

EDITORS' COMMENTARY

Lived Experiences and Cultural Practices

Tiffany Ana López and Josie Méndez-Negrete

Life paths encompass the spectacles, rituals, performances, and experiences that inform the ways we carve the material spaces and affective places comprising our lives. The works brought together in this volume stage a conversation about the range of life paths encountered by Chicanas and Latinas: paths that have been set before us, paths we chose for ourselves, worn paths we blindly follow, new paths given to us by others who have forged the way, as well as the many paths we have had to fiercely blaze or reconstruct.

The trajectory of the works in this issue address a spectrum of life paths spanning from the representational realm of popular culture to the experiential realms of family, work, and school. Tanya González' essay, "Is Ugly the New Sexy? Dilemmas of Latina Sexuality on *Ugly Betty*," presents a critical reading of the *Ugly Betty* television series crafted for American audiences. Her essay focuses on the show's complex representation of Betty as a sexual subject and active agent in the forging of her own life paths. González sees the series as marking an important shift in representations of Latinas within dominant visual media, especially regarding its portrayal of Latina sexuality not as a totalizing factor of identity performance (that is, a replication of historically stereotypic images of the Latin spitfire) but as an integral component of Latina subjectivity. González reads Betty as illustrative of new mestiza consciousness in action, "a rare example of a complex, intelligent, feminist, professional, and sexual Latina subject." She also critically spotlights *Ugly Betty* for the ways it offers a most empowering message for Latinas about how to "put yourself first while still loving those around you."

Adelina Anthony's *Bruising for Besos* furthers discussion about matters of representation, sexuality, and Latina subjectivity. Anthony's play explores the ways in which family and violence inform our life paths. Her work stages several emotionally wrenching and politically urgent questions: How do we absorb personal and cultural violence and pass our wounds on to others? How do our expressions of love and friendship, including the sharing of emotion and sex, reflect residues of trauma? How do we resist the gravitational pull of paths that easily appear before us yet are dangerous precisely because of their toxic familiarity? Her protagonist indirectly poses this last question when she realizes, "In a flash it was like my father was in my body and I knew exactly how to hurt another female." Notably, Anthony describes her work as an "offering" designed to help audiences see the paths we need to carve in working towards personal and cultural healing.

In "Commercializing Death and Desegregating Gender: Twentieth Century Funeral Practices in Central Tejas and the Border," Ana M. Juárez and Marta L. Salazar clarify the importance of working from the personal as a springboard for critical engagement: "We realized that everyday rituals could help us understand our own culture and how it had changed over the years." Their essay explores how gender roles within families and communities have shifted with the evolving commercialization of death (that is, the many accessories and props marketed as necessary to prepare the body and memorialize the dead). Juárez and Salazar chart shifts in the specific spheres of family and labor and use their data to inquire whether the break from engendering particular types of emotional work and physical labor ultimately leads to the daily practice of gender equality.

In her personal narrative, "Elvira: A Testimonio on Employment and Sisterhood," Dolores Zapata Murff reflects on a past job search. Her testimonio speaks to the importance of creative approaches to problem solving and the ways that advocacy—for oneself and for one's sisters, both literal and political

hermanas—opens new life paths in very concrete and enduring ways. The role of the testimonio is also important to the thinking about life paths in Cindy Cruz' review of Gilda Ochoa's *Learning from Latino Teachers* (2007). Her review discusses the significant contribution of Ochoa's text and finds much of the critical force of this work born from its sharing of educational testimonios about struggles of Latino students today, including challenges of family, poverty, teacher support and expectations, language and assimilation, tracking and high-stakes testing. Cruz' lens also focuses our attention on the importance of these early life paths, the role they have played for each of us, and the critical ways we might constitute these paths for others.

Juanita Cabello's book review essay, "Josefina López' *Hungry Woman in Paris* (2009): A New Latina Chick Lit/ Travel Narrative" contextualizes her reading of López' novel within contemporary travel narratives and the newly emergent and quickly evolving genre of chick lit (which has also been termed "chica lit" in reference to works by Latina writers such as Alisa Valdes-Rodrigues and Michelle Serros). Cabello observes that these novels focus on "a generation of modern, upwardly mobile, professional Latina misfits who, finding themselves at dangerous turning points and no longer able to compromise, are stepping out of their lives to redefine their identities, careers, and relationships." These genres are thus devoted to literal personal movement as characters change courses in their treading of life paths.

Notably, the theme of life paths also speaks to us editors in poignant ways that powerfully charge our reading of the works gathered together in this issue of the journal. I [Tiffany] am in the process of completing a project about trauma and violence that has taken me nearly ten years to fully narrate in ways that I feel will be most critically productive to others. We have been taught that our personal experiences and our professional lives exist on separate registers. Our

individual and collective work, however, repeatedly shows us that this thinking is not only false, but also highly toxic. My survival process—struggling through personal trauma while also working to forge a career in academia and generate a critically enriching dialogue that makes sense of the experiences of violence and trauma—clarified that the personal and the critical are always mutually intertwined tributaries on the same life path. Traumatic events are disruptive because they fragment our sense of self and shatter personal wholeness.

Disassociation is a defense mechanism meant to aid our survival; it is not meant to be a permanent state of being. The strict separation of personal experience and critical production feeds disassociation and adds to the toxicity of violence and trauma. Chicana/Latina epistemology, which is more simply defined as the ways we know the world, is born from the different tributaries of our life paths. As a genre, testimonio provides one of the most productive narrative spaces for articulating the sources of knowledge production, and it illustrates the importance of reading various locations as belonging to a shared cartography. Testimonio work is not simply the sharing of personal experience, but the working from personal experience to illustrate theory, enact criticism, and create social change. Given our present projects and experiences, it seems timely for us to end our commentary for this issue by means of a testimonio.

I [Josie] recently completed the process of gaining citizenship in the United States. The night before my interview, I had nightmares. Fears framed my sleep, and in a lucid state I witnessed myself attempting to grasp the potential questions that would come my way.

I mentally tour the archive I've amassed of American history and civics. Four hundred thirty-five congressmen; if I remember that the three is between the four and the five, I'll be okay... 'cause it's easy to remember one hundred senators—two for every state of the union—it's fifty states. Kay Bailey

Hutchison, John Cornyn, and Barack Obama. Who wouldn't know that name? Agency acronyms, names of institutions, and other governmental entities swam inside my mind, as I tossed and turned in preparation for February 17, 2010.

The day of my appointment, I arrived about fifteen minutes before the scheduled 1:00 p.m. time slot. Two groups of individuals arrived after I did, but were called for their interview ahead of me. About ten minutes past one, an elderly man (probably my contemporary, but at this point in my life, age has become a slippery slope) asks me in Spanish, "Are you here for your interview?"

"Sí," I responded, adding that I had been waiting for about half an hour, since I don't like to arrive late for such appointments. I also shared that I still feel somewhat intimidated by *la migra*, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)[!], or whatever it calls itself now.

"I waited two months for it," the gentlemen offered, more to comfort himself than to provide me the information. I commiserated with him by responding, "Me, too." We glanced at the floor as a sign that we had said all that needed to be said. There was nothing else to add.

In the lobby, where all the prospective citizens awaited their turn, a woman of about my age and physique called out my name. It was about 1:15 p.m. I answered, got up, and made my way towards the door from where her voice emerged, but I could not see her. One thousand and one, one thousand and two, one thousand and three—it took three seconds for her to make her way out. I had to work to catch up to her.

"It takes a while for the elevator to arrive," she explained when I asked if she thought I had not come to my appointment. She added nothing else and

remained somewhat distant, yet very professional, as she led me to her office on the third floor.

“What is your name?” I asked.

She seemed a bit remorseful as she answered, “We’re so busy we forget to introduce ourselves. My name is Amada Guerra.”

“Good to meet you,” I replied.

We had formally made each other’s acquaintance.

She continued, “I will have to swear you in. Please raise your right hand and repeat after me, ‘I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.’”

I did. And I meant it.

From there, Guerra began to leaf through the four-inch binder that contained all my immigration information—legal or otherwise—as if searching for a beginning point.

“Your name is Josephine?” she asked, almost as if not expecting a response.

“Yes,” I responded. “It’s one of those migra stories.”

The agent who came to see about our status and to give us a permit—A 014 703 520—changed my name to Josephine; it’s been the legal name I have used since. “After all, your name is Josephine. You’re in America now,” I recall him telling me.

“There are many of those stories,” Guerra said as she continued to systematically go through every page of my file. “I’ve had to deal with children who have grown up with counterfeit birth certificates, who come around asking for passports, only to find out that they are not citizens. There are more stories than I can tell. You’ve had two orders for deportation? Right?”

I informed her that I knew of one but not two.

“November 5, 1965, in California,” she offered, pointing out that “your parents came here as illegals and they, too, had deportation orders.”

“I didn’t know that. I knew my father had signed up as a bracero during that workers’ program, but I had no clue that my mother had also come without documents,” I explained. Without any prodding, I offered, “They both got their papers in the 1950s, before the Bracero Program ended in 1964.” However, she clearly wasn’t listening; it was as if the information didn’t matter to her.

By this time Guerra appeared to have come across the administrative beginning of the story. With the file slanted forward, I was finally able to make out the handwriting. The penmanship was mine. It was my written response to the first deportation order.

“I was the translator for the family. I completed that handwritten document,” I heard myself say through the tears I was shedding as I recalled that time when our family broke apart. I was also hit with the force of realizing I had translated the documents that could have deported both my twelve-year-old sister Felisa and myself at the age of seventeen, but for the kindly immigration agent who had given us a permit to stay. In hindsight, I imagine he wanted to avert worse consequences for our family, given what we had already experienced with our father having been arrested for molesting his daughters.

"The second deportation order was sent in 1972," Guerra continued, without even looking in my direction.

"That's when I applied for citizenship the first time," I commented. Though in fear that this disclosure may prevent me from becoming a United States citizen, I continued, "I had been led to believe that, after having been here five years with my A 014 703 520, I could apply to become a citizen." I paused and waited for her response, but she didn't say a word and almost undetectably shook her head from side to side, adding that some immigrants are not very "sophisticated" about these matters. "I don't mean to imply this about your mother," she began, "but I don't know what some of these parents think."

If she found the reported cause for our family breakup given by the officer who came to our home, Amada Guerra didn't tell me. However, as she delved further into the file, her face softened a bit. I could see more compassion reflected in her eyes. Her body language appeared more relaxed as she continued reviewing my case.

I'm not sure if her intention was for me to sweat it out. However, if it had not been as cold and dry as it was, I would have definitely been drenched.

As we went through the process, I learned that Amada Guerra liked to work in the field and missed the outdoors. She had worked in Laredo and El Paso. We talked about the people she interviewed, particularly those artists that come to perform in the United States. Two names that came up were José José and Juan Gabriel, and it was the latter whose music became ground for a common connection.

I became more comfortable. Guerra completed my file review and began asking for verification of the data I provided.

“Yes, that’s my address.”

“Yes, we are buying our home.”

“I’ve lived there since 2000.”

“I travel to Mexico three to five times a year and sometimes not so often.”

“Yes. I went to Europe and Venezuela.”

Finally, she observed that I had been a member of many professional organizations, which I proudly acknowledged. With that, the questions ended.

I did not have to renounce my country of birth nor my flag. I did, however, pledge allegiance to the United States—not literally but figuratively.

“Do you swear to abide by the meaning of the pledge of allegiance?”

“Of course,” I answered.

“Will you, if called for, agree to serve this country in time of need?”

“It would be an honor,” I said and added, “As a social worker it is my responsibility to serve in time of need—my professional code of ethics makes it so.”

Then the test came, beginning with literacy. First, Guerra asked me to read three simple sentences: “Who lives in the White House? Who is the President of the United States?” (In the stress of it all, I forgot the third one.) Of course, I could easily read these interrogatories without much fanfare. Next, I had to demonstrate my ability to write in the language of the nation. I was ready to write an essay that

would show my appreciation and value for the nation and what it has given me. However, all I had to do was to write a response in a form that provided me three blank rectangles numbered 1, 2, and 3 to match the questions I first read. I was instructed to answer question one. To my surprise, Guerra told me to write the response in cursive letters, and she dictated it: "The President of the United States lives in the White House." With that, I passed the literacy test.

Amada Guerra believed that I gave their computers too much credit, so the next step was for me to sign, not the immigration translation that had become my formal name in daily life, but my old Mexican name, in triplicate: Josefina Mendez Negrete. No accent. No hyphen. Just plain Josefina Mendez Negrete. After this, I signed my official name one more time. This was to request a final change to my name, for which I got a new American name—Josie.

Having established what my new name would become, I was instructed to write that name on the photographs I had submitted. To get the pictures ready to accept the ink, Guerra had to erase the sides to take off the sheen. I signed my name, Josie Méndez Negrete, beginning with the left side and continuing all the way to the top.

There were no bells and whistles. No congratulations.

Amada Guerra closed our interview with the information that I would be sworn in on March 25. She couldn't guarantee that exact date. It would be sometime in March.

I thanked her and expressed my appreciation. I left the interview, wishing her a fast recovery from her recent surgery. Also, I suggested she use aloe vera sap directly from the plant, as it speeds the healing process, but not without a prayer.

My interview was complete. However, the icing on the cake was to find myself face-to-face with a Mexican American Studies (MAS) alumnus, a young man who had been my student—and had prodded me to become a citizen. Sure he had heard my voice, he had come around to give me his regards.

“See, it wasn’t that hard. What took you so long?” He said as he gave me a hug.

Josie’s commentary implores us to think about the performances of citizenship we are all expected to deliver. These narratives and testimonios evidence life paths as to whether we are considered cultural citizens by virtue of a legal process or if we are to remain citizens in name only. The narratives in this volume illustrate the many life paths we traverse to exert our agency and to create the change that is possible.