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**Testimonio Praxis in Educational Spaces: Lessons from Mujeres in the Field**

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**Abstract**

Drawing from their educational *testimonios*, in this article the authors explore the notion of leadership via *testimonio* tenets. The authors share their positionalities as *testimonialistas* and delve into *testimonio* as methodology, epistemology, and pedagogy. The authors focus on what *mujerista* leadership looks like for them inside the classroom and in the community. A reconceptualization of leadership in higher education is discussed.

*Keywords:* testimonio pedagogy, administration, higher education, educational leadership community advocacy, Chicana/Latina/Latinx

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## Introduction

In this article, we interrogate the notion of leadership and whom we think of as ‘leaders’ via *testimonio* tenets. Following Chicana feminism and intersectionality, we work toward a *liderazgo feminista*<sup>1</sup> theory and hold that notions of leadership need to be interrupted and re-elaborated in order to explore how *testimonio* offers a path to acknowledge our community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Consequently, we posit leadership is a collective reflexive process that results in acts of solidarity and what we term *testimonio* praxis in educational spaces. We begin our article by introducing ourselves and sharing our positionalities as *testimonialistas*. Next, we delve into *testimonio* as methodology, epistemology, and praxis. We then share our own *testimonio* and how we see ourselves as leaders in the field, re/framing how we each make a difference via our academic selves, our personal lives, and our commitment to making a difference in our communities given our intersectional identities. We conclude by offering our thoughts on the need to re-conceptualize how we define and understand ‘leadership’ in higher education.

### Vanessa

Vanessa is a first-generation Chicana/Latina and native of the El Paso/Juárez Borderlands. An activist scholar who uses theory, pedagogy, and praxis to impact social change, her work is informed by Chicana feminist epistemology and borderlands methodology, as well as transformational leadership practices. Influenced by the work of Tara Yosso, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Octavio Villalpando, Rebeca Burciaga, and Judith Flores Carmona—and after living in California for several years—Vanessa returned to her borderland community to pursue her doctoral studies and begin to research effective higher education practices surrounding the areas of critical race theory, *testimonio*, and Chicana/Latina feminist theory. Judith serendipitously joined the New Mexico State University (NMSU) community in 2012, and upon hearing the news, Vanessa met with Judith to discuss shared research interests and goals. Judith has remained Vanessa’s advisor and mentor since 2013. Constantly offering *consejos*, Judith has had an influential role on Vanessa’s growth as a student, researcher, educator, and higher education leader.

### Ma. Eugenia

Ma. Eugenia is Mexicana, a native of the Borderlands raised in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. The youngest in her family and the first generation to experience higher education, she engages in constant dialogue between the tension represented by memory and national narratives, between voice and legitimate accounts. Her pedagogical journey includes Chicana/Latina/Latinx feminisms, critical

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<sup>1</sup> Included in this *liderazgo feminista* are Chicana/Latina/Latinx peoples.

epistemologies and visual narrative construction. Her first encounter with Chicana feminisms began at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) where she studied the decision-making process of deported adults into Ciudad Juarez. Ma. Eugenia was also part of the Women's Leadership Institute and studied social anthropology centering around the experiences of deported children—where she spent five years teaching and painting with them. Ma. Eugenia is pursuing a doctorate in education and is mentored by Chicana *feministas* who support her by connecting her academic work with the possibilities of transnational solidarity and scholarship. Judith has been a tremendous support and mentor. Ma. Eugenia makes the critical connection between education and various border crossings that happen in academia and beyond. Specifically, she considers how we are presented with the opportunity to resist oppression and build solidarity. How, she asks, does our work promote justice as an everyday, collective, hard and beautiful practice of *reflexión-acción*?

### **Judith**

Judith is a first-generation, Mexicana academic—born in Veracruz, Mexico, raised in Los Angeles. She is one of eight children, the oldest *mujer*. Her pedagogical praxis is informed by critical race *feminista* scholars and her educational trajectory in higher education began at California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), where she was recruited and mentored by Cecilia P. Burciaga. Judith was undocumented when she entered CSUMB in 1997, and it was Cecilia who, through her incessant advocacy for students from historically underserved communities, displayed a *feminista* leadership praxis that inspired Judith, and many others, to pursue social change through work in higher education. One example of such commitment to social justice came when Judith was nominated to be the student representative in the review process CSUMB was undergoing. This was arduous work, which included reading many materials for each major the campus offered. There was compensation offered to each member of the group, but since she was undocumented she could not get paid. Creatively, Cecilia decided she would get compensated by purchasing her books and groceries for each week she worked for the committee. “If you work, you should get paid,” and “*no te dejes*” were constant *consejos* that Cecilia shared with many of us who work in academia.

### **Yvonne**

Yvonne is a Northern California native of Mexican and Guamanian descent. Initially raised Catholic, when she was six her mother converted to Islam and raised all her children as conservative Muslims. This included limits on music, movies, and television, strict separation of boys and girls except for at home and in school, and donning the headscarf from the early teen years. Because more emphasis was placed on religion, it was not until the move from California to Las Cruces, New Mexico

for doctoral studies that Yvonne began to consciously explore what it means to be Latina, and what it means to be Latina Muslim. Her doctoral studies gave her the vocabulary for talking about what had long been rendered invisible about her embodied social identities, including gendered and racial oppression both in her faith community and in the community at large. This oppression is based on her visible markers of ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Thus, when Judith introduced her to *testimonio* as a genre of research that would get at the deeply political work of sharing one's lived experiences, the decision to use *testimonio* as her primary method of research felt right.

### **Testimonio Methodology, Pedagogy, and Praxis**

In order to add to the genre of *testimonio* pedagogy and envision new conceptions of leadership rooted in *testimonio*, we begin by reviewing the genre as method and methodology. First, we address how *testimonio* interrupts what knowledge is and how knowledge is legitimized. Second, we focus on the organization of knowledge by situating the subaltern, and third, we elaborate on the notion of leadership as an act of *reflexión-acción*. *Testimonio* methodology creates a space where the narrative centers lived experience and interrupts the existing structural way of organizing and recognizing what knowledge is and how it is constructed. *Testimonio* begins by taking into account a historical context of power relations; therefore, third space feminism is the analytical space that allows us to address social inequality, envisioning a transformative practice during the research process and build our resistance capital to form a community cultural wealth (Flores Carmona, 2014; Yosso, 2005).

Drawn from Chicana feminist methods, empathy and compassion, establishing *confianza* is one of the major tenets of *testimonio*. But perhaps more important is the acknowledgement of the tension developed by how the researched and the researcher have interwoven stories that produce a reciprocal deep learning experience (Flores Carmona, 2014). Viewed from traditional paradigms, this is a limitation of *testimonio*—it is seen as lacking rigor, as unscientific. However, Chicana feminisms recognizes the value of opening our subjective self, our vulnerability, to establish a more leveled relation with the *testimonialistas*, to draw from our *facultad*. Anzaldúa (1990) notes the *facultad* is “the capacity to see in the surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface” (p. 38). Researchers are thus encouraged to draw on their intuitions and inner wisdom to dive deeply into what is underneath what is said and left un-said. Cervantes-Soon (2012) also contributes to the way we understand the transversality of *testimonio* as a tool to uncover both violence and resistance from a subaltern position—to seek deeper meanings. Cervantes-Soon (2012) stresses the importance of *testimonio* methodology in areas of violence where stories are otherwise silenced. Moreover, *testimonio* connects body violence with structural inequality.

To engage with *testimonialistas* in a way that honors their experience, compassion, and relation are necessary. Beyond this, researchers must understand *testimonio* as a dialogic process, sustained by dialogue (Benmayor, 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001)—a collective “I” that recognizes both individual agency and collective solidarity. This collectivity comes from shared oppression that forms a political *conciencia desde abajo* as subaltern.

Collectivity is expressed in *testimonio* by its democratic production of knowledge (Benmayor, 2012) and the voice of the subaltern represents how structural violence is enforced (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). *Testimonio*, then, is both theory and practice; it constructs and occupies a space of possibilities for our thriving and survival in academia. Life is complex and *testimonio* imitates life by including its contradictions. It involves a practice, a space, a product, an emotion, and much more. “*Testimonio* is a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle...the *testimoniante*s (subjects of the text) admit that they withhold secrets about their culture or details of their personal lives that for political reasons are not revealed for the most part” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 13).

The work of *testimonio* “differs from oral history or autobiography in that it involves the participant in a critical reflection of their personal experience within particular socio political realities” (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012, p. 364). The researcher asks the *testimonialista* not only what she has lived, but what meaning she has made from it. *Testimonio* is a personal account, not factual (in terms of presenting the material evidence of truth like documents, scars, maps). It is a memorial interpretation of events, including our past selves. So, what happens to *testimonio* when you yourself are the Other? The Latina Feminist Group (2001) moves us from the rights of self-narration towards self-definition within narration, i.e., ‘self-construction.’

*Testimonio* responds to the need to position “women center and in opposition to masculinity and white feminism” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 9) in order to gain insight from “the interrelationships among these systems of power” (p. 19). The Latina Feminist Group (2001) describe *testimonios* as “narratives lodge[d] in memory, shared out loud and recorded” (p. 20). *Testimonios* as a methodology explores the relation between the intimate and the collective (not necessarily the public). Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodriguez (2012) concur stating, “although a *testimonio* is technically an account made by one person, it represents the voice of many whose lives have been affected by particular social events, such as totalitarian governments, war violence, displacement, or other types of broad social affronts on humanity” (p. 528). Benmayor (2008) recognizes *testimonio* as “the result of an oral process of telling, recording, and bearing witness to each other’s life stories” (p. 507). In this vein, we can ask questions such as: How is love possible under a dictatorship? In what ways do part of our life story entail feeling like a foreigner in our own country, in our own home? Or how can motherhood

include separation from your children?

In order to get to know the stories of *testimonialistas*, sustained dialogue (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) is used to allow the connection between the researcher and the researched to unfold. According to Alarcón, Cruz, Guardia Jackson, Prieto, and Rodríguez-Arroyo (2011) “*testimonio* requires a deep learning, necessitating an openness to give oneself to the other” (p. 370). Through constant dialogue a “space of disclosure” (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 10) can be built. For Benmayor (2008), “to *testimoniar* (bear witness, to testify) involves an urgent voice of resistance to social injustices, an urgency to speak out, a collective interlocutor, and a collaborative process of production and interpretation” (p. 510). However, in terms of the space of disclosure, Benmayor (2008) distances herself by acknowledging that the notion of a safe space of disclosure as a personal experience cannot be generalized nor achieved in equal terms (p. 512). For example, with digital *testimonios*, the experience is sensorial, by listening to the (recorded) voice we can deepen our understanding of the *testimonio* itself; we can experience the sound of the voice, the tension, the silences, and the *arrebatos* (Anzaldúa, 1987; Saavedra & Pérez, 2012).

Because *testimonio* is based on a sustained dialogue (Benmayor, 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001), which implicates the superiority of the act of listening in order to understand the *testimonialistas*’ experience, there is an emphasis on the analytical element that connects a personal story to its social implications of inequality and possibilities of solidarity (Flores Carmona, 2014). That is, *testimonio* produces valuable data and also deconstructs oppressive power structures, decolonizes, and fosters transnational understanding and solidarity (Saavedra & Pérez, 2014). Perhaps Pérez Huber (2009) summarized the power of *testimonio* most succinctly when she stated that it “counter[s] traditional research paradigms and lead[s] to a more complete understanding of the experiences of People of Color within and beyond educational institutions” (p. 640). One of the values of *testimonio* is that an individual account simultaneously reveals oppression and the autonomy of the *testimonialistas* within that system of oppression. Thus, *testimonio* recognizes the importance of individual agency and collective solidarity (Flores Carmona, 2014). Each story is a unique experience, but at the same time connects to other stories with those undergoing the same circumstance.

For Women of Color, *testimonio* has broken the chain of the grand narrative that divided us and showed a path for organic solidarity. *Testimonio* recognizes women’s diversity in order to uncover common sources of oppression as peoples coming from colonial countries trying to unlearn oppression by developing our voices, our ideas, and the images of what we want to become. However, *testimonio* goes beyond the recognition of the self; our personal story is only the beginning that helps us connect with other *testimonialistas* across borders as the result of “a relational framework” (Latina Feminist

Group, 2001, p. 19). What is powerful is the way in which we learn to listen to each other's *testimonio* with respect and compassion. *Testimonio* knowledge is not neutral, however, and it does not try to be neutral; it recognizes the value of tensions, contradictions and representations across the stories of *mujeres*. *Testimonio* is a learning experience that rescues situated knowledge given through generations of women's complicity. In consequence, *testimonio* has educational implications. By connecting *testimonialistas* across borders we are employing community cultural wealth and expanding upon a variety of knowledge, skills, and abilities utilized by *testimonialistas* to continue resisting different forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005).

### **Testimonio Pedagogy and Praxis**

*Testimonio* is deeply associated in the Chicana tradition—we hold that there is great value to centering a Chicana narrative form in our pedagogy, research, and praxis. *Testimonio* represents *el camino*/path for a more representative and democratic educational environment—especially with working in and with Students of Color. While reaching its preeminence in higher education as a process and a product of academic research, *testimonio* has also become its own pedagogy. *Testimonio* pedagogy allows people to connect across social positions, across differences, across language. *Testimonio* pedagogy facilitates opportunities to learn and perform aspects of *testimonio*, including issues surrounding reflexivity, collectivity, social awareness, and power imbalances (Flores Carmona & Luciano, 2014, p. 85). Because *testimonio* has a broad variety of pedagogical uses, and is typically coupled with a theoretical grounding, it is impossible to make simple generalizations about the purposes for which it might be used in the classroom, nevertheless many Chicanas and Latinxs have embraced this pedagogical and methodological genre.

In education, texts are never simply products; they are also vehicles through which instructors impart particular theories, methodologies, and epistemologies. When instructors incorporate *testimonio* into their curriculum, they are teaching not only the specific text and its historical context, but also introducing their students to concepts including intersubjectivity, subaltern studies, first-person narrative, and “alternative” epistemologies. For example, too often multicultural curricula “otherizes” the experiences of historically oppressed groups by making them objects of study and analyzing them using dominant pedagogies and modes of analysis (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). *Testimonio* creates an intersubjective, accessible learning experience that encourages new, radical ways of listening and connecting with a text. Cruz (2012) wrote that *testimonio* can be used to deconstruct and dismantle the ways that students have been taught to engage with academic texts. She explained that traditionally, students are taught to identify with the first-person speaker in a text and

construct him or her as an individualistic hero or protagonist; however, *testimonios* configure their speakers as part of a community, and reject the reader's "imperialist substitution" (i.e., identification) of themselves for the narrator (Cruz, 2012, p. 461). Instead, they invite the reader to engage in "radical listening,"<sup>2</sup> in which the reader is not just an observer but a participant.

Furthermore, *testimonio* genre's portrayals of injustice and calls to action leave little room for the reader to maintain a neutral, critical distance as one might when reading a conventional nonfiction text. These aspects of *testimonio* force the reader to take a side, and in doing so, engage with the content not just critically, but personally (Cruz, 2012). Prieto and Villenas (2012) praised this relational aspect of *testimonios*, noting that they "revealed fruitful tensions for mining the liminal and relational moments across difference and privilege" (p. 411). Instructors can also use *testimonios* as a tool to encourage their students to recognize alternative, non-positivist epistemologies based on communally understood truths rather than logic and scientific proof (Cruz, 2012; Delgado Bernal, 2001).

*Testimonio* itself is also a pedagogy in the sense that it is an inherent Chicana/Latina traditional mode of learning and of knowledge transmission. As in many marginalized societies, impoverished Chicana/Latina and Latinx people use oral tradition for functions that would be fulfilled by formal education and 'book learning' in mainstream U.S. American society. Passed from woman to woman, the Chicana/Latina tradition encompasses not only family and personal histories, but also communal history. Often, it also transmits a set of values and beliefs that run counter to dominant ideology (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). As Esposito (2014) and the Latina Feminist Group (2001) noted, social justice, activism, and resistance have an important place in Chicana/Latina feminism, and this is at least in part because they have been enshrined in the oral tradition. It should be no surprise, then, that introducing Chicana/Latina/Latinx modes of learning to the United States higher education system has been a difficult process that challenges both the dominant epistemologies and pedagogies of the academy. Yet, by adopting a Chicana feminist pedagogy, and the epistemologies that accompany it, we ensure that the classroom is a place where Latina/o students have their home epistemologies validated rather than rejected or excluded.

When it is practiced at the university, the pedagogy of *testimonio* challenges dominant assumptions about truth, objectivity, and marginality. *Testimonio's* way of transmitting knowledge

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<sup>2</sup> Cruz draws on a personal communication from Regina Day Langhout (2011) to explain radical listening this way: "Angela Davis defines 'radical' as 'grasping things at the root.' Radical listening, therefore, is listening for root ideas that are connected to a structural analysis. This means listening for what is being said and what is left unsaid. It means co-creating a space where what has been rendered invisible can be seen, spoken, and heard. To practice radical listening is to take seriously what is being said and to be in dialogue with the speaker in ways that facilitate a structural, radical analysis" (Cruz, 2012).

depends on the reader's ability to accept that the text is true, and that there are multiple layers of truth: the personal, the communal, the ideological, and the political. A personal anecdote might be fictionalized in service of relating a broader communal truth, or in building a cohesive ideological message. This disrupts and unravels the epistemologies that U.S. college students have learned since childhood: the scientific method, the supremacy of verifiable facts, and the 'unreliability' of subaltern voices. If instructors can successfully teach students to accept a *testimonio*-based pedagogy, it will not only help them to read and understand *testimonios*, but also introduce them to new critical orientations that they will apply elsewhere in their education.

### **Extending the Genre of *Testimonio* Pedagogy**

Given the profound capacity of *testimonio* as a genre of research to support individual agency, re-center the voices of the collective of marginalized communities, and advocate for social change, we seek, through our work not only as researchers, but also as teachers, and leaders to extend the *testimonio* genre. In this section we will each share, via our *testimonios*, how we employ *testimonio* as pedagogy as teachers and leaders, followed by a discussion of how we view the impact of our individual and collective works.

Disrupting traditional notions of leadership informed by our *testimonios* and lived experience provides us with new visions and possibilities to reflect and enact a praxis that is informed by our *feminista* epistemologies and our cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Chicana/Latina/Latinx *liderazgo feminista* honors the uniqueness and the wholeness of every person and in the service to individuals and the collective. This praxis promotes the sharing of *testimonios en confianza*. Listening deeply is an essential trait of this *feminista* praxis—an important leadership quality but often overlooked. We now shift to each sharing our reflections on our leadership and pedagogy.

#### **Vanessa**

As a faculty adjunct instructor, I noticed that *testimonio's* pedagogy changes when it is introduced to the university, but the university can also be changed by its exposure to *testimonio* (Burciaga & Cruz Navarro, 2015). When Chicana/Latina perspectives take their place in the classroom, they validate the experiences of Chicana/Latina students and their epistemologies. According to Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito (2009), Latinx students are still underrepresented and marginalized on university campuses, despite universities' apparent attempts to diversify and be inclusive. Furthermore, these students' experiences are "often more complex and tumultuous" (p. 560) than those of their White peers, because they must adjust to an environment that is irresponsive to them at best, and hostile at

worst. Engaging with *testimonio* has the potential to be one of the few inclusive experiences Chicana/Latina students have in their college careers (Urrieta Jr. & Villenas, 2013). When students engage with *testimonio*, they are learning, using familial and communal epistemologies and forms of knowledge transmission, rather than being excluded, otherized, and/or having their experience seem illegitimate (Delgado Bernal et al., 2009; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Students engage with a pedagogy that places Chicanas/Latinas in a position of authority and as knowers—the students are also holders and producers of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

This pedagogy has the potential to empower Chicana/Latina students and faculty alike. This validation of narratives and overall sense of empowerment are *testimonio* tenets that emanate what a *mujerista* leadership looks like to me, both inside the classroom and in the community. My curriculum encompasses concepts from Chicana feminist theory and pedagogy to encourage and empower students to transcend borderlands and equip them to become active agents for social change.

### **Ma. Eugenia**

*Testimonio* speaks to the marginalization that Chicanas and Latinas experience in educational spaces (Latina feminist Group, 2001). *Testimonio* pedagogy allows us to represent our lived experiences, becoming the collective “I”. My pedagogy is informed by *mujeres* such as the authors of *Telling to live: Latina feminist testimonios* (2001), Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Dolores Delgado Bernal, C. Alejandra Elenes, and of course by the works of *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS). Judith has modeled by sharing her own *testimonio* of oppression and her growth. In this way, a profound intimacy emerged and the classroom became a sort of kitchen-space where each of us represented an ingredient that created both a personal and collective *testimonio*. As a result, after constant discussions, we participated in the MALCS Summer Institute—where we shared our *testimonios*. There, at El Rito, we were able to meet with *feministas* Chicanas/Latinas and Indigenous *mujeres* who have been resisting for years the structural and personal elements that subjugate us in academia and in our communities. These *feministas* have created *cadena de solidaridad* (Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012) whose fruits will help us continue our resistance in education.

### **Judith**

I serve as advisor and mentor to the three co-authors of this piece. We expand on *testimonio* scholarship and incorporate our own commitments and passions. We each are drawn to *testimonio* for similar, yet different reasons, and enact it in different ways—in our classroom and beyond. We all center *testimonios* as the foundation of our courses from which to then explore critical theories. I have

been profoundly impacted by pedagogues who employ *testimonio* in their praxis and I have learned greatly from *testimonios* of *mujeres* who were or are leaders in higher education. Now, I am also constantly learning from students, such as Vanessa, Ma. Eugenia, and Yvonne, who push the genre further, methodologically and pedagogically. Together, the four of us locate our motivation and our *ganas* to persevere because we have been influenced and inspired by *mujerista* leaders in higher education. However, these *mujeres* have enacted a praxis that deviates and challenges our traditional understanding of “leader” by putting into practice the tenets of *testimonio*.

### **Yvonne**

What *testimonio* has given me is a conceptual framework that feels aligned with who I aspire to be as a Chicana *feminista* scholar. Delgado Bernal et al., (2012) explains that *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” (p. 364). What particularly moved me was learning about *testimonio* as an inherently political act because it seeks to compel the *testimonialista* as well as the reader to action (Anzaldúa, 1990; Saldana, Castro-Villareal & Sosa, 2013; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Prieto & Villenas, 2012; Saavedra & Pérez, 2012; Saldaña, Castro-Villareal, & Sosa, 2013; Sánchez & Ek, 2013). The idea of having a political impact spoke to my heart because at my core I want to know, or at least believe, that someone may, in a tangible way, benefit from my work.

What called my soul to employing *testimonio* as methodology and pedagogy is the theoretical framework in which it is founded. I met myself in the lives and pages of the Chicana feminists I studied. In *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras* (1990), I found an intellectual home for both my head and heart. In the introduction, Anzaldúa (1990) writes, “the pull to believe we ‘belong’, that we can blend in, that we can be accepted like any other ‘American’ can seduce us into putting our energies into the wrong battles and into picking allies who marginalize us further” (p. xxii). Anzaldúa hooked me because I identify as Muslim and what she wrote spoke to me about what it means to be a Mexi-Cali Muslim. I have experienced Islamophobia, racism, and sexism, and it has been painful. I have also experienced the hurt that comes with finding that someone you love and respect holds deep-seated bias against your community. In my role as researcher, I see myself in solidarity with the *testimonialistas* in my study. They have been so generous with me, not just with their time but with their vulnerability and openness. As a teacher, now when I ask my students to write about their educational experiences I feel a deeper sense of compassion. I feel sad about the pain they have experienced by institutions that should serve them but don’t. However, I also recognize that it is through our teaching that we come full circle—we

continue to self-reflect and implement the learning from our *testimonios*. This knowledge becomes part of our praxis.

To the four of us then, *testimonio* pedagogy serves multiple, simultaneous purposes—to engage in the deeply personal (and political) work of writing our own *testimonios*. In these *testimonios* we are telling the collective his/her story of our communities. However, we move beyond merely telling our stories to reflect on our privileges, oppressions, beliefs, and the tensions we bring to academia. Such work, by definition pokes at the sore spots and (re)opens many old wounds. In this sense, we name our privilege, our oppression, and we tend to the ensuing feelings of collectivity and solidarity. The end goal of *testimonio* pedagogy and methodology is not only to re-center our marginalized experiences as sources of knowledge, but to legitimize our agentic political voices through our struggles and actions.

### **Conclusion: Testimonios in Educational Spaces to Re-conceptualize Leadership**

I recall several behind closed doors meetings where I meet and discuss the progress of many of my doctoral student advisees. Before a proposal or dissertation defense I meet with each committee member to know “how they will vote.” This is a tactic I learned from my mentors. From Cecilia I learned to constantly ask how students are doing-- personally and professionally. My approach is to serve the whole student, to listen to their *testimonios* of mindbodyspirit. That is what I learned from *mujeres lideres* and that is my praxis.

–Judith

In the previous sections, we offered our *testimonios* about how we arrived at the genre, how we each enact *testimonio* methodology and pedagogy, and how we are reflecting on our own agency by considering how we lead from our seat in academia. In this section, we offer our experiences and reflection as a way to contribute to the body of literature not only about *testimonio*, but also leadership. Given how we employ *testimonio* in our work and how it propels us to be leaders in our communities and in educational spaces, we conclude by offering our thoughts on the need to re-conceptualize how we define and understand ‘leadership’ in higher education.

For Chicana/Latina/Latinx educational leadership to achieve its full potential, we must (re)envision an educational leadership approach that is transformative and culturally responsive. Community cultural wealth is a powerful concept that helps Latinx educational leaders to understand our ways of knowing and to enact Latinx educational leadership. Yosso’s (2005) concept of community cultural wealth refashions the traditional concept of cultural capital. It holds that marginalized

communities, particularly those of color, have valuable forms of cultural capital, such as, traditions of resistance, rich linguistic heritage, supportive social structures, and unique ethical and aspirational values. Educational leaders can leverage this cultural wealth to enact resistance and pursue progress toward social justice.

Bridging our community cultural wealth and *testimonio* methodology and pedagogy brings a unique value to the Latinx educational leadership approach. *Testimonio* helps us consider the sociocultural conditions that have shaped educational institutions and by enacting our cultural wealth, we challenge the narrow parameters of conventional, top-down educational leadership. This allows us to look from within, leveraging our unique Chicana/Latina/Latinx epistemologies in order to enact transformative change in educational spaces (Pedroza & Mendez-Morse, 2016, p. 70).

When it comes to educational leadership, racial makeup's influence is typically overlooked as a factor affecting administrator's leadership practice. Higher education institutions disregard the community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) that Latinx educational leaders bring to their practice (Pedroza & Mendez-Morse, 2016) and we are constantly trying to overcome gender and racial barriers. According to Cecilia P. Burciaga, "With a glass ceiling, you are allowed to see the next level. At least you can see through it and practice or prepare for the promotion. But an adobe ceiling is dense, impenetrable, and it doesn't allow you to see to the next level" (cited in Rodriguez, 1994, p. 23). How pertinent to think of Chicana/Latina leaders as constantly trying to break through an adobe ceiling, even at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). After all, we do live in the Borderlands and we all are border crossers of sorts. We are not trying to break through the glass ceiling; we are trying to break through the adobe ceiling. Also, Darder (2012) posited that as scholars of color/marginalized scholars we are inundated by "neoliberal policies upon the work of border intellectuals within the university, whose scholarship seeks to explicitly challenge longstanding structural inequalities and social exclusions" (p. 412). We believe that we must challenge longstanding definitions and representations of whom we consider leaders and embrace, validate practices such as those enacted by Cecilia P. Burciaga.

However, we believe it is necessary to analyze leadership using a cultural collective approach that unveils the social construction of knowledge and identifies and signifies what a leader is and what transformative leadership looks like. We want to decolonize the individualistic and patriarchal constructions that connect leadership with a person's individualistic trajectory and move toward a *liderazgo feminista*. Reconceptualizing leadership as a collective effort also relates to Chicana feminism as a movement across the fluid Latinidades we embody (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). We are *lideres testimonialistas* as we share our *testimonios* of resistance, work ethic, and strategic actions to achieve solidarity in and with our communities. In this vein, *mujeres lideres* have the ability to develop a

perspective from below, where we can see beyond specific events by connecting *testimonios* with major struggles. Hence, transformative educational leadership has a dual effect. Leaders divulge their *testimonios*, encourage students to voice their lived experiences on how they navigate the educational system—we share our paths and we model solidarity by taking concrete actions that open a world of possibilities for ourselves and for our students.

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