literacies, Family Literacy, and New Literacy Studies (NLS)**

In this study, I employ the term *living literacies* to capture the many ways the participants transacted with literacy. Acknowledging Maldonado’s (2001) case for “living literacy,” this study also demonstrates how bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural individuals have, at least, twice as much knowledge and, in this case, community cultural wealth, to bring to bear on their literacy experiences. This study’s *living literacies* capture a treasury of multiple and multimodal literacies and their uses central to the livelihood and survival of individuals from marginalized and underprivileged groups. These literacies are dynamic and organic in which meaning-making remains at the center of their lived experiences.

A significant and growing body of literature has concluded that literacy is a highly culture-specific type of activity that forms through interactions with families, communities, and histories (Auerbach, 1989; Compton-Lily, 2009; del la Piedra & Araujo, 2012; Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 2018; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Street, 1995, 2013; Valdés, 1996). This research challenges deficit-thinking views that exist about families from underprivileged and diverse backgrounds. Such beliefs include deficiencies due to cultural and linguistic differences, blaming these differences for “inadequate” literacy development, and aiming to “fix” families in becoming literate around the dominant definition of literacy.

Concerning this study, the definition of literacy development in the Freireian sense implies “reading the word and the world” (Freire, 2006) and works towards affirming the diverse family literacy practices that exist among non-mainstream families. “Reading the word and the world,” is a short phrase coined by Paulo Freire that contains an entire philosophy and practical theory of what it means to be a literate person. This phrase explains that decoding words on a page and making meaning from those words, or any text, is a small component of the entire reading process (Torres & Ruiz, 2013). The world in which we live, our environment, or natural settings greatly influence the sense we make and the meaning we place on the



context of that text. Moreover, this philosophy acknowledges the various and equally essential literacy practices that occur in the homes of marginalized families and the multiple ways in which families support their children (Reyes & Torres, 2007). Recognizing Jiménez's (2004) concept of *cultural borderlands*, literacy learning is more appealing to individuals when it is connected and supportive of their bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural identities, and fosters their Spanish-language literacy development.

Many researchers in family literacy (Auerbach, 1989; Compton-Lily, 2009; Delgado-Gaitan, 1996; González, 2001; Reyes & Torres, 2007; Valdés, 1996) assert that children bring a multiplicity of language and literacy practices from home that are valid and as equally important as those from the dominant mainstream culture. These researchers explain that family literacy practices reflect the complexity of each family's lives and shape the realizations that not all marginalized families are the same. Conclusions from such studies, particularly seminal studies found in Heath (1983) and Street (1995), evoked a new term in the realm of literacy coined as the New Literacy Studies or NLS. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) paradigm recognizes the multiple literacies people employ, varying according to space and time. NLS proposes that texts and their functions connect to power structures and social factors dependent on cultural meanings and the social contexts that users assign to them (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The NLS represents a new tradition of literacy that concentrates on and unequivocally links to literacy as a social practice and the ideologies associated with print rather than on the acquisition of skills, as found in dominant approaches (Street, 2003). When considering multimodal literacies, Kress (2000) provides the term *multimodality*, which implies that meaning-making occurs through various forms of communicative channels other than print. Such channels include, but are not limited to, multiple modes of visual, audio, gestural, and spatial patterns of meaning or representations, and various forms and semiotic systems. Such studies identify the multiple forms of *capital* Latinx individuals and families employ, emphasizing the strengths that communities contribute to the process of education and schooling (Delgado-Bernal, 2001; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Vélez-Ibañez & Greenberg, 2005; Yosso, 2006).

### **Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory**

Related to this study, the primary goal of CRT is to apply narratives and storytelling to examine race and racism through counternarratives, placing value on the participants'

experiences. Counternarratives serve as a tool for analyzing, exposing, and challenging the status quo and majoritarian stories of racial privilege, calling attention to voice.

Counternarratives focuses on the experiences and stories of people of color and people traditionally silenced, providing the opportunity for individuals to tell their stories to counteract the grand narratives of the dominant group. These stories and narratives defy conventional stereotypes and ways of depicting people of color and expose the systemic inequalities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso & García, 2007; Yosso, 2006).

As the three participants of this study are Latinx, LatCrit, a branch of CRT, offers a broader conversation of Latino epistemologies (Yosso, 2006). LatCrit serves to analyze their lives and stories through counternarratives by revealing practices, discourses, and social structures that impacted their experiences as a whole. LatCrit in education serves as a framework to theorize and examine the implicit and explicit ways race and racism impact processes. This framework focuses on the intersectionalities of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) that emerge from the various aspects of Latinx identities, such as culture, nationality, ethnicity, immigration status, phenotype, accent, surname, and language (Anguiano et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2006).

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

To visualize community cultural wealth as a model, Yosso and García (2007) apply a kaleidoscope metaphor to illustrate its complex nature. When the kaleidoscope shifts, six dynamic and overlapping forms of capital emerge that build on one another. Explanations of the six forms of capital are as follows: (1) aspirational capital pertains to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite people's present life experiences and high aspirations for their children's future; (2) linguistic capital refers to the multiple language skills enacted through intellect and/or style, including the communication skills people use through art, poetry, music, *cuentos*, (stories), and *dichos* (proverbs); (3) social capital refers to the knowledge that Communities of Color hold that are seen and used as resources, the knowledge that helps them network; (4) navigational capital refers to the various social and psychological critical skills that Communities of Color hold to maneuver through social institutions such as schools, job markets, health care, and judicial systems; (5) familial capital encompasses the cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia*, and the idea of kinship that carries a sense of community,

memory, history, and cultural intuition. It involves family in the broader sense, including extended family (grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins) both living and long passed; (6) Resistant capital encompasses conscious behaviors, knowledges, and skills that challenge inequality.

It is important to note that the concept of *capital* through the community cultural wealth model does not relate to Bourdieu's (1986) examination of cultural capital. As Bourdieu explained, cultural capital defines socially constructed symbolic wealth and the tools and assets acquired by individuals to promote social status and the type of social mobility that is highly prized. *Capital* through community cultural wealth captures the "array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (Yosso & García, 2007, p. 154). While some forms of capital are inherent within families and Communities of Color, others are developed as resistant and protective measures where opportunity and basic needs are lacking. These resources are overlooked when analyzed through cultural capital and social mobility frameworks (Bourdieu, 1986) that view Communities of Color as deficient.

While all six forms of capital were evident in the participants' literacy experiences, this paper focuses on three forms of capital—familial, linguistic, and aspirational capital. While many examples of each of the three types of capital were evident, this paper centers on the most prominent. It is important to note that some forms overlapped due to the dynamics and fluidity of each type of capital.

### **Portraiture as Methodology**

The portraiture methodology served as the qualitative means for data collection to examine the participants' voices and stories, providing counternarratives. Portraiture develops when the researcher wishes to produce a full picture of a person or event that speaks as much about the topic as it does about the researcher, creating a portrait. From my positionality as a third-generation Chicana, born and raised in the Southwest Borderland, whose parents and grandparents had limited opportunities for formal schooling or left high school before graduating, I critically observed the complex ways my family enacted with literacy and the high value they placed on education. However, the predominant discourse found in society concerning "dropouts" and people of color from disadvantaged economic backgrounds painted a different picture; this picture also affected how my family and I viewed ourselves. I grew up

hearing phrases such as “*Nunca acabé la escuela, no sé nada. Soy un tonto.*” “I didn't finish school, I don't know anything. I'm a dummy.” I came to recognize that this expression also represents a sentiment, a stigma, and a perception of internalized failure for not completing high school. I realized that it stemmed from a negative image inflicted by society and the school system. Such a notion proliferates the ideology of “blaming the victim” instead of critically examining educational institutions (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Valencia, 2010).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) define portraiture as a type of qualitative research that seeks to join science and art into an image representing a detailed, thick description where “each subject is fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, and scrutinized” (p. 5). This framework serves as an essential tool for this study because it embraces the concept of the “good” whole and the expressions of “voice” (Chapman, 2005, 2007; Davis, 2003; Dixson, Chapman & Hill, 2005; Flores, 2017; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) discusses, the researcher begins with an anti-deficit approach asking what is good, and identifies the goodness as defined by the participants. This methodology aims to create portraits that honor the life experiences of Chicana/os and Communities of Color by telling and affirming their stories (Flores, 2017). In this sense, the researcher must be prepared to listen *for* the story (Welty, 1983; Chapman, 2005).

The search for goodness does not mean giving a positive spin to everything or looking only on the bright side but entails an inquiry approach that resists a preoccupation with documenting pathology or documenting remedies. Instead of identifying weaknesses, the search for goodness means asking questions such as, what is happening here? What is working, and why? (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The characteristic of voice found in portraiture emerges through an element of storytelling that holds valuable spaces related to this research through counternarratives.

## **Research Procedures**

The data gathering process was conducted for three months. Methods of data collection utilized were: 1) two individual interviews: one in-depth semi-structured interview, and one follow up semi-structured interview; 2) researcher field notes; and 3) personal artifacts the participants shared. A set of 14 questions guided the first interview, while the second interview consisted of individualized questions for each participant needed to complete their portrait.

An entire account of all data sets collected through interview transcripts, field notes, and personal artifacts was created by taking inventory and creating categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After transcribing the interviews and reading the data multiple times, categories were developed to identify the emerging themes according to the portraiture method (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The interview transcripts were color-coded according to the forms of capital in the community cultural wealth framework. The aim was to identify the forms of community cultural wealth that were generated and enacted in literacy development.

Member checks or respondent validation (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were administered to secure validity and reliability. Member checks entailed providing the participants with a draft of their portrait to verify the information. This process ruled out any possibility of misinterpreting the meaning and perspective of the participants. Also, it served an essential function in recognizing and identifying my biases and misunderstandings.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study were three Southwest Borderland Latinos who left high school before graduating. Utilizing my own networks, contacts, and relationships through purposeful sampling, potential participants were identified meeting three criteria: they (1) were Southwest Borderland individuals, as per “Context of the Borderland” section; (2) were educated within the U.S. public school system; and (3) left high school before graduating. Participants who met these criteria were sent an invitation to the study explaining the purpose and procedures with my contact information. Three individuals agreed to participate, one female, Jenny; and two males, Andy aka “Chang” and Geraldo. The participants ranged in age from their late 30s to the late 70s. Other commonalities that emerged throughout the study were that all three participants were raised outside of the nuclear family unit and spoke about being raised in poverty. Table I provides an overview of the participant demographics. All names are pseudonyms to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Illuminating the complexities of identity centered on the context of the Southwest Borderlands, each participant self-identified.

**Table I****Participant Demographics**

Participant Name	Andy aka “Chang”	Jenny	Geraldo
Place of Birth	USA	USA	USA
Identity	Chicano	Hispanic	Mexican-Indian
Approximate Age	Late 30s	Early 40s	Late 70s
Last Grade Completed	9 <sup>th</sup>	8 <sup>th</sup> /GED	8 <sup>th</sup>
Occupation	Farm Worker/ Off-Road Event Organizer	Bus Driver/ Retail Department Store Employee	Farm Worker/ Construction

**Findings**

Through the community cultural wealth framework, the participants demonstrated their literacy development as they read the word and world (Freire, 2006) utilizing their collection of living literacies. These literacies capture their cultural borderland in which literacy development and crucial aspects of their identity connected to their status as bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural individuals are shaped and profoundly influenced by their experiences (Jiménez, 2004). The following sections outline the participants' use of familial, linguistic, and aspirational capital.

**Familial Capital Literacies****“Being in harmony and peace with people...the land brings us back to that.”**

As discussed in the introduction, Chang learned the tradition of working the land and the ways his grandfather was taught, “being in harmony and peace with people...the land brings us back to that.” Chang demonstrated a strong sense of community and connection to the land as part of his familial capital. The farming culture played a prominent role in his life, and working the land has been his livelihood. One of his jobs involves clearing weeds at private residences. He described the ways he chops weeds:

*It’s knowing how to read the dirt by looking at it and where you’re gonna follow your corte, (cutting). It’s the same thing with the weeds, the way they tangle up, you just can’t go at ‘em and chop, you’ll kill yourself all day doing that. There’s a certain way to do that so you gotta*

*know how to read the way they turn, the way the grass is turned. You gotta know how to read the plants and the weeds which you're gonna deal with.*

Another notable facet of Chang's livelihood is his involvement with the off-roading community: a tradition that began with his father, who passed away when he was 10. Chang has worked with a local off-roading group for the past five years, organizing sand drags, mud races, and other off-roading events. One of his roles consists of preparing the track for events. He describes the process:

*Like for instance, if we're gonna race in mud, it takes about seven days to prepare this, so you gotta know how to plow the dirt up, the depth you're gonna get to, what you're gonna run into the dirt. It's not just clay, sometimes there's a mixture of sand in it. So, you gotta know how to mix it and keep on watching it as you're disking it. It'll take you hours to do it and just keep on reading the dirt until you get that mixture of sand and mud right, and you start putting the water in. You gotta watch that and see how your water is seeping down. Go back, test your mud and look at it, if it's gonna be good enough cuz you don't want people complaining that the mud is too soft, or it's not fair in both lanes.*

From his uncles, Chang learned how to perform bodywork on automobiles. He describes that process:

*Anybody can paint a car, but it's the preparation of the metal and everything. So, everything is straight, you don't see no waves in it and you don't see no lines. Like for instance when you're preparing a car after you're through with your primer, it looks like everything is straight, okay? So, from far away, you get a spray can, you shoot just the mist of paint and where ever that paint lands that's your high spots. So little by little you start wiping all your high spots down until it's all gone off the metal and you gotta cure a slate.*

Chang's relationship with his grandparents, father, and uncles and their influence on him illustrates familial capital or the cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia*, and the idea of kinship that carries a sense of community, memory, history, and cultural intuition. Chang has learned to read and make meaning from the land, the plants and vegetation, and how to study, read, and take meaning from the flow of the water, the preparation of bodywork on a car, and the type of soil and vegetation he works with, understanding them through scientific and mathematical perspectives as well. These objects have become the multimodal texts that Chang

reads, and their functions are dependent on the cultural meanings and social contexts that he has assigned to them. This early introduction to cars sparked his interest in *Lowrider* magazine, which he started reading at a young age and still reads to this day. Other books Chang mentioned enjoying were *The Mouse and the Motorcycle* (Cleary, 1965) and *Bless Me, Ultima* (Anaya, 1972) because he could relate to the storyline and the characters.

**“My mom loved to bake! So, we were always helping her bake, we had to read the recipes.”**

In the introduction, Jenny describes how her mother was a prominent figure in her life. She shared the struggles of being raised by a single mother but also spoke with confidence when describing the knowledges learned from her mother when caring for people and showing love through manual labor. This tradition began when Jenny was a child. “*Since we were little, we were always helping her bake. My mom loved to bake! So, we were always helping her bake, we had to read the recipes.*” Jenny, continues the tradition of baking with her children who are now adults. She shared that she and her daughter plan to bake later in the day but will have to run to the store for cornstarch and peaches.

Another tradition was watching the soap opera *Days of Lives* with her mother, sister, and brother, a tradition started by her grandmother. “*It really was a family event,*” she said. “*I remember my grandma coming over to the house and, ‘Did you see what happened!’*” These events led to engaging discussions after each episode in which they discussed the characters and critical elements in the plot.

The family baking experiences exemplify a practice that captures how Jenny and her family used literacy in their everyday lives. Watching and discussing the soap opera demonstrated engagement with a multimodal text. These concepts recognize the interactions and ways the family enacted with literacy at home and the reading conceptions in this social context. It also demonstrated how written text(s) and talk were central to the activity (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Moreover, when baking, Jenny engaged in math and science concepts by measuring ingredients and mixing the proper ingredients to yield a product.

**“It was hard, but I learned how to do them!”**

Geraldo was the oldest of the participants. Being raised by a single father, central family figures were his father, grandfather, and uncles. He spoke with pride about all the manual tasks



he learned to perform as a child such as chopping wood for the woodstove; filling tubs of water from a water pump to use for drinking, bathing, and washing clothes; learning how to dig holes for the outhouse; and joining his dad in the cotton fields after school and on weekends. “*It was hard, but I learned how to do them!*” Geraldo provides an example as he demonstrated how he used to chop wood:

*Pues, it all depended, si eran logs, vez, si eran logs you had to get them a certain length for the stove. So, you had to hit it like this and hit it like that. [showing by demonstrating, his hands cutting at angles] hasta que you got out the little log. [using his hands to show an approximate length of the logs] Porque we didn't have saws, it was just hacha. We had a special log there, standing up, y con la hacha, whack! Split it.*

Translation:

*Well, it all depended, if they were logs, see, if they were logs you had to get them a certain length for the stove. So, you had to hit it like this and hit it like that. [showing by demonstrating his hands cutting at angles] until you got out the little log. [using his hands to show an approximate length of the logs] Because we didn't have saws, it was just an ax. We had a special log there, standing up, and with the ax, whack! Split it.*

He stood up and placed a water bottle on the table and showed me on the water bottle where he would hit the piece of wood, “*You hit it in the middle, como está este aquí (Like this is here) [referring to the water bottle] Salían dos pedazos que cabían en la estufa.*” (Two pieces would come out that would fit in the woodstove.)

From his grandfather, Geraldo shared, “*My grandpa always told me to keep a knife in my pocket, matches, a bit of string or something. In case you need to tie something up, fijate, todo eso me enseñó, (can you believe, he taught me all that) and he was right!*” He explained how these items always came in handy:

*Well, I learned to cut things, to make bows and arrows and all of that stuff with a knife. And the string, sometimes we used it for the bows or to tie things up that we found or whatever. Matches sometimes when we were out in the desert, we made fires. We hunted rabbits and we cooked them out there. It tasted good!”*

He also recalled how he would make a bow and arrow:

*There were a lot of cidras (saltceders) around and we would look for a good rama (branch). We would make a bow out of that, then we would go over to the canal over there. There were those cattails... we would look for the straighter one, we would cut four, four or five, and we get... We got the spoons, flatten them out con un martillo (hammer) y con una (and with a) cutter, un cortafrío, we would cut them into arrowheads, and they were good, they were good!*

Also, as children, Geraldo's older brother introduced him to books such as *White Fang* (London, 1906) and others about Cochise and Geronimo. He remembers, "*Those were good books, all those books, I read them.*"

Like Chang, Geraldo read multimodal elements of nature to distinguish where to aim at a piece of wood to split the wood efficiently. He read the land to identify different animal tracks when hunting and utilized everyday materials when reading his world for survival. He was utilizing mathematical and scientific concepts when explaining the ways he transacted with these multimodal texts.

### **Linguistic Capital Literacies**

Through linguistic capital, the participants utilized multiple language skills through intellect and style, including translanguaging (García, 2011, Sánchez et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2019), as illustrated thus far in their voices.

#### ***We're from both sides but at the same time we gotta make this caldo in the middle.***

Chang demonstrates linguistic capital when engaging through the use of translanguaging to express sentiment and/or make a statement. This concept is seen when Chang described his identity "*We're Mexicans and we're Apaches. We're from both sides but at the same time we gotta make this caldo (soup) in the middle.*" As a young teen, Chang entered customized model cars in school art shows and was featured in *Lowrider* magazine, "*It was for my carritos (little cars) that I was making cuz people were impressed of the details that I was putting into the little cars.*" The words he chose to express this sentiment and statement with the term "caldo" as it is not a direct translation for soup, though he chose that word to express a sentiment, the same when he chose the words "carritos" and "corte." With his customized, lowrider model cars, Chang used art to communicate his culture and identity. His use of linguistic capital captures his bilingual and bicultural identity.

Chang also shared times that were difficult for him, such as running away from home, *“It’s not easier than the picture they paint you. ‘Yeah, yeah, it’s gonna be easy we can do this.’ And then, no, no! ¡Los hambres están carajos!”* (The hunger you feel is rough). These are words that express a concept not found in the English language or dominant culture. When explaining the hardships of running away, he chose to make a statement when talking about the hunger he felt in Spanish rather than English. Furthermore, the years he spent hitchhiking when he ran away and the time spent in jail captures the multiple language skills he employed to read his surroundings and specific contexts to survive, to live on the road, and network through various social situations and discourses.

***“Me llegó una carta, ándale, léemela.”***

While Jenny spoke English throughout most of the interview, she explained that she used Spanish as a child when speaking to her grandfather. She also uses Spanish to communicate with her ex-mother-in-law, with whom she fosters a relationship. Jenny explains, *“Her biggest barrier is that she doesn’t know English.”* Then, Jenny portrays her ex-mother-in-law’s voice, *“Me llegó una carta ándale léemela.”* (I received a letter, come on, read it to me) *And things like that so... “Let me call and find out where you can do this or let me see what we can do.”*

As a young mother, Jenny admits to intimidation when interacting with more formal means of interaction, such as when her youngest child was diagnosed with ADHD. *“School was a nightmare, and it was a struggle, and it was constant parent meetings. He was constantly in trouble, constantly being on medication.”* She sought the help of her sister-in-law to help her through the paperwork and Individualized Educational Program (IEP). When her children both graduated high school and applied for college, Jenny explains, *“Oh, Mom can you fill out this application for financial aid? Oh, Mom can you do...?” I was so involved.”* She claims, *“The only time I stepped foot on a university was with them.”* Jenny describes how she was always on the go with her children attending orientations, meetings, and helping them fill out forms. When Jenny’s mother fell ill, she took hold of *“Calling places, doing things, taking her, finding where to go, finding what to do, all revolving around doctors.”*

As a bus driver for the past 20 years, Jenny shared the many book titles she read while waiting for the children to fill the bus and on field trips. The authors she reads include Nora

Roberts, Stephanie Meyer, and Diana Palmer. She shares, “*Instead of turning on the TV, I’m reading my book until like, I fall asleep.*”

In the examples above, Jenny utilized linguistic capital when reading her world and the word. In using Spanish, she communicated and formed a relationship with her grandfather. She used Spanish to communicate with and assist her ex-mother-in-law when navigating through various social systems, both in English and Spanish. When supporting her ill mother, Jenny negotiated her way through medical, academic, and legal discourses. When her son was young, Jenny sought the support of her sister-in-law when transacting with letters sent home and with meetings she had to attend in an academic setting. Through more academic discourses, Jenny navigated her way when assisting her children fill out various forms to attend college. Consistent throughout Jenny’s interactions are the literacies and linguistic forms that are learned informally and rooted in her everyday experiences that serve many purposes.

**“*Los parábamos en el corner del trailer.*”**

Geraldo was the participant who used translanguaging most in his interviews, as exemplified thus far. His translanguaging is further seen when he explains his near-fatal fall when picking cotton. “*Los parábamos en el corner del (We would stand at the corner of the) trailer and we dived into the cotton, and I went back, pow!*” Also, when he describes the traumatic event of abandonment:

*I remember that little room, it was adobe and it was full of cobwebs and it was full of old furniture adentro y había (inside and there were) spider webs all around... Estaba chiquito yo, (I was little) I had a bottle. And they locked the door with a candao (padlock).*

It was evident that Geraldo had experienced much trauma in his life, though he spoke of it with such resilience.

He shared other memories such as his love of music and the *conjunto*—a three- or four-piece band made up of folk musicians—he joined. Geraldo learned to play the guitar by watching his older brother and mimicked his finger placement. He and his brother plus another friend would perform at small gatherings and would also serenade mothers of their small town in the early hours of Mother’s Day. He shares that his favorite singer at the time was Hank Williams, stressing “*Old Hank.*”

Geraldo's use of translanguaging captures the sophisticated way he used both English and Spanish as one linguistic repertoire. It was not haphazard but followed a complex and intricate process governed by precise language rules. Moreover, he uses a style of Spanish identified as Chicano Spanish (Anzaldúa, 1987) where certain consonants are left out when appearing between vowels such as *candao* for *candado* (padlock). Geraldo was engaged in making music, which captures another linguistic style.

Moreover, all three participants recall learning life lessons communicated through the use of *cuentos* (stories), *dichos* (proverbs), and *consejos* (advice) passed on by previous generations, which they have passed on to the younger generations. A *consejo* all participants have in common is learning the value of hard work. A *dicho* Chang recalled passed by his grandparents "*¿Que le dijo una víbora a la otra víbora? Que arrastrada es la vida.*" (What did one snake say to the other snake? Life's a drag). This *dicho* proved influential in his life because he claims it reminds him that there will be hard days in life but the next will be better. Jenny recalls her mother's *consejos* of not wasting food. Geraldo recalls his grandfather's *cuentos* and the moral of the stories used to teach life lessons. This form of linguistic capital represents everyday learning through participation in the broader environment of families, homes, and communities.

### **Aspirational Capital Literacies**

Through aspirational capital, the participants utilized resiliency and the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite their present and past life experiences.

#### ***"Yeah, life's a struggle. Just gotta always be positive."***

Growing up, Chang shared that living in poverty was a struggle for his family and himself. He describes, "*A lot of people take life for granted. Nah, 'this is easy, and this is easy,' No, no, life is very hard! You know, I grew up real, real poor. We never had nothing.*" In school, Chang recalls that he had difficulty reading because "*The letters would move off the page.*" He received assistance though it was short-lived. He would take a *Lowrider* magazine with him to school that he would read when instruction became disengaging. He shares:

*Everybody grew up in that time, when you know, either you needed to speak English. If you did then it was mocho, (cut up) it was always cut up so you were trying to get that part of it being Spanish and English together and it just didn't match together, you know.... It was real hard*

*like that... everything was written towards like an Anglo aspect, and they wanted us to learn that way and throw our way, you know, to the side and not use that, but actually, we need that nowadays.*

His struggles throughout school led to him being served with papers after turning 18 and in the tenth grade. The alternative program he was sent to proved worse schooling conditions than those at his regular high school, and he eventually left school altogether. Considering the times he ran away from home and hitchhiked across the country to escape the tensions with his parents and at school, he revealed that he got into trouble and spent some time in jail. Despite the challenges he has faced, *“I’ve been through hell and back and I don’t see it in a bad way, I see it as a life experience you know just, just to be alive still and doing this and telling my stories about it.”* Though he remains optimistic and considers what he has, *“Money comes and goes. It’s about living life and enjoying it, that’s the main key to it. Yeah, life’s a struggle. Just gotta always be positive.”* With assurance in his voice, he shares, *“But I tell everybody, stay in school cuz it’s, it’s hard, man! It’s hard after you get out. I tried to go back, but, no, no, no it’s way too advanced now.”* Chang aspires to write a book about his life and tell his story.

**“We’re blessed.”**

Being the youngest of three children and raised by a single mother, Jenny recounts the hard times they faced growing up. *“The main reason... everything that held us back was financial...”* She recalled excitement and anticipation when the family received their food stamps because they got to travel to a neighboring city about 20 miles away to shop for groceries. Jenny describes the summers when her oldest brother, a young teen at the time, would help contribute to the family income by traveling to a city in the Midwest. He would send the money he earned back home to take care of his mother and younger sisters.

While at school, Jenny revealed the struggles she faced related to reading. She described that the act of learning was not as enjoyable as the experiences at home when baking with her mother and discussing the latest episode of their favorite soap opera. *“Nothing was for leisure; nothing was for pleasure.”* Lack of excitement for learning was a contributing factor that extinguished Jenny’s interest in school. She makes a striking comparison to baking with her mother. *“And baking at home and doing things and actually getting a physical product of what you did is very rewarding, and it’s fun.”* When referring to school, she shares, *“It wasn’t fun, it wasn’t*

*interesting. It was boring. That's how I saw it...And that's why I just let it go."* Also, Jenny's priorities changed when she became a wife and mother at the age of 16. With frustration and pain in her voice, she adds, *"And still I regret that... Back then it was just... people disappeared and nobody asked. That's just the way it was."*

Though she carries around internalized failure due to leaving school and the experiences she missed out on, her advice to her children has been, *"That's the one thing that I always told my kids, go to school, go to school. Don't end up like me."* Despite her life struggles, Jenny considers her many blessings, such as her brother and children. She beams about her brother's success and shares, *"So because he furthered his education because he did more... we're blessed. He's allowed that to fall on us. He's brought that home to us."* Although she may not acknowledge this, Jenny has enriched her children's lives by the many forms of community cultural wealth she has passed on to them. When asked what her most significant accomplishments are, she readily answered, *"My kids and what they have done for themselves. What they have gone out and done... You know and where would I be without them?"*

***"Les enseñe todo lo que pude a mis hijas y mis hijos."***

Geraldo's life was filled with challenges from the time he was a child. He shared a time when he and his older brother were abandoned by their mother and left to starve in a small room. At almost 80 years old, Geraldo still wonders, *"And I don't know why I haven't forgotten that. Never. Pero yo perdoné a mi mama (But I forgave my mother). I don't know why she did it. I don't know."* After being rescued and raised by a single father and his father's family, Geraldo recalls, *"Así era en ese tiempo. No había nada."* (That's the way it was in those times. There wasn't anything.) *Everybody, we were poor... Everything was very hard, everything. When we were young, there was not enough food sometimes."* He shared about an accident when he was a child while picking cotton that almost took his life and left him with chronic back pain, which he has continued to endure; pain that he worked through and against, as hard, manual labor became his livelihood after he stopped attending school as a teen. Geraldo's last grade completed was eighth grade, *"No acabé el ninth grade me salí del ninth grade... porque no estaba aprendiendo por eso. Estaba batallando mucho y sufriendo mucho porque no podía aprender."* (I didn't finish ninth grade and I left in ninth grade...because I was wasn't learning, that's why. I was struggling a lot and suffering a lot because I couldn't learn.). *"Aprendí acá 'fuera, lo que aprendí, no en la escuela"*

(What I learned, I learned out here, not in school). When speaking more about this topic, he referred to himself as a “*burro*.” A literal translation of *burro* means “donkey” but is used as a derogatory term to describe someone who is stubborn and not very bright. Despite these struggles, Geraldo considers his children as his greatest accomplishment, as he shares, “*Les enseñé todo lo que pude a mis hijas y mis hijos*” (I taught my daughters and sons all I could). His advice for future generations is, “...*To love your children very much, with all your heart! Go to school and learn a lot because I didn't learn nothing.*”

A powerful theme that emerged throughout these voices was that Chang, Jenny, and Geraldo did not “drop out” of high school. Instead, they were “pushed out” due to silencing practices and exporting dissent centered on the lack of adequate support and equitable opportunities. Each still faces damaging consequences, emotionally and psychologically, and a lifetime of regret. Each participant makes crucial and critical analyses of the ways schools were structured —Chang, how schools were aimed towards an Anglo aspect and did not value his culture or language; Jenny, how people disappeared from the school landscape and nobody asked any questions; and Geraldo’s statement about learning outside of school but not while in school. Furthermore, his use of the word “suffering” when related to school learning makes a powerful impact. Despite the challenges and obstacles the participants faced, Chang, Jenny, and Geraldo's future aspirations are unwavering and awe-inspiring. They utilize this aspirational capital to read the context and situations in their world to remain resilient and navigate the challenges and barriers of life. They continue to pass this capital onto younger generations.

### **Discussion**

Through the voices and stories of Chang, Jenny, and Geraldo, this study provided insight into the myriad of ways community cultural wealth was generated and used in their literacy development through familial, linguistic, and aspirational capital as they read their world and the word. Moreover, they each demonstrate how bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural individuals bring in, at least, twice as much knowledge to bear on their literacy experiences and how these experiences shape and influence their literacy development and crucial aspects of their identity. The living literacies in this study capture a treasury of multiple and multimodal literacies and their uses that are central to the livelihood and survival of individuals from marginalized and



underprivileged groups. These dynamic, organic, and meaning-making literacies remain at the center of their lived experiences.

Aligning with Rodriguez's (2016) work, which explicates how Latinx students continue to be underserved across the educational pipeline, further research within Southwest Borderland schools with elementary and middle school Latinx populations will illuminate the utilization of community cultural wealth in literacy development with younger, school-aged students. More information on this topic informs Rodriguez's pedagogical approaches using the community cultural wealth lens. As Burciaga and Erbstein (2012) contend, understanding the forms of capital in community cultural wealth offers a vital conceptual framework in confronting deficit-based and incomplete portraits of Latinx communities. Educational leaders who work with students at all educational levels must recognize, value, and affirm the multiple literacies these children bring into the classroom informed through the community cultural wealth framework and validate and foster the collection of living literacies they employ. Doing so will allow educators to reach students through "teacher-student relationships and community and cultural relevance" (Rodriguez, 2016, p. 69).

Although this study sought to reveal how community cultural wealth contributed to literacy development, the participants' experiences within the educational system also emerged. Their voices and stories substantiate the literature that maintains how the educational system underserves and undersupports students of color. All three participants describe rich, engaging learning experiences at home and through their community tied to their bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate lives yet were disengaged with school instruction. This disengagement leads to a series of factors, which results in the "push out," *not* the "dropout." Their voices and stories debunk stereotypes and assumptions that perpetuate the belief that students who fail to complete high school do so due to their internal deficiencies or deficits. It is time to change this discourse and change the practices that cause such injustice in our schooling system. Chang, Jenny, and Geraldo are *not* "dropouts." They are holders and creators of knowledge. The aim of this study is steadfast in creating portraits that honor the life experiences of Southwest Borderland Latinos by telling and affirming their stories.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Geraldo who passed away shortly before the final revisions of the manuscript were completed. "*Diosito te bendiga y la Virgen de Guadalupe.*"

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