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# Testimonio and Re/membering: A case for LatCrit in the Latina/o educational crisis

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TESTIMONIO AND RE/MEMBERING:  
A CASE FOR LATCRIT IN THE LATINA/O EDUCATIONAL CRISIS

by

Anthony Rosendo Zariñana

B.S., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2014

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Arts

Department of Communication Studies  
in the Graduate School  
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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in the field of Communication Studies

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

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TITLE: TESTIMONIO AND RE/MEMBERING: A CASE FOR LATCRIT IN THE LATINA/O EDUCATIONAL CRISIS.

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Nathan Stucky

In this paper, I outline the present educational crisis facing Latina/o students in the U.S. I then trace the emergence of LatCrit out of Critical Race Theory as a particularly powerful theory accounting for Latina/o minority experiences in educational contexts. I offer my own *Testimonio*, centering my raced body in order speak back to everyday racist practices of educators. I conclude by offering a dream imperative to continue the work of *Testimonios*.

Keywords: *Latina/o, Testimonio, LatCrit, identity, education*

## DEDICATION

*Para mi Mami y Papi, y todo mi familia-* this is as much for my family, as it has been made possible because of them.

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## PART I

### INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last ten years, research concerning the severely limited presence of Latina/os in the U.S. educational pipeline has been increasingly emerging. By initially examining data from the 2000 U.S. Census, scholars began piecing together the complexity of what is currently understood as a crisis of Latinas/os being absent from the educational pipeline. This pipeline tracks Latina/o students from Elementary School through graduating High School and even on to obtaining a graduate or doctoral degree (Yosso and Solórzano, 2006). Yosso and Solórzano (2006) articulate a breakdown of the findings as follows:

Of the 100 Chicana and Chicano students who start at the elementary level, 54 of them drop out (or are pushed out) of high school and 46 continue on to graduate. Of the 46 who graduate from high school, about 26 continue on toward some form of postsecondary education. Of those 26, approximately 17 enroll in community colleges and nine enroll at four-year institutions. Of those 17 in community colleges, only one will transfer to a four-year institution. Of the 9 Chicana/os attending a four-year college and the 1 community college transfer student, 8 will graduate with a baccalaureate degree. Finally, 2 Chicana/o students will continue on to earn a graduate or professional school degree and less than 1 will receive a doctorate. (p. 1)

Education in the U.S. is considered to be the primary mechanism enabling the potential for upward socioeconomic mobility. While Latinas/os continue to be the most increasing minority population within the U.S., their dwindling presence in the educational system raises legitimate and alarming concern.

Latinas/os currently sustain the highest rate of departing high school among minority groups in the U.S. at 22.4% (Marx & Larson, 2012). In turn, attention to high schools as research sites along the pipeline has garnered further interest. Much of this interest attends to what many scholars call a crisis of Latina/o School Pushout, having taken place for the last 20-plus years,

specifically at the high school level. The concept of pushout emerged as opposition to the idea of “dropout,” which lacks nuanced understanding of this social phenomenon. Data point to students’ decisions of exiting school as comprised of a bevy of social factors, rather than the perceived individual decision to leave. Varying research into this crisis at the high school level has since generated multiple ways to understand students’ experiences (Luna & Revilla, 2013). A primary theme identified in contemporary research examining the crisis suggests that instructors and administrators hold a deficit perspective towards Latina/o students. Educational deficit thinking perceives Latina/o students’ culture as a deficit, rather than a strength (Marx, 2006; Marx & Larson, 2012; Valencia, 1997). A deficit perspective “suggest[s] that cultural traits of students and their communities are the primary cause for [negative] perceptions and findings” (Irizarry, 2015, p. 67-68). This model still holds within many educational settings. It essentially blames “Latina/o students, their parents, and communities for lacking specific [positive] attributes, which in turn lead[s] to academic failure” (Luna & Revilla, 2013, p. 24). Such thinking has been located in everyday interactions between Latina/o students and educators. I now outline several research studies examining the impact of everyday instantiations of deficit thinking.

### **Latina/o Educational Crisis**

Valenzuela’s research (1999) connects deficit perspective thinking to what she calls “subtractive schooling” of Latina/o youth. She offers “subtractive schooling” to define assimilationist practices embedded within the educational system that reduces students’ cultural resources and strengths. In her work with Latina/o high school students, she found that educators believe students are strongly opposed to education. Valenzuela instead emphasizes that these students are not opposed to education, but rather are subject to “a schooling process that

disrespects them” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 5). A great deal of Valenzuela’s (1999) three-year immersive ethnographic study continually featured students’ desire for authentic caring from their instructors.

Quiroz (2001) examined narratives composed by Latina/o students during their eighth grade year and once more as juniors in high school. Her work was directly interested in offering “a window into the high dropout rates” directly affecting Latina/o students when little attention and research existed around this ongoing crisis (p. 326). Quiroz’s study locates several changes in students’ attitudes about school and self between the first and second narratives. These include a decline in feelings of empowerment and an increase in feelings of alienation. Students also pointed out sensing growing disinterest from teachers. They also noted over time perceptions of self as unintelligent, as failures, and filled with a sense of hopelessness in regards to their academic and professional potentials. Teachers holding deficit perspectives against Latina/o students were directly responsible for shaping students’ feelings.

Irizarry’s (2011) project worked with high school students for two years to build a Latina/o centered alternative curriculum. Some of the points raised by students included the way a deficit perspective was reflected in mainstream curriculum. One student pointed this out stating “Have you ever noticed that Latinos hardly ever appear in the curriculum? As a student, I have never learned about Puerto Rican or Mexican history. Before [this project], I just figured that Latinos hadn’t really done anything worth teaching about. If they had, our teachers would tell us, right?” (Irizarry, 2011, p. 60). This highlights the implicit ways students form attitudes about themselves when instructors maintain a cultural deficit perspective regarding their students. Maintaining an absence of Latina/o figures in any central curriculum has the powerful potential

to limit one's identification with celebrated or accomplished people. This absence keeps Latina/o students' reality of what they are capable of dangerously limited.

Luna and Revilla (2013) offer similar findings in their work assessing Latina/o school pushout. The term "pushout" is used in opposition to the idea of "dropout" to center the role institutions play in school departures. In particular, it marks discrimination and microaggressions from instructors and administrators lodged against Latina/o students as the most salient theme students cited influencing their decision to leave school. This points to a severe instantiation of deficit perspectives directly influencing students' decisions to leave school. Students also articulated being aware of the negative attitudes held by teachers and the myriad ways they were communicated to them. In this, students were regularly made aware of negative perspectives teachers held regarding their academic ability.

These studies outlined a few ways in which deficit perspectives emerged in the everyday relationships between instructors/educators and students. Quiroz (2001) highlighted the ways that the everydayness of these experiences affected students:

The high school experiences portrayed by these Latina students (failing tests, being placed in low-ability tracks, criticism by staff, and socially distant or indifferent teachers and counselors), were generally so negative that it was difficult for them to tolerate the punishing aspects of schooling. (p. 344)

The everydayness of negative attitudes made for difficult school experiences, and necessitated a particular kind of endurance in order to make it through.

As a response to the effects of deficit thinking, West (2004) contends that race is indeed a central matter to students of color in the U.S., and that students are prone to develop a sense of nihilism in the face of structural forces denying their value (Hernandez, 2013, p. 102). Hernandez

(2013) articulates a concept of nihilism built from West (1993) as a “resigned hopelessness” formed in part out of exhaustion and frustration in the face of racism in the education system (p. 103). Hernandez positions LatCrit as a means to speak back to racist educational practices and as a means to combat nihilism shaped by these practices. LatCrit is a particular theory employed to analyze experiences of Latina/o people facing oppression in the United States. It is especially powerful in its ability to account for the particular experiences of everyday oppression facing Latina/o students in the educational system,

### **CRT Theoretical Background and Assumptions**

Critical Race Theory’s (CRT) inception evolved over the latter part of the 1970s and into the 1980s. Early on, its budding branch of intellectual thought was housed within the developing field of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and was yet to be formally named. CLS had branched out of American Legal Realism from the 1920s and 1930s, which took the position of “radical skepticism about traditional legal discourse” and that the “best way to understand the law and the legal system was not to take an internal perspective, but an external perspective” (Hernandez-Truyol, Harris & Valdés, 2006, p. 172-173). Closer to the emergence of CRT, CLS was a collective of politically left-oriented law scholars aligning with like-minded critical ideological assumptions. Many of the primary scholars responsible for CLS’s initial growth had direct involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Several of these scholars were people-of-color, and between their activist work and lived experiences, they had particular first-hand understanding from within the movement. Advancing from these positions and working in tandem with CLS, they sought to challenge and dismantle the popular legal opinion regarding U.S. law as an apolitical and “nonideological” construction (Crenshaw, 1996). This small sect of people-of-color in CLS continued to define the field, further garnering the attention and inclusion of other

scholars-of-color. Contemporary academics therefore explicitly connect the liberal civil rights tradition and CLS as essential premature components enabling the eventual fruition of CRT (Crenshaw, 1996).

There are then two sequential events identified as permitting the split of CRT into an entirely distinct realm of intellectual thought from CLS (Crenshaw, 1996; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). First is the student led protest, boycott, and subsequent formation of an alternative course on race at Harvard Law School in 1981 (Crenshaw, 1996, xix). A year prior, renowned civil rights litigator and professor Derrick Bell (widely considered the “Father” of CRT) left the university, after instructing classes which focused on the investigation of the systemic maintenance of racism in the U.S. through law. In his absence, students demanded administrators hire a professor of color as well as offer courses with race as a central inquiry. Harvard administrators declined these insurances and instead opted to offer two mini-courses on minority issues, as they claimed other courses already focused on such issues. This in turn prompted students to boycott the mini-courses and create a student-lead “Alternative course,” which served as a continuation of Bell’s teachings. This is seen as a pivotal moment for two reasons: first, it marked an early attempt to engage scholars of color to analyze the legal treatment of race from a “self-consciously critical perspective” (p. xxi). Secondly, the course assured the necessity to contest rigid assumptions of standard legal discourse.

The second event is the 1987 CLS National Conference, which led to the first workshop, structuring the early tenets and assumptions of CRT. This conference marked the genesis of an intellectually distinctive critical account of race on terms set forth by race-conscious scholars of color, and the terms of contestation and coalition with CLS (Crenshaw, 1996, p. xix). Eventually, this conference led to a separate workshop, the first held for CRT in 1989 in Madison, Wisconsin

(Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). From this first conference, CRT was then supported and upheld as a particular and distinct realm of intellectual thought.

Two primary interests have therefore defined CRT. First, that CRT is employed to analyze the deeply embedded systemic maintenance of White supremacy and its subordination of people of color in U.S. America (Griffin, 2010). Second, CRT is meant to go beyond simply understanding and deconstructing the first point; its aims are to labor towards the transformation of the system (Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Solórzano (1998) defines racism, drawing from Lorde (1978) and Marable (1992), as containing three central points: (1) a group understands itself as superior; (2) the same group understands they have the power to perform racist acts; and (3) racism is something that affects a multitude of racial/ethnic groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In the context of racial relations within the U.S. this speaks directly to Whiteness.

Working in tandem with these guiding interests, seven tenets are generally agreed upon and utilized in analysis. These include: (1) interest convergence, (2) racism as everyday, (3) colorblindness as insufficient, (4) race as a social construction, (5) whiteness as property, (6) racialized narratives as significant and telling, and lastly, (7) racialized realities as contextual (Griffin, 2010). Interest convergence posits that social change and promotions for equality only ever occur when the interests of whiteness overlap with those of marginalized groups. Delgado & Stefancic (2012) state that “what is true for subordination of minorities is also true for its relief: civil rights gains for communities of color coincide with the dictates of white self-interest” (p. 22). The second tenet locates racism as permanent and everyday, making it all the more difficult to adequately identify, as it is deeply entrenched in our social systems (Griffin, 2010). In the third tenet, scholars speak to the ways that colorblindness negates the very real impacts categorizations

of race have on bodies. This tenet generates a great deal of pushback to notions of post-racial society in contemporary discourses (Crenshaw, 2011). Race as a social construction contends, “race and races are products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Deldago & Stefancic, 2012, p. 9). The final tenet understands that the racialized realities of the social world are contextually bound. Abiding by this tenet, employing CRT means understanding that the social world is bound temporally and spatially. More largely, commitments to CRT fall in similar fashion to overall critical inclinations, positioning oppressions are connected. Additionally, CRT pushes researchers to pursue and always keep in mind ways to bring about social change.

### **LatCrit**

While Critical Race Theory has been essential in exploring systemic racism, scholars in particular fields have begun pushing for further implementation of CRT to more holistically speak to the complexities of racism. Pushback to CRT began as scholars perceived a disadvantage in its ability to speak to more persons of color. Davila & de Bradley (2010) explain that CRT research primarily privileges its racial analysis along a Black/White binary in the U.S. From this, scholars noted a lack of nuanced consideration within CRT when assessing race among varying populations of color and the nuanced particularities within each group.

LatCrit has since been carefully identified as not proposing a challenge to CRT, but rather building off of “its achievements and moving in an independent direction to shed additional light on the subordination of Latinas/os” (Davila & de Bradley, 2010). A good deal of this movement from CRT to LatCrit is in alignment with a guiding principle that CRT should be extrapolated into various disciplines and scholarly discussions, moving outside of its inception within critical

legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). LatCrit as theory has been deployed to incorporate “a fuller, more contextualized analysis of the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of White supremacy, particularly its impact on Latinas/os in their individual and collective struggles for social justice and self-understanding” (p. 42). LatCrit also joins with CRT in embracing a social justice oriented approach to research in hopes of producing tangible change for oppressed people. I now proceed to outline a LatCrit approach to education, which moves with these levels in mind.

### ***LatCrit in education***

As a particular theory speaking to Latinas/os in educational contexts, Solórzano & Yosso (2001) define LatCrit in education as “a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that affect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically” (47). Solórzano & Yosso declare five themes of a LatCrit approach to CRT in education. First, they uphold the position of race as permanent and central in analysis, while simultaneously including space for intersectional considerations of oppressions. Second, they refute allegations that the educational system is objective and equal in opportunity in order to continually challenge dominant ideology. Third, they posit that there must be a commitment to social justice by the means of practicing liberatory responses to oppressions. Fourth, experiential knowledge is centered and recognized as a legitimate form of knowledge (p. 473). Lastly, they note a transdisciplinary perspective is useful towards forging holistic understandings of oppressions. From this, LatCrit embraces a wide array of disciplines employing tenets for analysis. This wide casting of LatCrit supports a larger historical and contemporary contextual analysis of the ways oppressions take shape.

### ***Testimonio and Counter-Story***

Solórzano and Yosso (2001) build from Delgado (1993) and Lawson (1985) to provide four methodological, as well as theoretical and pedagogical functions. First, counter-stories can form community “among those of the margins of society by putting a human and familiar face” to theory and practice (Solórzano and Yosso, 2001, p. 475). Second, they inherently challenge the majoritarian center by establishing a context that complicates and transforms “established belief systems” (p. 475). Third, they can provide new optics of reality for those at society’s margins that establish unity in oppressed subject positions. Last, they can be used as teaching tools in the joining of story and reality, which in turn “construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (p. 175). Counter-story is therefore a way to methodologically construct hope in the face of factors working against Latina/o students in the educational pipeline.

In a similar vein of counter-story, Irizarry (2011) provides four central characteristics of *Testimonio*. First, *Testimonio* as a methodology accounts for particular life experiences with a focus of injustice (p. 12). Second, *Testimonios* are “narrated by members of oppressed groups” (p. 12). *Testimonios* are inherently transformative in their aim to dismantle structures of oppression and enable the narrator to shape their potential trajectory (p. 12). Lastly, *Testimonios* “honor the knowledge produced by the narrator” (p. 12). I pair this with the understanding of *Testimonio* from Huber (2009), who notes it as “a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future” (p. 644). From this, *Testimonios* are stories structured from the real experiences of Latina/o people that provide a window of insight into resistance against dominant narratives. *Testimonio* also connects to LatCrit in education by providing space for intersectional analysis of oppression as it manifests in

individuals' lives, while simultaneously marking oppression as real, and the narratives produced as valid. These methods provide for the telling of an experienced and knowledgeable subject/individual, lodged within particular positions along varying axes of oppression in educational contexts.

These methods of storytelling in serving LatCrit promote particular understandings of subject experiences and reality. The pushback to master narratives is made possible by rendering experience told in narratives as data, and as valid. Experience in a LatCrit context prompts cultural intuition, which declares subjects in such positions know particular workings of oppression.

The subjectivity I employ to interpret my lived experience, coupled with the intuitive understanding I have about who and where I am, allows me to construct a personal narrative that captures a lived, and living, experience; an experience that garners kernels of truthfulness when others can identify a part or whole of their own lived experience in the narrative. (Aguirre, 2005, p. 150)

I then proceed in tandem with Aguirre's claims in constructing my own counter story, in which validity is located in the inter-subjective identification of my story, to others "lived experience and reality" (Aguirre, 2005, p. 150). Aguirre goes on to draw from Bochner (2001), noting that "critics view the personal narrative as the product of inquiry that is not subject to neutral and objective measures of description and explanation; it is perceived as the product of a storyteller that has decided to take a side in telling a story" (Aguirre, 2005, p. 150). And like Aguirre (2005), who writes, "My personal narrative takes a side in order to show the reader that there are competing perceptions of social life that can instruct us regarding the rich texture of a

diverse life experience,” my work does so too. My view of reality aligns to that of what LatCrit sets out, that these marginalized experiences have something to do in the word, in the sharing of reality, in the shaping of optics of reality, in the inter-subjective unity of community building, in having in a paper a student who says, “yes, systemic racism is real and alive in the educational system, and here is my tale, which is like others, and by sharing it, lets mark a problem, and work to change it for the better.”

PART II  
TESTIMONIO

My Mother and Father were around the age of 16 when they each emigrated from Mexico to the Chicagoland suburbs. In the mid-1980s, they were among the first wave to move into a predominantly White, well-established suburb. They were among the first Latina/o students to enter the town's high school. My Father moved in with his older brother who had immigrated to the area a few years earlier. My Father worked overnight shifts in a manufacturing warehouse during the school week. My Mother moved in with her parents after being separated from them for a few years. My maternal grandparents moved to the U.S. with their two youngest children, dividing up the four older ones into two pairs to stay with different family members in Mexico.

My Mother worked overnight shifts in a manufacturing warehouse during the school week with her sisters. I remember my Mother telling me that when she first started school with her sister, she only knew of one other person, an instructor, who was able to speak Spanish. He would urge them to only speak English and was often hesitant to offer help, even when she was lost in the building.

For whatever reason, I have heard little else about their high school experiences. I know that they dated in high school. I know that an instructor was taken aback upon learning of the fact, as she claimed my Mother was "an angel" and my Father was "the devil." The only other stories I heard were from my Father about his trickster classroom behavior and routinely getting pulled over by White police officers in a traditionally White and affluent town. On these occasions, they would not provide an answer for why they stopped him. My Father would tell me it was because he was a young looking guy driving beater cars. I can also draw the assumption

myself that he was likely subjected to routine racial profiling. The cops would find nothing wrong and let him go.

I know they both wanted to go to college, but were unable to given the cost, even in those days. After graduating they both went into the workforce. Soon thereafter they assembled a family in another Chicagoland suburb with my sister and I. The community school district we became a part of was the recipient of several awards dolled out by various financial agencies and publications. These awards specifically lauded the school district for being an integral feature of the town's status as a desirable location to raise a family. The town was situated among historically affluent communities and because of its proximity to Chicago, was once held as a respite for the weekend homes of the city's elite. Being among few working class Mexican families in town, we often only relied on ourselves. It was our first time navigating this particular school system. There was no map for this kind of land.

My sister was two years older than me. We were only of a handful of students of color to have gone through kindergarten to senior year of high school in our district. We were also faced with a constant barrage of doubt. Since elementary school my engagements in class were framed as "disruptive." My standard classroom behavior leaned towards "chatty" and excitedly blurting out answers. In another time and place, with different meanings associated to my body, I might have been coded as capable, or smart/advanced, and lack of attention to classroom formality might have signaled boredom with pace and material. Unfortunately, I was only ever noted for disruptive tendencies, not my efficiency and speed at problem solving or general cognitive ability. Every report card, over the course of six years in my childhood, noted that I was disruptive in class. I effectively learned that I was disruptive for the sake of being disruptive, rather than ever being questioned about the root of my disruption. I simply learned that I was

disruptive. I was never given the privilege of the benefit of the doubt. Had I possibly understood other factors or realized I was experiencing boredom I might have had a different experience throughout the course of my early education. But it unfortunately did not play out that way.

I struggled with this benchmark of participation throughout middle school, where it developed into angst and then apathy by the time I entered high school. This move to apathy unfortunately occurred as I passed 14 years of age and my physicality also began taking different shape. At the age of 15 the stature and mass of my body far surpassed the majority of my high school peers. This paralleled a significantly lower voice than most and a capacity to project loudly. My sarcasm also extended out as much as the resonance of my voice. At times, my profession of crass vulgarity fit comfortably among a niche of friends but ultimately stunned others in its abundance. I was loosely aware of contextual requirements for particular and appropriate speech, but chose to disregard them for whatever reason. At 5'8" and over 250 lbs, my tawdry, brown, and apathetic presence was difficult to overlook, even while seated in class. It was with this abrupt change of my body that I found an opportunity.

By loudly moving my sizable brown frame I could signal acute disinterest in the face of any classroom happening that I believed to be unfavorable. Such happenings most often included various in-class activities and because of my refusal to locate any value coming from their completion, I publicly refused to engage. Simply lacking participation to signal disinterest became insufficient and boring. From this, I desperately aimed to disrupt whatever disagreeable learning environment I entered so people could know I was making the deliberate decision to disengage. I now find a great deal of irony in my angst driven attempts to disengage for in reality, these choices to not participate were actually still engagements of their own kind. At times, I was privileged to encounter instructors who saw through what I was doing and in turn offered

challenging learning environments. In other classrooms though, my disengagements became elevated in face of my own insecurities.

As a person of color I made up a disproportionately minute population of students within my high school. The vast majority of my peers were White. I was often one of two students of color in any given classroom, whereas an occasional threesome would occur. Additionally, most of my peers came from middle to upper class families. Most of my friends fell into these characteristics as well. They were also kind, caring, generous, and loyal. At the same time, I was often regarded as a token or stereotype while seemingly always met with a barrage of racial epithets occurring on a sliding scale between casual and violent, used commonly by friends and foes.

Therefore, racist gibes became daily occurrences that I regrettably grew complacent with hearing. The kinds of comments that truly left me deeply troubled were ones that concerned my relationship to speaking Spanish, making me out to be a “bad Mexican.” This relationship was already complicated in the face of my bilingual family. Around the time I began learning to speak, Spanish-proficient students in the surrounding school districts were being taken out of standard classes and paced into remedial classes. During my Mother’s time in high school, she would go on to observe that students struggling with English proficiency often fell behind, and in their real frustration would leave school. Because of these experiences, I was exclusively taught English as a toddler.

From this, I was one of only two family members unable to speak Spanish. I perceived myself to be a failure in the wake of this comparison. In reality, I was never once harassed or ridiculed by my family for being unable to speak Spanish. The language barrier existed but we all managed to communicate in some way. But growing up unable to differentiate this meant my

shame was guided by comparisons. So when my friends made fun of me about it, the exposed nerve was stung once again. The repetition of this sting only amplified my shame and insecurity.

This all tragically collapsed into the classroom setting of Spanish II. I had gone through middle school and freshman year taking Spanish to complete my foreign language requirement. At first, I was doing fairly well as I was familiar with more material than I was unfamiliar. As I entered into Spanish I and II, my unfamiliarity grew, and its expansion compounded my shame and frustration. I was constantly confronted with tenses and syntax I could barely make sense of in English. Poised with my poor attitude and insecurity, this was a class where my disruption and disengagement occurred much more pointedly.

My Spanish II instructor and I did not have the best relationship. I can only imagine that having had to deal with my attitude, disruption, blatant displays of sarcasm, and general public calls of disinterest, for forty something minutes, five days a week, would chip away at even the most patient and caring of teachers. Which is precisely what she was. She unfortunately was located between a position of trying to teach material and being subjected to my projections of insecurity that were incredibly difficult to overlook.

One day, I was seated close to the door of the classroom in a heavy rigid desk with an immobile surface top. The underside was caked in a layer of chewing gum. When considering such a habit of improper disposal and reflecting on the sheer quantity of remnants beneath the desk, I am still quite confounded because the trashcan was located immediately adjacent to the desk. I always leaned more on the side of drawing. Either way, I came to disregard the marks left by others, forgetting the arrant amount of bodies that had over time taken up that particular desk.

I could say that in an attempt to avoid the gum, I would rest my hands on the desktop rather than my lap. I could say that when my head would meet my hands for rest it was because

of an intense state of exhaustion from my draconian work ethic, but the way I need to tell the story is too important to be dishonest. I despised work I could not see a clear purpose in doing. I did not trust my instructors. Most class activities I coded as “busy work;” and I refused to understand the way that various exercises enabled different learning styles. I most often refused to participate and if I did I made my begrudging attitude obvious to the class.

One day I was confronted by my attitude when completing a translation worksheet in Spanish II. My dull exasperation in imaging the exertion of labor for the worksheet meant that I instead would doll out sarcasm and heavy audible sighs. On most days I would refuse to participate, but this worksheet counted for points and I suddenly felt compelled to make an effort, however irritating.

I meandered over each sentence to translate. It was an exercise to engage with some obscure tense. Forgetting a common word, I asked out loud in the quiet classroom “¿Como se dice ‘also’ en español?” My tone was not far off from the one I used to employ sarcasm. It probably did not sound sincere. A reply to my question was caught on the complete opposite end of the room, located next to the instructor’s desk.

Someone replied loudly “¡It’s tambien, come on, even I know that and I suck at Spanish!” A soft chuckle was released by those seated nearby. This was the only other classmate that shared the hallway with me when we did not complete the optional homework. He was a year older than the rest of the class and was genuinely interested in learning the material. He was the second most vocal after me, offering a casual and appropriate sense of humor never lodged at others’ expense.

I kept my head down and wrote “tambien” on the worksheet. As the quite laughter permeated throughout the classroom, there was another comment offered to those seated on the

opposite end. It was pointed enough in delivery for me to pick up from where I was seated. The instructor offered, “Yeah, and he’s Mexican.” The “he” she was speaking about was I. The tense quality in her voice broke on her emphasis of “Mexican,” highlighting the center of her comment; the punch line of the joke. Laughter erupted from the other corner of the classroom and I knew that if I heard it from my seat, so did everyone else.

I had 16 Latina/o high school peers in my graduating class. Some did not graduate from Lake Zurich High School and some did not graduate high school. About half of us passed as our Anglo peers with fairer skin. We came from differently classed backgrounds, but most of us were from working class families. I shared three years of middle school together with two peers, where everyone else attended the other middle school in the district. Throughout four years of 64+ classes, I only shared three classes with a Latina or Latino peer. Our graduating class was comprised of well over 500 students and in that only 3% were students identifying as I did.

I struggled afterwards trying to locate and articulate my emotions. When confiding to my group of friends what had transpired, I was often met with a confused “oh.” Their faces told me that they could tell I was upset and they wanted to offer support, but struggled to make sense of it. I struggled to make sense of it, too. I did not allege racism, because I knew at least that doing so was not entirely accurate. But I struggled still, with being able to explain why what happened was fucked up and affected me so adversely. In this confusion I labored greatly to explain what had happened even in the most basic sense. Years later, I still do. In this very composition I do. For me, there exists no neat starting or end place...it all bleeds into itself.

### PART III

### ANALYSIS

On the clearest level, I was deliberately shamed in public. Of that I was sure. I was made to be a joke to a class of my peers and the basis of that joke was “HA-HA-HA, he is Mexican and cannot speak Spanish!” It was as if the only thing that mattered was living up to everyone’s expectation that people with bodies appearing as mine are supposed to speak Spanish. When I failed to meet that expectation I became open to public ridicule from anyone marking my failure as a Mexican. Having that expectation held against me made me feel like I was stripped of my own free will.

Below the surface of this expectation is a wealth of meaning. My woe here is not that Mexicans can speak Spanish; it is with the implicit expectation that just because someone identifies a certain way, they are expected to behave in one, overarching particular way; here, that all Mexicans speak Spanish. While not exactly a racist outcry, it is an intensely reductive one, assuming that everyone who might look the same, is the same, and that when they move away from that sameness, they are open to judgment and shaming by anyone. I had learned to expect and manage peers holding this reductive expectation against me, but was taken aback when an instructor upheld this kind of thought. These effects and implications are incredibly different.

Throughout K-12, we are taught that when in a classroom we listen to the instructor, both in the way of privileging their voice above all else and heeding any instruction. We are taught to trust what they say. We are taught to believe their word. The instructor’s voice is highly regarded. And in that classroom, I have no doubt that everyone was able to hear what she said. The danger is if people listened to it and took what happened in class into account when they

move through the world and engage with other bodies that look like mine. When we listen to instructors speak, we learn to learn what they say, to repeat it, to trust it, to believe it. We put what is said into comparison of what we know within our own cognition. So when an instructor utters something so casually, the dangerous parts of it are left to soak into a classroom of students and as students we learn that if an instructor is capable of uttering something like that, so are we, and that such kind of thought is appropriate.

As my body was subjected to their reductive expectations, it was simultaneously unhinged from any oppressive experiences. When I was only seen as a person with one single facet, it went to negate the presence of any complexity or personhood. The means of my arrival into that classroom did not matter as much as my immediate presence as a Mexican-American that did not speak Spanish well.

It was this single view of my personhood—my entire self, that hurt the most. I felt fractured. I was a minority student. I was being made fun of for what made me a minority. An instructor made fun of me. An instructor made fun of me for being a bad minority. An instructor made fun of me for being a bad minority to an audience of my peers. I was made fun of for things that made me who I was. I was made fun of for things that were out of my control. I was made fun of for things that were out of my control and the result of racist, oppressive, educational practices. I was being made fun of by an instructor for being a minority who was not doing well in a school system that was set up for me to fail. It was a cheap shot to which I did not have the power to respond. I was made to be less than an entire classroom of my peers for things out of my control. I was reminded of my place. And all of those factors collapsed onto my sizeable brown frame, where my ripe insecurity and weakness quickly embraced the brunt of the hit.

I proceed forward with the themes Solórzano & Yosso (2001) outline in a LatCrit approach to education in order to render further sense making of my *Testimonio* with the first four themes.

***On race, racism and intersectional subordination***

In my *Testimonio*, the way my body was raced under conditions of power on a public scale became the most salient concern. It is clear the way that presumptions formed regarding bodies that look like mine played out in the moment I was hailed into a particular rigid kind of subjecthood, that mutilated my sense of self into one supremely held standard of what Latino bodies *should* and *are supposed* to be like. As the utterance permeated throughout the room it was dependent upon the inter-subjective sense making of my peers. I was reminded of where I was positioned in my raced body by an entire classroom of people. And they understood the joke, or at least signaled something to that by their laughter.

At the same time, this jeering agreement worked implicitly on a classed level. The intersectional concern of my raced and working class body can be addressed here, by noting the ways that this public consensus towards the joke benefited from its classed nature. The utterance worked to exclude me on a classed level by implicitly securing the middle class audiences' understanding. While many varying classes might hold this understanding, the way that the class population was that of a middle class group moved against my working class frame.

***Challenging dominant ideology***

Constructing my own sense making and narration of what happened is powerful. I could in my own words offer a response back, pointing to the complexities of what existed beyond the reductive hailing of my subject position. In assessing the moment of interpellation I have been able to construct a narrative that situates this seemingly mundane utterance as an everyday

emergence of systemic racism and a nod to a deficit perspective. It is my way of securing this as a pivotal moment to not be overlooked, but instead held as valid, real, and concerning. I can posit that this micro-aggression is in fact quite powerful, and the inter-subjective sense making has far reaching implications. It was not just a joke, but in fact a complex, raced utterance necessitating further inquiry to understand the everyday iterations of racial supremacist discourse that allowed someone in a position of power to reduce my body to static and rigid conceptions. In this *Testimonio* I have the ability to speak back, through theory, to articulate what it meant and how it felt to be reduced into such subjecthood, and that *Testimonio* asserts this experience is valid. I am not inclined to be further rendered silent and here I take a stake in finding and offering my voice. This discovered is powerful in the face of oppressive systems.

### ***Social Justice***

In offering a statement of my experience in my own voice, I wish to formally align myself and declare myself a community member. I also assert that these experiences are unique and similar, and that they are symptomatic of larger cultural values held regarding Latina/o students in complicated binds. Educators are continually holding deficit attitudes and behaviors towards students for not being able to succeed in a system built to disenfranchise them and remove them from their cultural strengths, values, and power. Microaggressions and deficit attitudes are adding salt to the large, historical, cultural wound. Here, I state this kind of work does matter, and that promoting a more equitable and empathetic understanding when engaging with Latina/o students is one way to make for a more positive supportive experience for students. I assert that I, and others like me, am/are not alone in these subject positions and experiences. And from that I form my own oppositional inter-subjective sense making.

### ***Experiential knowledge as valid***

To have my own superfluous language permeate in academic realms is powerful. Here, I offer a *Testimonio* in my own words, my own flowery language, for privileging this rich description means turning away from page limits and instead moving in the way I desire. In this, I locate an intensely liberating endeavor where I communicate my pain, sorrow, and present anguish in a way to send it out into the world as real experiences. I honor my experiences as real and I invite others too. I remind myself that there is so much good in the world. I carry these experiences with me. My testament, my account giving, my words, and they are not only my experiences, they are shared, across and between, but also they are in my own words, articulated in the way I make sense of them. And that is powerful. *Testimonio* is powerful in writing back to a system that continually treated my body in reductive ways, within a system that treated it as less than.

## PART IV

## A DREAM EPILOGUE: ON RE/MEMBERING AND TESTIMONIO

Recently, someone had made the point to me that in order to grow we ought to not only abandon the ghosts of our former selves, but also destroy them. I understood what they meant, for they offered this as a means to heal, to repair, and to move on from pain, or whatever other woeful sorrow that might have been impairing one's growth. Something within me believed in an alternative means to heal. One night, when I was finally ready, I met this in a dream.

It starts when I hear my only sibling, Steph, tell me I have to help my Tía Ines with the carne asada. My Tía Ines is the eldest of my Father's siblings, something of importance since the passing of my paternal grandparents. Steph says this in her resonant and typical older-sibling-directive-to-the-younger-one-way. I assume she means I had to help my Tía carry the food to the backyard. My sleeping mind organically assumes some narrative structure within the context of the dream. I suddenly take in the shadows around the kitchen and see my Mami among them. The voices of my Tías, her sisters, warmly embrace the room to my left.

I look across the hallway and peer into another house, one I know quite well. I see lovers from past lives and they have my bags in their possession, ready to send me on my way. I tell my Mami I have to leave. My Sister's stem voice reminds me again I have to help my Tía Ines with the carne asada. I leave the kitchen to find her in the backyard.

I pass by some of the children of the family, those of my Papi's side. I see my young first cousins and second cousins, gathered at a table on the grass to my right. They play among each other and I am hopeful they do not bother me; for my tired frame knows the strain of journey I take even in slumber.

I move through the quickly progressing dream and suddenly find myself standing before an open plaza of dirt. I see my Tía Ines within a doorway to my right. I then bear witness to a pyramid of gold ascending up through the dirt. Columns settle in place before me, no higher than my eyes. They mark the steps down into entrance. I instinctively walk down into the cavern of gold. I do not know what this has to do with carne asada.

A soft yellow glow gives light to the small room of the interior. I know I am under earth, nestled within the dirt, protected from its potential by the walls of gold.

A list of my sorrows is read aloud by a speaker I do not see, but know well. The room passes the drifting truth of my great sadness. I hear one too painful to hold and collapse into myself. It is here I finally understand it.

I come to sobbing in a train station restroom. I collect myself and return back to the table where I was sitting with two close friends. I see them and an old mentor walking past me and I realize my things have been left unattended, including my computer with all my (not-backed up) research on it. I run to it as someone grabs it and takes off. I catch up and tackle the man whose face I cannot see.

I wake up. I retrace my dream steps with a cup of coffee between heavy sobs.

I first walked past my maternal side, ghosts filling the room to my left. I then moved past the children of my paternal side lingering in the backyard at a table to my right. I met my eldest Tía in the backyard, where I then entered an inverted pyramid of gold that sprouted up from the earth. Inside, I felt the warm embrace of my ancestors holding some of the purest pain I have ever known. They held me safely here. They held my pain for me when I was too weak to bear it any more. They held the fractured parts of my spirit in their protection. I was not brought to this pyramid to destroy the fractured parts of myself, my ghosts. I was here to honor the trauma and

sorrow in the way they had, and in this, I was brought to the inverted pyramid of gold to *remember* myself.

Why would I want to destroy this part of myself- the strong and resilient enduring flesh, the cleverness of my light that pushed to survive? I choose to look back to it, turn to it, open my arms to it, and hold it. I hold my hands in those moments. I hold myself, too.

I exist in an educational system built to disadvantage bodies like mine. It is a system built for me, and others like me, to fail. To survive this system, we often have to dismember ourselves, denounce our families, or values, our language, and embrace a barrage of racist toxicity from our peers and instructors because at least that way we can fit in.

I instead finally heeded the message from my ancestors to *remember* myself, to *literally become one with myself again* and claim the pieces of myself that had been fractured. This *Testimonio* too, is a way to re/member myself. It is a way to honor the things that haunt me and hold them sweetly. To put them out into the world in an effort to build community, to forge connection between sorrows and re/member the strength within our bodies, pulsing out from our lights. If I destroy myself, what can I learn of my strengths? *Testimonio* then implores us to recognize our strength, rearticulate it, and use it to learn from and teach others. It holds rife with promise the knowledge we know; it urges us to fight for it and to claim it as our own.

My dream concluded in a train station where I was surrounded by friends and mentors. We were going in different directions, but at the complicated crossroads we were still able to meet. I invite you, in conclusion, to meet me too. I invite you to recognize the strength of your past, and to chase down the pursuit of your knowledge as faceless others try to strip it away from you. Hold it, re/member it, it is yours. This is mine. This was mine. And this can be ours, too.

With joy, we can re/member ourselves in our own temples of gold and embrace the light from the ghosts of ourselves, kindly granting them passage back into the depths of our sacred chests.

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