

TRANSLATING CHICANA TESTIMONIOS INTO PEDAGOGY FOR A WHITE MIDWESTERN CLASSROOM

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Based upon my own testimonios, I merge critical education and testimonio to argue for the integration of love, community, and a disruption of the teacher/learner binary within higher education. In this article, I present the concept “pedagogy of love” and suggest how it can be accomplished through a true dedication to a shift within the prevailing meritocratic educational model. Using testimonio methodology, I examine the obstacles prohibiting acts of love and the use of testimonios in a university classroom. Currently, faculty are pushed to demonstrate productivity through entrepreneurial endeavors, rather than building a community of engaged and critical learners. It is in this era of standardization and over mechanization that faculty struggle to maintain meaningful humanizing relationships with students, which is even more complicated for women faculty of color who attempt to map onto a white middle-class student body their own ideas of a community-building framework. Throughout my narrative of survival and celebration, I recount the challenges in integrating a pedagogy of love in the university space.

Key Words: pedagogy, love, testimonio, education, and community

While revolutionary transborder theorist Che Guevara was commenting on the qualities of a revolutionary political leader, I expand his application and attribute this sentiment to another form of revolutionary: the educator. As revolutionaries, educators respond to and engage with sociohistorical politics, and are responsible for guiding emerging generations into a shared and collective future. The obstacle before us, as educators is the fear of an enormous responsibility and the work it may entail. Inevitably, the fear to engage with students as members of our own learning community, particularly as collaborators in creating and generating knowledge, has erected an immense division between faculty and students.

The false dichotomy of teacher and learner (Freire 1970) feeds such fear, thereby veiling the hierarchy as somehow necessary for education.

I believe one way to disrupt the teacher-student binary and ultimately to confront such apprehension is by establishing a sense of community and love within the classroom. Situated within the method of *testimonio* and Chicana/Latina feminist theory, I argue for the necessity of a pedagogy of love and community within the space of the university. One could argue, however unsuccessfully, that the importance of love and community is embedded within the learning experience; however, these elements are removed when the learning becomes contained within systems rooted in certain capitalist ideologies, such as meritocracy.

Framed by a Chicana feminist methodology, I demonstrate the ways in which *mis testimonios* as a Chicana/mother/scholar/activist translate into a specific pedagogy used within a predominantly white, Midwestern classroom. By exploring the obstacles that prohibit acts of love and the use of *testimonios* in the academy, I have discerned that these obstacles consequently push faculty to equate scholarly productivity with entrepreneurial endeavors. In response to this neoliberal turn, I will briefly chronicle my own experiences as a Chicana/mother/scholar/activist working within the university. My work is directly inspired by the work of Chicana feminist scholars C. Alejandra Elenes, Francisca E. González, Dolores Delgado Bernal, and Sofia Villenas (2001), who complicate the term “pedagogies” to include those Chicana, Indigenous, and feminist perspectives that allow us merge our knowledge from the home with the community. Moreover, my sensibility is intimately connected with Gloria Anzaldúa’s conceptualization of *mestiza* consciousness, a Chicana feminist epistemology that straddles a multiplicity of borders (language, cultures, sexualities, spirituality among others) while “balancing opposing power” (Delgado Bernal 2001).

These Chicana scholars helped form my entry into academia, particularly my pedagogical practices with and relationships to students whose previous experiences are drastically unlike my own. Nevertheless, my students and I are linked through geography, access to higher education, and the pursuit of uprooting systemic inequities. Taking into account both our differences and our similarities in my commitment to building a community, I teach in a way that claims the classroom, however obliquely defined, as a learning space founded in revolutionary love. The understanding of this type of love is grounded in the indirect teachings of mi familia, who continue to believe that despite socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic obstacles, *echando la mano* (lending a hand) is what marks one as *un buen ser humano*. And thus, my story begins.

Beginning the Journey

Echando la mano took root for me in the second grade when I decided my career choice was to be an elementary school teacher, preferably teaching in a school that serves migrant farmworker families. In a time when most classmates aspired to be soldiers, princesses, or pop stars, I envisioned my future career as a teacher of farmworker children in Arizona. I'm not quite sure why Arizona. While my Midwestern Chicano family, whose Indigenous roots were in Texas and New Mexico, had never visited the state, I nonetheless yearned to be in the Southwest. The elders in my family had spoken so unfavorably about Texas that I had a deep-seated disdain for the Lone Star State without ever having visited it, and since my childhood travels were limited primarily to farms around the region, Arizona was the only option that came to mind.

My grandmother lamented how poorly her sixteen children were treated by whites and elite Hispanics in Texas. It is significant to articulate the racial and class divisions that exist between Hispanics and Chicanos. The individuals who

identified as Hispanics derived from communities whose class and racial positions were quite dissimilar from my Indigenous-identified, racially marked, farmworker Chicano family. As used within this article, Hispanics are those individuals whose socioeconomic status and European ancestry markedly distinguish them from other Spanish-speaking laborers of Indigenous and mestizo ancestry.

As a child, it was quite a shock to learn that *nuestra raza*—with whom I thought I shared a racial identity—intentionally distanced themselves from migrant farmworkers, like that of my family. Perhaps our physical presence served as a reminder of the legacy of Chicanos in the US and of their own *campesino* or Indigenous ancestry. I could feel the pain in my grandmother's eyes when she shared stories of life in Texas. These painful testimonios were enough to deter her nearly two hundred grandchildren and great-grandchildren from ever questioning their matriarch's memories. We trusted that living in *el norte* was the best place for *nuestra familia*. Why wouldn't it be?

During one of our many kitchen table conversations-turned-lessons, my grandmother shared the story of my Tío David, who at the age of five was hit by a pick-up truck. Tío David's older siblings witnessed the horrible accident and wept as their younger brother lay crumpled on the street. The mother of sixteen, a proud woman who rarely cursed, could barely bring herself to finish the sentence: “¿Qué piensas, que dijo? Ese bolillo, dijo, ‘Oh well, just one less Mexican on the streets.’ El hijo de...” After this incident, my grandparents packed their children into a station wagon and went, as we say, *pa'l norte*. Stories of such trying experiences are part of my childhood memory, and experiences like these remind younger generations to actively remember and resist oppression (Torres 2003).

Tales of *La Llorona* and *La Lechusa* narrated *nuestra vida* as *mexicanos*, as Chicanos, and as migrants. These stories testified to our existence, strength,

ingenuity, and *sobrevivencia*: we were unwanted guests in a rural America that was built upon and fed by our labor. As described by Chicana feminist Ruth Trinidad Galván (2006), *sobrevivencia* provides spaces where Chicanas and Latinas can move beyond plain victimhood to realize their ability to satiate hopes and dreams in creative, joyful ways. These testimonios serve as the guiding tools for cultural survival and quickly translate into strategies for my life as an academic. As a professor, I believe it is my personal responsibility to map these lessons onto my academic life as a means to support *mi comunidad* of engaged learners, or individuals committed to enriching the lives of historically marginalized peoples. These testimonios, furthermore, serve as a pedagogical tool for disrupting hegemonic educational models. My experience has been that exercising testimonios in this way allows students and me to build *comunidad* in our classroom, regardless of where we locate our home. For me, *comunidad* is a migratory concept that allows us to move back and forth between various communities and different times. As a professor working primarily with white students, this is especially crucial as we each move in and out of one another's *comunidades*. In working with this idea of community, I am actively transforming the culture of academia by creating linkages with students whose experiences are antithetical to my own by virtue of our separate access to social privileges based on race, class, and gender.

In response, testimonios continue to serve as the backdrop for my constantly evolving pedagogical knowledge. The challenge in sharing such intimate moments is freeing myself to do so, particularly as my audience's experiences are so different from my own. The following sections will illustrate the ways in which I work through tensions when analyzing social inequity as a farmworker, bilingual, Chicana professor with predominantly white, middle-class, English-dominant students.

Testimonios as Methodology and Pedagogy

As both a methodology and a pedagogy, testimonios emerge from within Chicana and Latina feminist scholarship as knowledges that challenge hegemonic methodologies which may systematically subordinate Chicanas and Latinas. By relocating the central position of disciplinary research into inclusive spaces that reveal the interrelationships between myriad forms of oppression, testimonios bring Third- and Fourth-World knowledges from the margin to the center (Pérez Huber and Cueva 2012; Delgado Bernal 1998).

The Latina Feminist group (2001) describes testimonio as a means to centralize lived realities in creating knowledge and theory, emphasizing the role that lived and embodied experience performs when theorizing our realities as women of color. By using testimonios, we acknowledge those whose voices have been historically marginalized as knowledge producers. Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez write that through testimonios “we come to understand this form of writing as part of the struggle of people of color for educational rights and for the recovery of our knowledge production” (2012, 526). As such, the use of testimonios for establishing alternative pedagogies within the university is central to any Chicana pedagogy as “the testimonio provides both a methodology and a theory of hope and liberation” (532). Drawing upon the lineage of Chicana/Latina scholars, as well as engaging with critical race theory (CRT)—especially Latino critical race theory (LatCrit) and testimonio—I foreground my pedagogical stance with *mis* testimonios.

My life in the academy began many years ago as an undergraduate activist in a small liberal arts college where I learned how to bridge activism with scholarship. It was through my undergraduate studies in a college of education that I came to view education as a “practice of freedom,” a

practice that encourages individuals to engage critically and creatively with reality to actively transform the world (Freire 1970). Those initial years on campus brought me an awareness of the need to expand access to education: to all communities rather than limiting entrance to a privileged few. My development as a scholar-activist presented me with a responsibility to join communities in the co-generation of knowledge, especially when this generation of knowledge informs the social systems shaping our collective histories. With this in mind, and through the guidance of multiple mentors, I became convinced to continue my graduate studies in a department of language, literacy, and sociocultural studies at a Southwestern university. Basing my studies on critical educational theorists such as Antonia Darder, Marta P. Baltonado, Angela Valenzuela, Paulo Freire, and Kris Gutiérrez, among others, provided a foundation to examine the insidious ways in which numerous forms of structural microaggressions manifest in everyday practices.

When looking for my first academic position after graduate school, I was invited to join the faculty in a research-intensive institution in my home state (a miracle I attribute to the hundreds of velas my mother lit and her direct line to La Virgen). I considered it a joy to be close to familia with the ability to work with farmworker and urban Indigenous communities. However, my early classroom experiences were occasionally less than pleasant. For instance, during my second year teaching at the collegiate level, a young, white, undergraduate male student announced in the middle of an in-class group project, “This assignment is pointless. I would much rather do my philosophy work, right now. This is just a waste of time.” Upon hearing this statement, my face became flushed and my mind was flooded with two competing thoughts: 1) What an arrogant, entitled brat; 2) Great! Everyone knows I am a fraud.

Rather than vocalize either of these fleeting and conflicting thoughts, my response was something along these lines, “I am sorry you feel that way. The assignment is worth 20 percent of your final grade, so you can either do it or take the hit.” The entitlement of this student was obvious to me and to the students in the classroom, as he seemed to disregard the project’s objective, which was to assess student understanding of course concepts through mapping key ideas. After class, I promptly went to my office to shake off the shame, anger, and fear—all of which I still feel to this day. In instances such as these, I am left with deep wounds causing me to question my belonging in the university, not to mention the very place of my knowledge and its importance. It was and is through the use of testimonio that I am able to document my struggles, similar to many other women of color in the academy, and in turn use them to mentor other Chicana professors and others with similar experiences (Pérez Huber and Cueva 2012). In documenting this process, my experiences are drawn out for examination, reflection, and transformation. Through testimonio my experiences are laid bare for all to see.

In response to alienating experiences like those with the male undergraduate student, I chose to reflect upon the experience, evaluate my response, and walk through alternate scenarios. Rather than become embittered with such instances, I opted to reclaim these learning spaces threatened by ignorance to make them environments of *sobrevivencia*. Texts such as *Mothers in Academia* (2013), edited by Mari Castañeda and Kirsten Isgro, or *From Oppression to Grace* (2006), edited by Theodora Regina Berry and Nathalie Mizelle, collect testimonios that speak to the experiences of women academics as they attempt to strike a balance with home and academic life, despite many oppressive factors. One increasingly prevalent factor is the burden or expectation to divert valuable time from mentoring emerging scholars or serving the community to producing “fundable” research agendas.

In this era of standardization and neoliberalism, many scholars are pressured to privilege entrepreneurship over the maintenance of meaningful relationships across campus communities. Students are viewed as consumers and learning is a commodity easily packaged on the Fordist conveyor belt of neoliberal education. From this perspective, a market-driven model structures instruction around workforce preparation and subsumes the dialectical teaching/learning relationship necessary for nurturing critical thinking (Slaughter and Rhoades 2000). Moreover, this dilemma becomes exponentially more challenging for faculty of color who attempt to map onto a white, middle-class student body their own community-building framework.

Through a narrative of survival and celebration, I recount my personal struggles in integrating a pedagogy of “revolutionary love” in the university space as a means of community-building (Freire 1970; Guevara 1965). This article opens transdisciplinary spaces where a Chicana professor can argue for the need for *construcción de una pedagogía revolucionaria* within a predominantly white university. In my proposed pedagogía de revolución, I depend on testimonios to draw out the humanizing aspect of love, which links home, community, and academy into a cycle of cogeneration of knowledge. As part of this pedagogy, creating space for a revolutionary form of love in which individual and collective engagement in our multiple realities is necessary for the purpose of reciprocally humanizing one another. All of this is done in the spirit of a transformation from oppression to social equity.

Testimonios as Love

My testimonios are the life lessons that shape and protect me from a world attempting to disavow my sense of self. These testimonios were instructive in understanding familia, strength, humility, and unconditional love. For mi familia, testimonios serve as a unique knowledge system or epistemology

that both celebrates survival and shares the strategies needed to thrive in a perpetual state of struggle and celebration. Moreover, testimonios urge future generations to resist the dominant culture's ever-present pressure to leave behind those stories. In the words of Chicana feminist scholar Delgado Bernal, "Chicanas become agents of knowledge who participate in intellectual discourse that links experience, research, community, and social change" (1998, 560). It is through this perspective that I understand my own story, and how this story has been generations in the making. My work is similar to that of feminist pedagogues like Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal, and Villenas who place "cultural knowledge at the forefront of educational research to better understand the lessons from the homespace, our communities, and schools" (2001, 595). In considering this knowledge, I have come to understand my own journey into the academy and the epistemological location of my engaged research.

The first step of this journey was envisioning my academic trajectory. Envisioning, a term borrowed from Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, proposes that Indigenous people "imagine a future, that they rise above present day situations which are generally depressing, dream a new dream and set a new vision" (2012, 153). As I entered higher education, my dream was to work in a school filled with the children of farmworkers, serving mi comunidad, mi gente, mi raza. With dismal graduation rates for seasonal and migrant farmworkers, I resolved to serve the community from which I was nurtured. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) found that 50 percent of children of migrant workers attain a high-school diploma compared to 79 percent of the national average. It was my experience as a student in *las escuelas*—the term migrants use for migrant summer schools—where I learned that there were children out in the world like me who knew *chongo* was a real word, and that *jalandando en los labores* was part of life.

In describing Chicana feminist perspectives, Dolores Delgado Bernal writes:

Chicana feminist ways of knowing and understanding are partially shaped by collectives' experiences and community memory. Community and family knowledge is taught to youth through legends, *corridos*, and storytelling. It is through cultural specific ways of teaching and learning that ancestors and elders share the knowledge of conquest, segregation, patriarchy, homophobia, assimilation and resistance. (2002, 113)

In retrospect, attending the summer migrant programs presented opportunities to participate in the act of creating a collective memory. These spaces nurtured a sense of community that was difficult to establish among my Anglo classmates in a rural school system.

As children of farmworkers, we engaged in storytelling, mimicking our parents' discursive interactions braiding *chisme* with facts, opinions, and caution. Moments in the grassy playfields, on squeaky swings, or at lunch tables surrounded by other brown children reaffirmed my experience as a farmworker in the rural Midwest. They understood my parents' deep affection for La Virgen, John F. Kennedy, tortillas, tierra, and conversations in saggy lawn chairs sipping sodas. They called me Estrella, instead of the translated Star used by my Anglo friends. Children in those programs knew the difficulty in explaining that summer vacations were spent attending la escuela or working alongside our parents in agricultural labor, instead of accompanying family on vacations to theme parks or national landmarks.

Those collective moments grounded me in a community that spread across time and space, rooting me in a farmworker chronotope that expressed

“the inseparability of space and time” (Bahktin 1981, 84). Community transcended borders, migrant versus settled, Mexican national versus Chicano, Spanish dominant versus English dominant, El Norte versus Tejas. Migratory workers were connected, even if only for a few summer months throughout the year, by a collective story (Torres 2003). For me, *los labores* generated a sense of community that foregrounded an ethnic identity for those who remained in rural America. *Los del labor* shared a lived reality of struggle to provide for our family in work intentionally made invisible by dominant society. It was here that we recognized that our testimonios were not too different, one from another. The significance of these collective moments inspired my examination of socially constructed borders meant to deter community-building. Restructuring my community to include those whose experiences differ from my own through the use of testimonios became a focal point in my pedagogical formation.

My testimonio in the academy is one part among a continual process of counter-storytelling in an effort to combat traditional intellectual discourse, which clearly delineates positions of both the teacher and learner. We could name this Chicana form of counter-storytelling, as I have elsewhere, *counter-consejos*, a knowledge with testimonio at its core (Torrez 2013). Testimonios are rife with knowledge acquired organically and shape our consciousness, epistemologies, and ontological lens(es) (González and Padilla 2008). As a Chicana professor from a farmworker background, this embodied knowledge influences my interactions with other university community members, especially when centered in the classroom dynamics.

This vantage point shaped my first classroom interactions as a professor. Looking out at a classroom *lleno con* white, middle-class, and suburban students, I envisioned the various ways in which we could collectively

build community, regardless of our varied differences. Invoking the spirit of collectivity, I purposefully structured the classroom dialogue around migration stories. By reading migration stories of agricultural laborers, refugees, immigrants fleeing countries for myriad reasons or Indigenous people, the students began to see the interconnectedness of our individual stories and the formation of a shared and collective story. We saw our collective roles in supporting or dissenting against a nation-state that continually plays an active role in wars, forced relocation of entire peoples due to land grabs for natural resources, or the pressure upon rural people to migrate to urban centers in search of work due to the loss of their land. In examining our daily practices and how they (in)directly support global and local atrocities, we observed how at some point our individual histories both converged and diverged.

In many ways, my own historical reality began with a dusty school bus rambling through the streets to pick up brown children who awoke hours before the sun arose. Similar to other farmworker families, our early morning hour routines entailed our mothers preparing *tacos de papa y huevo* while our fathers sharpened hoes and bleary-eyed siblings dutifully washed the sleep from the tired faces of younger brothers and sisters. While our parents drove away, we obediently stood by the door waiting for the school bus to arrive. The eldest would look out for the bus, while the younger children would watch early morning cartoons, half asleep on the couch. The sun would rise on our parents' backs and through the school bus windows onto our tired faces. The bus rambled from one camp to the next, often times through dirt roads lining the fields where our parents worked. Through dust-covered windows, migrant children saw our collective and undeniable past, present, and future come together. Younger generations peered through dirty school bus windows to see a future they might not escape, a future of hoe-in-hand labor.

Although unspoken, we knew that as our twelfth birthday approached, our family responsibility would grow to include economically contributing to the household income. No longer a financial burden on our parents, we would share in feeding those who were too young, ill, or old to endure the hard labor. *Jalar en los labores* was a communal responsibility, a shared story, and an individual choice for past, present, and future generations.

In spite of personal sacrifice or consequence, we cared for one another, loved one another, and supported one another, even if at times reluctantly. Similar to Luis Urrieta's description of his family, in which he writes that our "families were groups of people and everyone had to unconditionally cooperate, like it or not" (2009, 4), I observed my mother work ten-hour days in the fields and then come home to cook, wash laundry, and clean the house. Not once did she complain about her body aching from the work or of her exhaustion.

My siblings and I sat with our father as he opened his wallet, dutifully handing the last fifty dollars to his younger brother who needed to buy Christmas gifts for *mis primos*, even though those few dollars were meant to buy our family's groceries for the week. Once my uncle left, my father turned to his family saying, "*Dinero es dinero, cuando morimos no sirve para nada. Pero familia nunca te deja. Nunca. Pueden ser enterados y todavía van a estar contigo.*"

The value of this statement, which I have intentionally left untranslated, cannot be understated when considering the importance of community in higher education. For me, this sentiment became a Chicana epistemology that helped me push through the silos of the academy and remain present to my responsibility in breaking down these isolating spaces.

Despite the financial strain that it caused my immediate family, my father understood that one provided for those in need without reservation. Without his having to directly lecture my siblings and me, we learned that our familial survival depended upon communal sharing of resources (material, linguistic, cultural, etc.). Delgado Bernal writes of how this transmitted intergenerational knowledge “help[s] us survive in everyday life by providing an understanding of certain situations and explanations about why things happen under certain conditions” (1998, 565).

These memories are particularly salient on days when a distressed young Chicana or Latina is seated in my office, searching for guidance on how to negotiate the cultural alienation of higher education. While I may be preparing for class or struggling through a writing project with a looming deadline, I remind myself that these moments are delicate and may have lasting implications for those sitting across from me. These students have recognized their position in an oppressive social hierarchy and refute complacency and academic violence. They seek guidance that may assist in their pursuit to confront racial microaggressions and covert acts of racism, manifested in many ways, including the reduction of funding to support students of color, the dismantling of ethnic studies programs, and the privileging of a white washed curriculum. This is both an opportunity and a responsibility for me.

Experience illuminates that our dialogues reveal the young women’s awareness that racial microaggressions can be more damaging than any overt act of racism. Critical race theorists Daniel Solorzano, Tara Yosso, and Miguel Ceja (2000) found the subtle pervasiveness of racist acts over an extended period of time can have damaging effects on student success. In their study of African American students, Solorzano, Yosso, and Ceja uncovered the various forms

that microaggressions take in academic and social contexts on a college campus: faculty ignoring students, setting low academic expectations, instilling a sense of self-doubt, or having African American public events heavily policed. Like the students in this study, my own students grapple to identify and oppose the effects of racial microaggressions with the intention of collectively confronting such racist acts. I believe that our individual energies should not solely be channeled toward personal goals, but coupled with establishing sustained responses and strategies to dismantle oppressive structures.

Just as my father handed over the last few dollars in his pocket to my uncle—an act of great love for family—it is my individual pedagogical responsibility to part with my time to serve as a listening ear, share my own experiences as a young Chicana undergraduate mother, and work across race and class to assist white students working through difficult personal issues. In sharing my testimonios and humanizing the experiences of all students, students may become convinced to complete their studies in the face of a parent's cancer diagnosis or to remain in a supportive marriage during a rough patch. In each instance, these students have continued to survive, thrive, and create transformation in their own ways. Through recognizing microaggressions and choosing to call attention to these practices through classroom dialogues, meetings with administration, scholarship, or in public forums we (students and faculty alike) have chosen to actively participate in dismantling oppressive structures. These joint efforts position us to join in a space of trust, community, and love.

Creating a Space for Love

Carrying this idea of *love*, I entered the academy hopeful that my love of teaching and learning, as well as for the students and for the ideals of the cogeneration of knowledge, was shared in my new learning community. As

scholar-activists, we could uplift our communities (both on and off campus) through validating knowledge produced in various spaces. I relished the idea of serving emerging scholars surrounded by other faculty with similar goals. Our *love* would bind us together, my familia would expand and I would learn from others' testimonios. Unfortunately, I found my notion of *love* is not shared by a majority of academics and is marginalized in the grind of professional survival.

Actions based on love cannot be enumerated in a file proving our professional accomplishments, and therefore it is commonly supplanted with a neoliberal agenda that privileges the production of a narrow-type of knowledge, albeit within a competitive and individualistic context. As neoliberalism persistently shapes education, it has systematically pushed learning institutions to depend upon funds from private corporations or encourage faculty to envision themselves as entrepreneurs. Hence, university classrooms regularly emulate corporate spaces in that they emphasize capital wealth, competition, and deemphasize working toward a common good. As such, this particular agenda pushes students to compete fiercely against one another, which is antithetical to my Latino and Indigenous communal orientation. With the increase of so-called education reformation, educational institutions must prove their success through arbitrary metrics excluding a consideration for the various ways in which students learn. Rather than nurture the complexity of individual student learning, learners must conform to acceptable models of learning based upon individuality, personal gain, and competition.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2014) found that the lack of Latino student support in Michigan resulted in a 63 percent high school graduation rate compared to their white peers who have an 80 percent graduation rate. Meanwhile, approximately 57 percent of Latinos attain a

bachelor's degree, despite a recent trend of climbing Latino college enrollment rates at the national level. When considering the low graduation rates among Latino students in higher education, and my personal challenges as a professor, I find my family's testimonios ever more relevant. As stated before, *love* is a communal responsibility. In some warped sense, I find that the academy's discriminatory treatment of Chicano and Latino students mirrors that of the reaction from the man who hit my uncle described earlier: desensitized and inhumane. On a national scale, institutional neglect manifests itself through the dismantling of bilingual education, removing Latino historical figures from the general curriculum, or the criminalization of youth of color, which has led to a school-to-prison system pipeline for Latino youth (Yosso 2005).

Such inhumanity is historic and firmly rooted in our collective memory (Torres 2003). The 1925 case of *Romo v Laird* is one of the first legal cases to focus on the "separate but equal" doctrine in education. Adolfo Romo, a Chicano rancher, sued a suburban Phoenix school district for denying his four children access to education. The designated "white-only" school refused the Romo children entrance, despite their state designation as legally "white" and state-mandated guarantee to equal education. As Indigenous and Mestizo people, Chicanos contested US racial laws and their injustices. Even though the Maricopa County Superior Court ruled in favor of the Romos nearly nine decades ago and the federal government required integration mandates in the 1950s, Chicano and Latino students continue to face de facto desegregation. These occurrences continue to chronicle the long struggles Latinos endure for educational equality (Valencia 2008). While Chicanos and Latinos have a tenuous relationship with the US educational system, beginning with forced segregation into under-resourced and ill-trained teachers to the denial of school entrance to bilingual Chicano students to the recent hostility in states like Arizona, Chicano and Latino communities continue to persist.

Persistence in the face of direct and indirect violence is born from love, which I believe is an explicit teaching from nuestras familias.

These teachings follow the words of bell hooks, who writes that “Love will always move us away from domination in all its forms. Love will always challenge and change us. This is the heart of the matter” (2003, 137). Love strengthened my mother the days she worked the fields—hoe in hand—after having completed her shift at Walmart. It strengthened my father, who would always find the time to repair my grandfather’s truck after returning home from sun-up-to-sun-down workday in the sugar beet fields. These actions demonstrated that love was not a privilege, but a commitment that one entered willingly. Love was not an *if*; it just *was*. Similar to my own fate as a farmworker, love was a communal responsibility, a shared story, and an individual choice. It is this *love* that drives my motivation to interact with students as engaged scholars. This is illustrated through my development of community partnerships where students are invited to become collaborators in a number of capacities. For example, students were included in my establishment of a nonprofit organization serving urban Indigenous communities and co-created generated curricular materials for an Indigenous summer camp. On these occasions students and off-campus community members are seen as invaluable co-creators of knowledge and necessary to push the boundaries of the academy to integrate spaces of love.

The love I have as a Chicana professor for nuestra gente energizes me during demanding times, and strengthens la comunidad. These stories remind me that as brown people we are physical manifestations of our collective testimonios. Although some of us have left las labores and those calluses have slowly disappeared, the hours of working alongside our families are forever imprinted on our bodies. We take those informal learning spaces, coined

by Delgado Bernal (2002) as *home pedagogies*, with us onto campus. Home pedagogies become those informal life lessons by which we learn strategies of resistance, challenging Eurocentric norms of higher education and abhorrent misconceptions of black and brown communities' academic abilities. These pedagogies are highly critical to student development across campuses, particularly for those students raised within communities of resistance.

Construyendo comunidad

When speaking of community, I am drawn to the work of black feminist Joy James, who speaks of theorizing and philosophizing from an African epistemological standpoint. Although she refers to pan-African experiences, her analysis of community is applicable to my own understanding of mi comunidad of farmworkers in rural Michigan. According to James, community transcends the confines of geography or time. She writes:

Belonging is not determined by physical proximity. . . . You may move out of the state or the old neighborhood to 'escape' your family or people, but you carry that family, the neighborhood, inside yourself. They remain your family. . . . You determine not whether you belong but the nature of the relationship and the meaning of the belonging (1993, 32).

Community is, thus, not bound to artificial barriers; rather, it is firmly implanted within one's body. As Chicanas, we embody our communities, and therefore embody the testimonios of the spaces we come from. Neglecting this part of the "ethnic self" severs a significant portion of ourselves; negating our lived experiences simultaneously removes us from the physical security of our families and severs the link to transformational testimonios. I believe this to be an act of violence meant to eliminate a life source.

In the spring of 2012, I attended a panel for Indigenous university students. The panel focused on highlighting factors that attributed to successful student retention. Each panelist, comprising undergraduate and graduate students, most of whom I knew personally, attributed their academic success to community building in and out of the classroom. A first-year graduate student shared his story of personal growth in encountering institutional cultural incompetence. For his tribal community, children enter the dialogue only after having carefully thought through what has been said; however, the common university discussion format expects students to be argumentative. Despite his well-thought out written responses demonstrating his critical engagement with the material, he was continuously penalized for his “lack of class participation.” In this instance, if the faculty had taken time to meet with this student, these “nontraditional” academic rules of engagement could have helped shape “traditional” rules of classroom dialogue. Inevitably, this student learned how to conform to his professor’s expectations but never truly felt a sense of belonging in the classroom.

As in the young man’s experience with insensitive faculty, I find myself struggling to sew my own community’s ways of understanding and interacting with the world in academy. Oftentimes, university ethos encourages the bifurcation of life into neat categories—scholar, Chicana, mother, or activist—yet I find these aspects commonly overlap, inform, and guide one another. Be assured that this testimonio is not of someone who is bitter toward the university. After all, I personally made the choice to enter this profession and have been happy with this decision. Rather, this testimonio reveals my journey to bridge my community-based pedagogy with its insistence on familia, comunidad and responsabilidad into the classroom.

In simple acts of inviting students to my home for a potluck, offering my undivided attention during meetings, encouraging students to assist in (or

co-facilitate) community projects, or inquiring about my students' lives outside of the classroom, I have slowly learned to construct these bridges. The constant cycle of generating strategies to maintain a foot in the multiple spaces of my life (academic-personal-social) is my own internalized struggle of living among competing worlds.

In many ways, this is my own form of *mestiza* consciousness, a term described by Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa poetically describes the pluralistic reality of new *mestizas*, a reality in which we must learn to cope with the contradictions embedded within our lives. My experience as a Chicana scholar-activist exemplifies this pluralistic and intersectional identity (Anzaldúa 1987; Sulé 2011). As I navigate my various *comunidades*, I am ever cognizant that these multiple and intersectional parts of myself cannot be left at the door of the classroom or outside the academy.

Rather, it is imperative to find ways to adapt Anzaldúa's consciousness to the present situation. An example would be using *mestiza* consciousness to understand, navigate, and negotiate the different ways of engaging in dialogue with my students and colleagues. Engaging in dialogue with my Anglo colleagues presupposes that physical contact (of any sort) is foreign and an invasion of the metaphorical "personal bubble," whereas interactions with Chicanas and other Indigenous people can only truly begin once we have physically and intellectually embraced. For some, inquiring about one's family may seem like insignificant pleasantries; yet I was taught that not acknowledging one's family is rude and disrespectful. From an Indigenous perspective, you must know who someone is and where they come from before engagement can occur.

These personal interactions are strictly forbidden between students and faculty, a socially constructed prohibition that I oftentimes disavow. In fact,

select students have come to expect to receive a short hug, a cup of tea (or a bit of chocolate), and an inquiry into the wellbeing of their family before we begin to discuss their academic life. For my students and me, initiating our time with caring acts of touch, food, and *chisme* demonstrate that we are familia and are part of a shared comunidad. A hug symbolizes that we mutually commit to engaging in a collective space where each is responsible for sharing, generating and transforming one another. While these practices are antithetical to the organizational model of most US colleges and universities (hooks 2003), they are a core element in *construyendo comunidad*. These sincere gestures, communal acts if you will, translate into a demonstration of entering a collective space of trust and transformation.

Unconsciously, my actions are framed within a *mestiza* consciousness, an epistemological stance challenging the reproduction of oppressive structures (Anzaldúa 1987). It is through this framework that I examine my position within the academy, my interactions with students, the content selected for courses, assignments, and methods of evaluation (Elenes 2001). A *mestiza* consciousness has shaped my understanding of classroom dynamics, which attempts to undo a dualistic thinking of me versus the students. This epistemological stance places the responsibility of teaching and learning squarely upon the shoulders of each individual within the classroom.

In my own classroom spaces, I lay the foundation of revolutionary love through food. Typically, the first week of classes I bring homemade baked goods—my own attempt at creating an atmosphere of my grandmother's kitchen table. I find that the awkward initial moments of classes are disrupted when we are all sharing in warm, sugary, blueberry buckle. Students are always awe-struck that a faculty member would take the time to make something for them. This also presents the opportunity for me to discuss the recipe—a

specialty from my husband's grandfather—as an entry point to family and histories of migration, as well as inquiries of food within their own families. I am able to use the recipe to discuss my family's relationship to the local sugar company, the ongoing struggle of migrant workers to attain a fair wage, and the difficulty that many Latinos have in linking with healthy food systems. Inevitably, students share stories related to food, families, histories, or their own struggles with understanding social inequities related to food systems. The key to laying the ground for revolutionary love is opening the space with a story that is experienced by all—for me that story is centered on food.

Conclusion: Creating a Space of Revolutionary Love

Central to the process of revolutionary love is the freedom to question, critique, examine, as well as make oneself vulnerable to critically reflect upon our deep-seated convictions. As we enter dialogues in the unequal position of teacher and learners, our thoughts are typically generated from particular ontological positions, the meshing of our multiple realities. As such, deeply embedded within these positions are those notions taken as *truths* without question. Inupiak Indigenous education scholar, Leona Okakok encourages us to “catch a glimpse of the world through other eyes” (1989, 248). As educators, it is our collective responsibility to encourage one another to examine our individual *truths*, to voice convictions, and consider the possibility of multiple ways of seeing the world.

These environments based upon love that become transformational spaces of candid discourse germinate when students feel free of ridicule for voicing such intimate ideas. Once individuals sense the space is open for questioning, transformation, and open exchange, they are committed to individual and collective growth. For example, in a recent class I taught, the dialogue centered on racial privilege and inequity, a topic that the students

(all white and upper-middle-class) were familiar with on varying degrees. It became apparent that my function within the classroom had shifted from professor to the voice of *all* people of color. While I am familiar with being in the “spokesperson” position, in this conversation the weight of such a responsibility became nearly unbearable. As I danced on a line of having and not having power, because of my position as faculty and a woman of color, I became incredibly attuned to my every facial expression, word choice, and body position. Serving as the lone voice from a nonwhite perspective, it was crucial that I remind the students our engaging in a dialogue around race and privilege was our collective choice, yet it was each individual’s responsibility to do so with an open heart. If we, as a collective learning community, chose to actively participate in the dialogue the onus was on each individual to identify our role in inflicting microaggressions on one another, as well as collaboratively generate strategies to suspend such practices. I resolved to not allow the fear entering my thoughts to sway me from the *revolutionary love* I was determined to establish.

Students shared firm commitments to meritocracy, personal beliefs about people of color and of themselves, and questioned their own ontologies. In all honesty, many moments arose when I was incredibly uncomfortable with the intimacy of the discussion. In an especially tense moment, one student exclaimed, “I love this class. We talk about difficult topics and make me really think hard about myself. I never feel like you (gesturing to the class) are going to judge; to be honest, this space is comfortable.” These discussions, albeit painful for me, transpire when all parties are committed to engaging in a revolutionary love. Therefore, to maintain this pedagogy I endeavor to share the counter-stories of the historically marginalized as a means to illuminate knowledge-bases commonly denigrated for those that are limited in their experiences with these communities. And through this sharing I encourage the

creation of spaces within the university for all students and communities to be recognized as knowledge creators and holders. The advent of this feat emerged many years ago, when I recognized my aspiration to bridge the *comunidad* that protected me with the learning environment that I loved so dearly.

My unintentional path to higher education grew from a childhood desire to work with migrant farmworker children and the need to serve *mi comunidad*. At the tender age of eight, I was prepared to teach young migrant children growing into their testimonios. Yet, life's trajectory has placed me on the path to university life. Fortunately, my recent work with the College Assistance Migrant Program on campus has allowed for me to work alongside migrant students. Instead of instructing young children, my path has led me to students questioning their position in higher education. As Freire reminds us,

I like being a human person because even though I know that the material, social, political, cultural, and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves almost always generate divisions that make difficult the construction of our ideals of change and transformation, I know also know that the obstacles are not eternal. (1998, 55)

I find myself encountering such obstacles in various manifestations each time I engage with a new community. In each instance, my father's words emerge: "Somos mexicanos, y nadie puede robar tu gente, tu raza." In the moments when discouraging thoughts creep up, *mis testimonios* serve as a reminder that *nuestra gente es luchadora*. As I continue to meet faculty committed to transformation within the academy, their testimonios reaffirm that surviving is not only embedded within our collective memory, but our shared responsibility to future generations. My fellow Chicana-scholar-activists

continue to reaffirm that such transformation is a communal responsibility—it is a shared story and individual choice.

I find that at this point in my very short career, critical self-reflection is important, particularly as a pretenure faculty. The time devoted to teaching, developing, and revising courses, and building relationships on and off campus seldom leaves opportunities for critical self-reflection. In these rare moments, I find myself mulling over the paradox of “being a Chicana from a working-class background and a teacher in a major research university” (Torres 2003, 75). Engaging in critical self-reflection creates spaces where I examine my practice in the classroom, and where I digest selected material, and the ways in which *mi testimonio* inform my teaching. I challenge myself to consider if my classrooms are a space of trust, of reciprocal learning founded upon love, humility, faith and dialogue (Freire 1970). In the end, I leave each class asking: Was this a space that I found working alongside my grandparents in the *betabel* and that I always find around the kitchen table? If I answer yes, then I have, in fact, used *mi Chicana testimonio* as a pedagogy of love.

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