

Chicana/Latina *Testimonios*: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political

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While the genre of *testimonio* has deep roots in oral cultures and in Latin American human rights struggles, the publication and subsequent adoption of *This Bridge Called My Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) and, more recently, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) by Chicanas and Latinas, have demonstrated the power of *testimonio* as a genre that exposes brutality, disrupts silencing, and builds solidarity among women of color (Anzaldúa, 1990). Within the field of education, scholars are increasingly taking up *testimonio* as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms in academia. Unlike the more common training of researchers to produce unbiased knowledge, *testimonio* challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance. These approaches have resulted in new understandings about how marginalized communities build solidarity and respond to and resist dominant culture, laws, and policies that perpetuate inequity. This special issue contributes to our understanding of *testimonio* as it relates to methodology, pedagogy, research, and reflection within a social justice education framework. A common thread among these articles is a sense of political urgency to address educational inequities within Chicana/o and Latina/o communities.

In what follows, we map the *testimonio* genre with a focus on the ways in which Chicana/Latina scholars have contributed to and reshaped it. We begin with a discussion of the contours of the genre including its political purpose. We then take up both the methodology and pedagogy of *testimonio*. Throughout, we discuss how scholars using *testimonio* in this issue have unveiled new approaches to understanding and addressing issues of inequity in the field of education.

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MAPPING THE *TESTIMONIO* GENRE

Testimonio writing has a long and varied history; it is most often seen as a voice from the margins or from the subaltern—a political approach that elicits solidarity from the reader. *Testimonios* were first used to convey the experiences and enduring struggles of people who have experienced persecution by governments and other socio-political forces in Latin American countries (Behar, 1993; Burgos-Debray, 1984; Lomas & Joysmith, 2005). *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. In bridging individuals with collective histories of oppression, a story of marginalization is re-centered to elicit social change.

Testimonio differs from oral history or autobiography in that it involves the participant in a critical reflection of their personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities. That is, it links “the spoken word to social action and privileges the oral narrative of personal experience as a source of knowledge, empowerment, and political strategy for claiming rights and bringing about social change” (Benmayor, Torruellas, & Juarbe, 1997, p. 153). *Testimonio* transcends descriptive discourse to one that is more performative in that the narrative simultaneously engages the personal and collective aspects of identity formation while translating choices, silences, and ultimately identities (Beverley, 2005; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Lopez & Davalos, 2009). As such, *testimonio* is pragmatic in that it engages the reader to understand and establish a sense of solidarity as a first step toward social change.

There has been an explosion of *testimonio* scholarship in academia, with “*testimonios*” appearing in 36 dissertations and theses from 1990–1999 and soaring to 835 during the 2000–2009 period (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, this issue). Much of the growth in *testimonio* scholarship has been within the field of education, focuses on the experiences of Chicana/o and Latina/o communities in the United States, and is largely being produced by Chicanas and Latinas. This may be due to the fact that *testimonio* as a methodology provides modes of analysis that are collaborative and attentive to myriad ways of knowing and learning in our communities. It might also be attributed to the ways in which *testimonios* align with a strong *feminista* tradition of theorizing from the brown female body, breaking silences, and bearing witness to both injustice and social change (Anzaldúa, 1990; Cruz, 2006; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). *Testimonio*, then, can be understood as a bridge that merges the brown bodies in our communities with academia as we employ *testimonio* methodology and pedagogy in educational practices.

Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios (2001) is part of this *feminista* tradition and the book opens by the authors reflecting upon their *papelitos guardados*—the protected papers written and roles filled in times of transition. *Papelitos guardados* are both concrete and abstract notions of self during various points in one's life. Some are shared openly with others, yet other *papelitos* are written in journals or filed in one's mind. In *Telling to Live*, *papelitos guardados* are explored through the method of *testimonio*. To this end, *testimonio* is process (methodology), product (inclusive of text, video, performance, or audio), and a way of teaching and learning (pedagogy). As a process, *testimoniar* (to give testimony) is the act of recovering *papelitos guardados*—previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold—and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities. One's *testimonio* reveals an epistemology of truths and how one has come to understand them. *Testimonio* bridges or serves

to connect generations of displaced and disenfranchised communities across time. In the next section, we look at how the methodology of *testimonio* also serves as a bridge to connect the lived experience as a “data” collecting tool and as the analytical process.

TESTIMONIO AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

Testimonio is both a product and a process. While the methodological strategy of *testimonio* is by no means limited to the research conducted by or with Chicanas/Latinas, the ways in which it has been articulated and enacted by these scholars mirror a sensibility that allows the mind, body, and spirit to be equally valuable sources of knowledge and embrace the engagement of social transformation. The methodological concerns of *testimonio* are often around giving voice to silences, representing the other, reclaiming authority to narrate, and disentangling questions surrounding legitimate truth. Most of the methodological and epistemological discussions regarding *testimonios* focus on an approach in which an interlocutor, who is an outside activist and/or ally, records, transcribes, edits, and prepares a manuscript for publication. Within this approach, a *testimonialista*¹ works closely with the recorder/researcher/journalist to bring attention to her community's experiences. When translating, for example, terms of endearment, underlying meaning can get lost in translation. One must be cautious to translate conceptually rather than literally because in translating particular terms, nuances get lost, and we run the risk of reproducing language marginalization. Translating *testimonios* from Spanish into English includes translating culturally-specific knowledge that can shift meaning and reproduce negative connotations associated with gendered or racialized terms of endearment². When translating we become a sort of interlocutor, a translator whose knowledge of English and Spanish becomes a filter to move from one language to another and the knowledge of the languages might affect the *testimonios* (Flores Carmona, 2010). In this act, the *testimonialista* is the holder of knowledge thereby disrupting traditional academic ideals of who might be considered a producer of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2009).

This type of *testimonio* scholarship places the Chicana/Latina scholar as the “outside” ally and activist who brings attention to the conditions of a particular group of Latinas/os. For example, in this issue, Claudia G. Cervantes-Soon (“*Testimonios* of Life and Learning in the Borderlands: Subaltern Juárez Girls Speak”) presents the *testimonios* of two high-school girls who attend a school with a critical pedagogy orientation and are coming of age in one of the most marginalized areas of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. These *testimonios* shed light on their experiences and identity formation, attesting to their struggle for freedom, dignity, and life on the South side of the border. In order to understand the effects of microaggressions as embodied systemic oppression, Lindsay Pérez Huber and Bert María Cueva also serve as “outside” allies and activists in “Chicana/Latina *Testimonios* on Effects and Responses to Microaggressions” as they present the *testimonios* of undocumented and U.S.-born Chicana/Latina students. The students' *testimonios* are analyzed from a Latina/o critical race and Chicana feminist theoretical lens that allows us to name some of the oppressions encountered in schools and to better understand how Chicana/Latina students respond to and heal from oppressive experiences. In both of these articles, the authors, who hold multiple insider and outsider positionalities, take care in addressing their methodology and some of the concerns surrounding issues of voice, representation, truth, and their role as researchers.

Their work also exemplifies and displays a Chicana/Latina *feminista* sensibility and attempts to situate the researcher-participant in a reciprocal relationship where genuine connections are made between the researcher and community members.

Another type of *testimonio* scholarship that can raise different methodological concerns is that in which the *testimonialista* is both researcher and participant where, for example, a formally educated Chicana/Latina documents her own collective story in or out of academia (see Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Delgado Bernal, 2008; Flores Carmona, 2010; Hurtado, Hurtado, & Hurtado, 2008; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Russel y Rodríguez, 2007; Turner, 2008). Bypassing the role of an interlocutor, these *testimonialistas* narrate their own stories and also challenge dominant notions of who can construct knowledge. They (re)claim *testimonio* as a text written by and for Latinas (or other marginalized groups) to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity (Latina Feminist Group, 2001).

There have been important discussions around the idea that attaining a privileged status might remove one from the possibility of writing one's subaltern or marginalized life. We align with Delgado Bernal and Elenes (2011) and quote them at length to contend that for most Chicana/Latina scholars and other scholars of color, group marginalization continues to exist in academia even when one holds a relatively privileged status.

Some scholars point to the idea that the very possibility of "writing one's life" (Beverley, 2005, p. 548) implies that the narrator is no longer in the situation of marginality and subalternity that her narrative describes. Part of Gayatri Spivak's (1988) argument is that "being subaltern means . . . not mattering, not being worth listening to, or not being understood when one is 'heard'" (Beverley, 2005, p. 551). Stated another way, if the narrator has attained the cultural status of an author (and generally speaking middle or upper class status), she has transitioned from the subaltern group identity to an individualized identity. We argue that for most Chicana/Latina scholars this is not the case: A group identity and group marginalization continues to exist in academia even when we have attained a relatively privileged status. (p. 111)

Indeed, the *testimonios* of Latinas in academia such as those in *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) or *Speaking from the Body: Latinas on Health and Culture* (Chabram-Dernersesian & de la Torre, 2008) expose experiences of rape, attempted suicide, migrations, chronic health problems, struggles within educational institutions, health care access, and the labor of academia. In doing so, their stories "tell how our bodies are maps of oppression, of institutional violence and stress, of exclusion, objectification, and abuse" (Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 12). Our bodies also tell stories of transformational resistance (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) talking back, and surviving in academia.

In this special issue, a number of scholars present their own *testimonios* as educators, researchers, and/or scholars. For example, in "Pedagogies from *Nepantla: Testimonio, Chicana/Latina Feminisms, and Teacher Education Classrooms*," Linda Prieto and Sofia A. Villenas provide us with their *testimonios* as two teacher educators committed to compassionate pedagogy and transformative teaching. They share how their experiences as child translators, young activists, children of caring immigrant parents, college students in predominately white universities, and racialized, gendered, and classed Chicanas inform their pedagogy of *nepantla* in teacher education classrooms. They conceptualize a pedagogy of *nepantla* that exposes tensions, contradictions, and possibilities for exploring how we might engage in transformative teaching. Cinthya M. Saavedra and Michelle Salazar Pérez are teacher and early childhood educators who also bypass the interlocutor to narrate their own *testimonios*. They draw from their theoretical homes,

Chicana feminism and Black feminism, respectively, in their article, “Chicana and Black Feminisms: *Testimonios* of Theory, Identity, and Multiculturalism” to theorize their shifting identities and privileges in and out of educational institutions, the healing of their mind, body, and spirit, and the us/them binary often found in multicultural education. They translate their theorizations into pedagogical lessons for collective social justice work in classrooms and local and global communities. Another example of scholars narrating their own *testimonios*, is the collaborative work of Michelle M. Espino, Irene I. Vega, Laura I. Rendón, Jessica J. Ranero, and Marcela M. Muñiz. These scholars provide an intergenerational perspective (“The Process of *Reflexión* in Bridging *Testimonios* Across Lived Experience”) that bears witness to the critical challenges, consequences, and benefits of academic life for both emerging and *veterana* scholars. They suggest the process of *reflexión* as a way to theorize the status of Latinas in academia through the eyes of two different generations. The process of *reflexión* allows us to learn and listen to our elders’ wisdom to preserve knowledge(s) that will not be learned in schools. Their article not only names and critiques oppressive educational structures, but the authors affirm healing pathways for our fractured minds, bodies, and spirits.

Whether as an ally or a *testimonialista*, Chicanas/Latinas in this issue have used *testimonio* as a methodology to transgress and as a venue to speak about educational inequities and systemic oppressions. Simultaneously, these *testimonios* demonstrate the possibility of social change and transformation of self and society. They seek what “Anzaldúa calls a healing image, one that transforms consciousness, bridges our mind, body, and spirit, and reconnects us with others” (Delgado Bernal, 2009, p. 4). Using *testimonio* as a methodological tool, these articles have highlighted the political urgency needed to address educational inequities, and they have unveiled new approaches to understanding the individual in connection with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance.

TESTIMONIO AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL

Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysical dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between the body and the mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, and not the body. (hooks, 1994, p. 191)

Testimonios focus on collective experiences of conditions that have contributed to oppression, as well as the agency of those who suffer under these conditions. As such, *testimonio* is a pedagogical tool that lends itself to a form of teaching and learning that brings the mind, body, spirit, and political urgency to the fore. Whether in a formal classroom or in myriad informal learning environments, such as the home, *testimonio* has the potential to provide a way to theorize and learn from bodily experiences of oppression and resistance. *Testimonios* represent what Moraga (2002) calls theory in the flesh. That is, *testimonio* is a tool for inscribing struggles and understandings, creating new knowledge, and affirming our epistemologies—*testimonio* is about writing what we know best, “*familia, barrio, life experiences*” (Rendón, 2009, p. 3). Through *testimonio* pedagogy we are able to hear and read each other’s stories through voices, silences, bodies, and emotions and with the goal of achieving new *conocimientos*, or understandings. The pedagogical practice and process is far from perfect, but when approached with reverence for the process, it is one that can be creative, innovative, and nurturing of various ways of knowing. *Testimonio* pedagogy is based on “wholeness and inclusiveness” (Rendón, 2009, p. 14)—a pedagogy

that pieces together our mind, body, and spirit as well as our head, heart, and hands, and where teaching and learning are not disconnected and theory and praxis are intrinsically dependent on each other. It is a process that brings together critical consciousness and the will to take action to connect with others with love and compassion to bring collective healing (Rendón, 2009). Because *testimonios* can take various forms, including written, oral, and digital, they have the potential to reach many audiences.

No matter what form a *testimonio* takes, listening is central to the pedagogical practice of *testimonio*. Hearing a *testimonio* is not the same as listening to a *testimonio* (Lenkersdorf, 2008). In this genre, listening is the precursor to telling. As a listener, another's *testimonio* is much like a gift—the listener unwraps the *testimonio* to reveal the heart of the matter. In doing so, the listener's responsibility is to engage the *testimonialista* in an effort to understand. “*Si no se habla no escuchamos nada. Y si, en cambio, se habla y no escuchamos, las palabras se dirigen al aire . . . el hablar y el escuchar, ambas se complementan y se requieren mutuamente*” (Lenkersdorf, 2008, p. 12).³ In this space of exchange between listener and *testimonialista*, we are able to open doors into another's world, open hearts and minds and at times, become invited participants—we become *emparejados*—aligned, next to each other, in solidarity (Lenkersdorf, 2008).

If speakers and listeners are open to hearing perspectives that may be different from ones they have lived, *testimonio* pedagogy can incite personal growth through a reciprocal process of exchange. Through *testimonios* we are invited to be participants, and it is not uncommon to encounter experiences that are difficult to hear, including those that are violent, frightening, and tragic. A goal of intervention is central to a pedagogy of *testimonio*. However, one must first listen to the *testimonio* in an effort to understand before one can be moved to action. Through this process, a pedagogy of *testimonio* can help transcend pain toward a space for healing and societal transformation. Listening to, sharing, and transcending struggles, pain, hopes, and dreams yields a type of interdependent solidarity, or *in lak'ech*—a Mayan philosophy that can be translated as, “*Tu eres mi otro yo*” or “You are my other me.” This type of interdependent solidarity allows people to connect across social positions, across differences, across language, across space, and across time (Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012).

In listening to the story of one, we learn about the conditions of many. When we pay close attention, we learn that all stories are collective accounts of how various forces including culture, history, and society at large, have shaped our understandings of life. Cindy Cruz (“Making Curriculum from Scratch: *Testimonio* in an Urban Classroom”) provides a rich example of this in her excerpt from a queer street youth whose *testimonio* about homelessness is both an individual and collective story. Within this young person's *testimonio* is an analysis and critique of the national crises our country continues to face with realities that include homelessness, poverty, and the marginalization of queer youth. When others read the *testimonio*, it becomes a teaching tool that has the potential to connect people across social positions and build solidarity among both those who are familiar and unfamiliar with the experiences of the *testimonio*.

In this issue, Norma Cantú (“Getting There *Cuando No Hay Camino* [When There is No Path]: Paths to Discovery *Testimonios* by Chicanas in STEM”) also employs solidarity praxis as she uses *testimonio* theory to analyze the published *testimonios* of Chicanas in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. She acknowledges how their *testimonios* of challenge and triumph have the potential to motivate and inspire students who are struggling to continue their studies in STEM. However, her analysis does not stop there. She delves deeper into the systemic and structural elements that need to be in place so that all Chicanas/Latinas

can successfully navigate the educational system in STEM areas, and translates these into policy recommendations. Her work demonstrates the pedagogical potential of *testimonios* at both an individual and systemic level.

Testimonio is deeply rooted in raising critical consciousness or what Brazilian pedagogue Freire (1973) refers to as *conscientização*. This concept focuses on achieving an in-depth understanding of the world—allowing for the perception and exposure of perceived social and political contradictions—to become concretized in our classrooms. Critical consciousness also includes taking action against the oppressive elements that are illuminated by that understanding. For example, in “*Testimonio* as Praxis for a Reimagined Journalism Model and Pedagogy,” Sonya M. Alemán presents us with the pedagogical possibilities when Chicana/o journalism students enact a raced-and-gendered conscious journalism practice. The students in her university classroom employ a *testimonio* pedagogy that allows them to reflect on their academic privilege in representing “others” and to simultaneously collaborate with their sources to write and edit stories for an alternative bilingual campus newspaper. Their pedagogy allows them to “pursue traditionally neglected stories, incorporate reciprocity as an element of newsgathering, and position student journalists as agents in the representation and transformation of their communities.” She demonstrates how by shifting power relations of news consumers and news producers, the students co-produce stories of political urgency that foster social change.

Rina Benmayor (“Digital *Testimonio* as a Signature Pedagogy for Latin@ Studies”) also provides us with pedagogical insights from her university classroom that contribute to the *conscientização* of her students. Her critical “signature pedagogy” is about providing students with texts and teaching that help them name their realities. That is by “taking inspiration from Latina writings, students write, record, produce, publish, and theorize their own *testimonios*, building new knowledge from personal and collective experience.” In this process, Benmayor guides students to construct a “historical and theoretical understanding” of who they are as holders and producers of knowledge, in the twenty-first century. Her article and the work of her students demonstrate that *testimonio* is a tool for inscribing our own struggles and understandings, by which we control the authorial process and in which we become subject and object of inquiry, create new knowledge, and affirm our epistemology.

Alemán, Cruz, and Benmayor utilize *testimonio* pedagogies that require building trust (by employing various activities, such as writing exercises, sharing/producing in duos, quick writes, and movement activities) to generate *convivencia* (being with each other) and to develop a genuine interest in listening to each other. When people share intimate or vulnerable parts of themselves, *testimonio* pedagogy asks the listeners for openness, respect, and self-reflexivity to forge connections between people who otherwise might never coalesce or build solidarity. All parts of people enter the pedagogical space as sharing and memory often prompt all our senses when reliving or listening to the stories. Feelings, emotions, knowledges, silences, and identities are integral to learning and connecting with *testimonios*—to enter a new site of knowledge—a space of reclamation.

To enter a new site of knowledge, Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez present us with another type of integral tool to learn and connect with *testimonios*. Their article, “*Testimonio*: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” offers guidance for the educator or scholar interested in conducting bibliographic research on *testimonio* scholarship and provides a short bibliography divided into three parts: Latin American *Testimonios* Roots/Origins; Chicana/o and Latina/o Narrative/*Testimonios* in Education; and *Testimonios* and Dissertations. They begin by

outlining the difficulty in searching for “*testimonio*” and give an exploration of terms used for bibliographic searches, as well as suggestions on how to navigate the Library of Congress key words. They point out, “As researchers we are constrained in research and scholarly production by mainstream terms as defined by librarians who may or may not understand the nuanced bilingual and bicultural use of a term such as *testimonios*.” They make clear that there is a rich history of *testimonio* scholarship and that the educational teacher or scholar (with some effort) can unearth and draw upon this scholarship to employ *testimonio* as a methodological or pedagogical tool.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

We took on the editing of this special issue as an academic, political, and personal endeavor. We come to *testimonio* work with different backgrounds and different types of expertise, but we have each taught courses on *testimonio*, have used *testimonio* as a research methodology, have written about *testimonios* within the field of education, and have produced *testimonios* of our own. The editing of this special issue has allowed us to nurture and expand our own ideas and understandings of *testimonio* scholarship, but perhaps most importantly we know that as a collection of scholarship, the contribution of these articles to the field of education is monumental. The authors help us understand the possibilities of engaging *testimonios* in education, and they contribute to how we all understand and address the educational inequities within communities of color, and specifically Chicana/o and Latina/o communities.

Of the 45 original submissions, we were able to include 10 of them between the covers of this issue. We would like to be clear that even though we were unable to accept all of the submissions, the personal, political, and intellectual lessons from the authors whose work we were unable to accept in this issue are groundbreaking. For those submissions that we were not able to accept, we invested time in providing the authors with substantial feedback and often, suggestions for different publication outlets. We know that their work has or will soon contribute to the literature on *testimonio* methodology, pedagogy, research, and reflection within a social justice education framework. As co-editors we made sure that we constantly called and responded to each other on employing a *feminista* editorial process. This process definitely reaffirmed the importance of listening to each other and of growing from mentoring that took place throughout the reading and editing process.

Testimonios are a critical tool for understanding the educational experiences of communities of color in general and Chicana/o and Latina/o communities in particular. It is striking that *testimonio* is becoming more popular in the field of education just when institutions of learning are banning Ethnic Studies and Mexican American Studies programs, specifically, in secondary schools and threatening institutions of higher education with similar cuts (e.g., Arizona). As such, we believe the growth of *testimonio* into the field of education is a challenge to the status quo—a reclamation of intellect that would have otherwise been dismissed by power structures in academia. The growth of *testimonio* in academia is the result of the political urgency to pursue social justice education for communities of color, generally, and Chicana/o and Latina/o communities, in particular. *Testimonio* in academia disrupts silence, invites connection, and entices collectivity—it is social justice scholarship in education.

Putting this special issue together has been a labor of love grounded in political urgency. Our academic training insists that we work in solitude, yet the work of *testimonio* calls us back to

reclaim solidarity with one another. The educational opportunities not provided to communities of color in general and Chicana/o and Latina/o communities in particular demand this of us as educators. We offer this special issue to building bridges between us and among us—as a call for political solidarity as *testimonialistas*.

NOTES

1. There are many terms used to describe someone who is giving *testimonio*. In this introduction, we use *testimonialista*.
2. Spanish is used throughout this Special Issue. At times it is translated and at other times it is not translated into English for these various reasons.
3. “If we don’t talk, we don’t hear anything. And if, in turn, we talk and don’t hear, the words dissolve into the air . . . to talk and listen, the two are complimentary and require mutualism.”

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