

Our Stories are our Sanctuary: Testimonio as a Sacred Space of Belonging

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“Another world is not only possible, she’s on the way and on a quiet day, if you listen very carefully you can hear her breathe.” –Arundhati Roy, 2014

On June 11th 2016, a shooter walked into a Gay bar in Orlando, Florida and killed 49 of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters, the majority of whom were Latinx, in one of the deadliest mass shootings in our history. The people that were killed were celebrating Orlando Pride on Latinx night in a space that was theirs, a space that affirmed their humanity and that served as a “sanctuary for people who are subjected to violence and discrimination on a daily basis” (Greer, 2016). As we sit to write this introduction we carry pain and anger about this incident and hold the people who died and the larger LGBTQ community in our hearts and in our actions. We recognize that violence is not a new phenomenon; terror and pain run deep in the economic and political systems of the United States. We also recognize that this particular moment in our country’s history is marked by increased racial and ethnic tensions; police brutality and state violence; homophobia and transphobia; economic insecurity; environmental racism as seen in Flint, Michigan; and an overall contentious presidential primary season that has allowed space for someone like Donald Trump to utilize a national platform to stoke white racial resentment, xenophobia, and misogyny. During his campaign Trump has said that if he were to win the presidency he would deport millions of Latinx immigrants, build a wall between México and the United States, and ban Muslim immigrants from entering the country, among other deeply problematic statements. Statements such as these, in addition to violence in and around most of his rallies, has added to what the Southern Poverty Law Center is calling the “Trump effect.” In a recently released SPLC report on the impact that the presidential campaign and Trump in particular is having on our nation’s children, Costello (2016) found that this so-called

“Trump effect” is “producing an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom” (p. 4). In addition, more than two-thirds of the teachers interviewed reported that their students—mainly children of Latino and Muslim immigrant parents—“have expressed fears about what might happen to them after the election.” We are undoubtedly living through turbulent times.

We believe as Julie Quiroz (2015) of Movement Strategy Center so eloquently states, “these dark times illuminate what matters most.” It is no surprise then that this moment is also marked by a surge in transformative movements grounded in racial and social justice. Communities across the United States and the world are rising up to assert their right to self-determination and to live in dignity. In the United States, young leaders of color have rekindled our collective radical imagination and are inviting us to see that other worlds are indeed possible. #BlackLivesMatter, the Dream Defenders, Domestic Workers Alliance, Undocumented Queer Youth Collective, End Mass Incarceration, and others have blossomed in the last decade and ground their work in the notion of radical love and collective liberation. Their work allows us to witness both new ways of building solidarity across difference and creative tactics that challenge white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, state violence, and narrow notions of citizenship and belonging. These Twenty-First century movements and activists are changing the material and social conditions of our lives and are reinventing a society that humanizes us all.

At the heart of all of these movements is the use of art and creativity. Many of the leaders are artists and cultural workers who see art as a process of story-telling, as an essential aspect of movement building, and a powerful tool to disrupt power. One example of this is seen in the work of Julio Salgado, a San Francisco Bay Area activist and cultural worker. Salgado is a visual artist whose work brings to life the many stories of queer and straight undocumented immigrants. His work is grounded in the notion that “undocumented immigrants should be leading and constructing the narratives of their own struggle” (Jobin-Leeds & AgitArte, 2016, p. 82). On the use of art as a powerful tool of resistance, Salgado says, “We need three dimensional stories that show our beauty and imperfections. But only we can do that” (Quezada, 2015). In addition, Gaby

Pacheco, one of many DREAMers who participated in the Trail of DREAMs in 2010, shares that “our stories are the most powerful tool that we have” and are central to any organizing effort (Jobin-Leeds & AgitArte, 2016, p. 92). Art and story-telling are central to many of the movements we are witnessing today. These transformative movements are weaving together a collective story, or *testimonio*, that makes the impossible possible by humanizing those whose stories are not told, whose realities are not seen, and whose lives are too often disregarded.

This issue is both inspired by and contributes to the use of art, creativity, and story-telling as a tool to dismantle systems of oppression, to inspire social change, and to reclaim the right to survive and thrive. We see *testimonio* as both a sanctuary and as a tool for creative soulful resistance and utilize it in our work and praxis as both a radical methodology and pedagogy within a human rights and social justice education framework. Similar to other forms of “decolonizing methodologies,” including auto-ethnography, *testimonio* serves as a conceptual and methodological tool that transforms cultural and personal narratives into critical social analysis. One of the key tenets of *testimonio* is to analyze and interpret individual stories as part of a collective experience. In this way *testimonio* is a practice of being with others “that not only can inspire the possibility of political community but also can be understood as an ethical practice of the self” (Han, 2012, p. 113). As the Latina Feminist Group (2001) writes, “*testimonio* [offers] an artistic form and methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community” (p. 3).

We draw on the works of Prieto and Villenas (2012) who ground *testimonio* within a Chicana feminist critique and see it as an act of “collective sobrevivencia.” Three main themes emerged from their work *Pedagogies from Nopantla*: cultural dissonance, *conciencia con compromiso* (consciousness with responsibility and commitment), and *cariño* (authentic care). We see all three as deeply embedded in the testimonios in this special issue and add the additional two frameworks of *testimonio* as sanctuary and as creative resistance. Each essay in this issue situates individual narratives within a larger collective experience simultaneously marked by oppression, agency, and resistance. Each of the authors provide compelling counter-narratives that unveil societal (and educational) inequities while re-centering stories of marginalization as

powerful sites of knowledge production and transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

This issue is motivated by a series of questions that explore the similarities and differences between counternarratives and *testimonio*: How do the two inform each other and how are the two different? How can we as educators incorporate artful resistance, counter-narratives and *testimonios* into the field of education? How can we subvert narratives and discourse that normalize whiteness, maleness, and heterosexuality? How do we actively resist promoting hegemonic and oppressive stories that continue to marginalize our communities?

Counter-narrative and *testimonio* are methodologies and frameworks from which story-tellers re-center the voice of marginalized communities born into a family of story-telling for liberation, resistance, and radical imagination. Both reframe and promote a discourse of liberation and healing for marginalized communities and provide a voice for those who are too often silenced. Counter-narratives are necessary, important, and act as an antidote to a dominant discourse that often inflicts pain and violence to marginalized communities. Born out of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, counter-narratives resist and oppose white supremacy and domination. Counter-narratives then become a way to push back against dominant narratives. Delgado (1989) asserts that stories serve two functions for members of oppressed groups. Stories are a means of psychic self-preservation and serve to lessen group subordination, and that “this proliferation of counter-stories is not an accident or coincidence. Oppressed groups have known instinctively that stories are an essential tool to their own survival and liberation” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). Counter-stories are critical to the livelihood of communities who are displaced beyond the borders of master narratives.

In turn, we see *testimonios* as standing on their own without the need to counter, as essential stories of resistance and healing that reignite social change from beyond a binary of us versus them. *Testimonios* reimagine a world of possibilities for truth and liberation in ways that are beautiful examples of soulful, creative resistance, both in terms of process and product (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). For example, *testimonio*, as a methodology, allows for the artful expression of voice and

story through the use of theory and praxis simultaneously. The researcher transforms into a part of a dialogue that is both reflexive, critical, and participatory (Yudice, 1991). In this spirit, each of the contributors within this space offer their stories as artful resistance in both language and form. In doing so, the stories shared by the authors in this issue are personal stories and also testaments to the ways in which communities share their Truths. Alarcón, Cruz, Jackson, Prieto, and Rodriguez-Arroyo (2011) describe the process of story-sharing in the following way, “the personal is indeed political as we acknowledge our collective memories, our shared histories. Through *testimonio* we acknowledge our own resiliency and the histories of our resistance” (p. 370). In essence, *testimonio* allows for the representation of authentic stories of communities from inception, (co)creation, production, and exposition. Cruz (2012) highlights this transformative power of *testimonio* as having the ability to uproot dominant narratives that historically exclude the voice of marginalized communities.

The *testimonios* shared within this special issue actively participate in naming injustice, resisting oppression, and finding artful ways to allow the soul to breathe and thrive. Yosso (2005) discusses this same cycle in the context of race and underscores the importance of examining racism, naming racist injuries in an effort to give voice to the victims of racism. We would argue that this naming process is also helpful to restorative counter-narratives that focus on healing and empowerment after trauma, pain, loss and suffering. In order to heal, it is essential to examine and name the pain in order to deconstruct it. Similarly, *testimonios* offer healing as well, from a space that honors a new world of possibilities outside of comparison to dominant discourse.

Truth-sharing through *testimonios* is about the power, resistance, and liberation for oppressed communities that is deeply embedded within the fabric of the story in product and process. These stories of Truth thrive within both counter-narratives and *testimonios*. In a similar way, *testimonios* can be counter-narratives and at the same time they can also thrive through and beyond stories that exist to actively resist dominant narratives. *Testimonios* are the radical imagination of liberation and artful resistance for marginalized communities. In retelling the stories of pain, empowerment, and transformation of marginalized communities, it is crucial to hear the narrative of the

oppressed as the principal story, not as a secondary subplot or tangent from a grand narrative.

Counter-narratives and *testimonios* are not mutually exclusive, and to assume that they should be is to succumb to the very oppressive and hegemonic systems of domination that would render their Truth-telling power as null and invaluable. We believe that both frameworks hold space together as *camaradas* in the world of storytelling for liberation, for healing, and for resistance. Without a critical awareness of the power and need to share both essential types of stories, we continue to cultivate a landscape that both directly and indirectly support and promote toxic and violent behaviors that are rooted in the oppression of marginalized communities. These behaviors actively alienate, violate, victimize, and disregard the lived realities of women, trans, and queer-identified communities, people of color, and Muslim communities, as is evidenced within the discourse of the 2016 Presidential election and the recent shootings in Orlando.

The authors in this special issue join a growing number of scholars in the fields of anthropology and education who are utilizing *testimonio* to bring voice to the experiences of communities of color and to better understand how they respond to and heal from oppressive structures and experiences (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). Utilizing *testimonio* provides new possibilities for the ways in which we conduct research, heal the fragmented spaces caused by histories of marginalization, and create opportunities for reflexivity and genuine voice, while building community and brave space within in the academy. In sum, the articles and essays in this issue will demonstrate the importance of the telling and re-telling of personal lived experiences as integral to the production of knowledge and as a powerful form of resistance to multiple marginalities.

Farima Pour-Khorshid sees collective *testimonio* as a process for homemade theory making or what Anzaldúa and Keating (2000) called *conocimientos*. Her essay brings together the stories and experiences of three educators of color who are part of a California grassroots social justice critical study group created exclusively for people of color. In a profession dominated by more than 80% White teachers (Goldring, Gran, & Bitterman, 2013), the *testimonios* of these teachers are examples of their resiliency,

agency, and community cultural wealth that they possess and have utilized to thrive within a oppressive education system. This essay posits that the use of collective *testimonio* among educators of color serves as a tool for critical teacher professional development, which is centered in political education, solidarity, empowerment, love, and resistance.

In his essay, Manuel Alejandro Pérez explores the story of three *hermanas* and their connections to *comunidad*, *familia*, and artful resistance through their involvement in *baile folklórico*. Through their *testimonios* the *hermanas* explore their relationship to sexual orientation, their ethnic identity, and cultural heritage as queer *Mexicanos* who have a relationship to traditional Mexican *folklórico*. These stories are examples of *testimonio* as both a product and a process. More importantly, these *testimonios* illustrate the ways in which marginalized communities make sense of the world around them in a way that empowers and uplifts the MindBodySpirit.

In “Documenting the Undocumented,” Laura Ochoa delves deep into the experiences of immigration and notions of belonging. Her essay is an example of *testimonio* as radical methodology that documents the experiences of four undocumented immigrants living in the US. Her essay seeks to create a rich narrative of human survival and resistance while highlighting the struggles and obstacles undocumented immigrants face within our current immigration system. Rosa Jimenez’ “*Nuestro camino es más largo*” (Our Journey Is Much Longer): A *Testimonio* from a Daughter of Mexican Immigrants Turned Professor in the Academy,” provides a powerful reflexive piece on the power of community cultural wealth, *familia*, and the use of *testimonio* as a sacred space. She shares her story of growing up as a little girl in California’s Central Valley as the daughter of working class Mexican immigrants to being an Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco.

Vincent Chandler’s essay is a beautiful example of *testimonio* as creative soulful resistance. He breaks the mold of traditional academic essays and invites the readers into a role-play of sorts. We are drawn into his speech specifically directed at educators around the use of *testimonio* and the powerful cultural capital Latin@/Chican@ students bring with them into the classroom. He adds a new dimension to work on community cultural wealth by introducing the concept of the *Nopal* Metaphor as a symbolic and

visual representation of the intrinsic wealth Latin@ students carry. Finally, the special issue closes with two poems by Rhummanee Hang and Olivia Muñoz. Both poems highlight the power of art, creativity, and radical storytelling.

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