

Testimonios Informing a Human Rights and Social Justice Education Framework

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

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

With Chandler's (2016), "A call to action," I revisited the difficult process I underwent last spring as I decided to leave my position in the academy as a tenure-track professor to return to my home state of California and forge a new chapter in my life where I currently serve as the Vice President of Programs at a nonprofit committed to delivering high-quality mathematics and college readiness programs to middle and high school students from low-income backgrounds who will be the first-generation in their family to attend college. Many times I questioned what others would think of my leaving the academy, but like Olvia and Axel,

I too am at a place where I no longer judge myself by others' standards and am fulfilled knowing that my work continues to positively impact the lives of underserved youth. Chandler describes Olvia and Axel's *testimonios* as examples of perseverance and resilience and highlights their "ability to bounce back 'cause you're made like that—the ability to authentically recover from difficulty and adversity in ways that enable future success is key to keeping one foot in front of the other" (p. 87-88). The *nopal* metaphor and accompanying six tenets strengthen the author's charge for us all to help others recognize, name, and foster similar talents in the students and communities of promise that we strive to serve.

"*Nuestro camino es más largo*" by Jiménez (2016) pulls and draws me in through our parallel experiences of growing up *en el Valle Central*—the Central San Joaquin Valley—*de California*. My hometown is Reedley, about 120 miles, *o dos horas*, southeast of Modesto and about $\frac{1}{8}$ its population size. I first published my own (2009) experiences as *The stings of social hierarchies: From the Central San Joaquin Valley vineyards to the ivy walls*. To fully understand Jiménez's *testimonio*, she invites us to witness her parents' experiences in the U.S., including threats of deportations which illustrate "the pain of living in a foreign land." Their experiences of working in the agricultural fields and fruit packing sheds echos my own families'—our *testimonios* entwine. Jiménez and I also share similar reasons for pursuing graduate studies and careers impacting the educational opportunities afforded to others from like backgrounds. I too (Prieto, 2015 a, b, c) describe the ways our *camino es más largo* in the academy, not only graduate school. The sharing and documenting of our *testimonios* as *mujeres*, Chicanas/Latinas, and academics from working-class backgrounds is essential to informing various educational policy issues, such as those that inform teacher and campus leader preparation and college access and completion programs. As Jiménez returned home during her doctorate program to help her family after her father's traumatic brain injury, I also returned home during my program when my mother required surgery and full-time care. Jiménez recalls a conversation with her father and eloquently states, "Through our conversations, I came to understand my life as one of having the opportunity to dream, to attain an education, and to inspire hope to (and with) our communities" (p. 75). It is not until we voice our *testimonios* that we allow ourselves and others to find solace, strength, and learning *a través de nuestras vidas, penas, y alegrías*. I look forward to reading her future work documenting her *testimonios como scholar activist*. ¡*Arriba Valle Central!*

Ochoa's (2016) piece beautifully and respectfully sets forth to "explore how the media and legal system both portray and affect [the unauthorized immigrant] population and utilize *testimonio* as a tool that challenges the morality of our current immigration discourse that continues to oppress these specific people" (p. 52). Esperanza Emmanuel and Mario/Marisol's *testimonios* of their experiences *cruzando la frontera*, living in fear of immigration raids, and deportations remind me of the many shared by my own family—parents, *tios, tias, primos, primas y abuelos*. On one occasion my sister and older brother who were born in the United States *cruzaron la frontera como indocumentados* because my parents were unauthorized to live or work in the United States at the time and were unable to cross them any other way. I was still developing in my mother's womb at the time. "I grew up in California during a time, much like the present, when immigration raids were common. For me and other children of immigration, the raids presented fears and frustrations that did not enter the classroom discourse" (Alarcón et al., 2011, p. 378). Our experiences remained, as Ochoa states, "in the shadows"—invisible to our classroom teachers.

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

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

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

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

The *testimoniante*s highlighted here share how their ties to dancing with and participating in the *folklórico* group allowed them to construct an *hermandad* from which they could be true to themselves and also reimagine a new sense of self. Dance is also recognized as "an expressive

medium through which humans externalize their feelings towards the supreme energy, sending symbolic messages through corporal movements and thus creating a harmonious link with the earth and the universe” (Lara, 2004, p. 61, translated by Claeys and Prieto as cited in Prieto, Claeys, & Lara, 2015, p. 131).

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

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

Pour-Khorshid’s (2016) article invites us to “travel with [the H.E.L.L.A. Educators of Color] as [they] engage in deep, reflective, and powerful storytelling that bridges [their] lived experiences to theory, love, healing, and transformative praxis in teacher professional development” (p. 20). Similarly, other *testimonios* by engaged educators of color in K-12 teacher and campus leader preparation programs (Prieto & Niño, 2016; Prieto & Villenas 2012, 2015; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013) examine who we are, how we “know,” and how we teach for wholeness, social justice, and liberation. “We highlight the powerful and fruitful tensions of these interconnections in addressing our curricular struggles and innovations, professional identities and scholarly trajectories” (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013, p. 514). Here, Katina, Nick, and Farima share their commitments to young POC (People of Color) and how they draw from their own lived experiences to understand the inequities and injustices the youth they work with face on a daily basis. “These three [*testimonios*] serve as examples of the deep, raw, painful and empowering racialized experiences we carry as educators of Color” (p. 28). The *testimoniante*s identify love—radical love and collective liberation—as central to their urgent stories:

“they do aspire to love themselves and their histories for all its laughter and tears,”

“the love we all shared fed my spirit through the madness,”

“love is what brought me back,”

“It was their love and courage that reminded me of why I couldn’t quit.”

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

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

As Alarcón et al., (2011) state:

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

Our educator “*testimonios* and Latina/Chicana feminist perspectives can rearticulate pedagogies of *nepantla*—a space of frustration, discomfort, and always improvised visionary modes of teaching and learning” (Prieto & Villenas, 2012, p. 412). It is my hope then that they can also help us continue to address the teacher of color shortage through purposeful recruitment,

induction, and retention as well as how to better prepare all in the field to become culturally efficacious educators.

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

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

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

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

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

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