

11. THE POWER OF TESTIMONIO METHODOLOGY: HISTORY, COMPONENTS, AND RESOURCES

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““Testimonio in academia disrupts silence, invites connection, and entices collectivity—it is social justice scholarship in education.”

–Burciaga, Delgado-Bernal, and Flores Carmona (2012)

When I first learned what *testimonio* was in my second year as a doctoral student. I had the privilege to take a course on *testimonio* one of my best experiences as a graduate student. The course made research more intimate and valued the political in my lived experiences. What I mean by intimate and political refers to the traditional training students receive when they first meet the elements of research. That first introduction usually asks students to think objectively and approach research from a neutral perspective. Critical qualitative research asks students to bring your full self to the research process. I learned from chapters and books that informed the practices of *testimonio* and learned that the work of *testimonio* has traveled the world and its practices have influenced scholarly work in areas across critical studies. In fact, generations of Chicana/Latina scholars and other writers have used *testimonio* as a way to demonstrate and expose the workings of oppression, marginalization, and resistance across time and space. In their work they situate themselves as holders and producers of knowledge while at the same time creating bridges between the collective experience in their communities and their own. This chapter offers guidance to students from the perspective and practice of Chicana/Latina scholars who are interested in

using *testimonio* as a methodological tool to conduct research. It provides a brief history of *testimonio* scholarship, important components, and a list of resources.

WHAT IS TESTIMONIO?

Testimonio differs from oral history or autobiography and extensively other forms of qualitative research practices in that it requires that the *testimonialista* engage with a critical reflection of their lived experiences. This engages the individual and the listener further than just a retelling of their story (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012). It is an intentional and political performance and its objective is to “bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action” (Reyes and Rodriguez 2012: 525). *Testimonio* allows researchers to bring awareness, offer opportunities to critically reflect, and examine the connection between lived experience and systems of oppression. It is important to note that there has been an increase in the use of *testimonio* within the field of education in the last two decades and a considerable amount of that is produced by Chicana/Latina feminists (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012; Reyes and Rodriguez 2012). This is significant because this scholarly work shifts the possibilities in qualitative research by

introducing *testimonio* as another way of collecting “data” and possibilities for analysis. This is a reason why I gravitate to *testimonio*, it is a process that creates space for many ways of knowing and learning with/in communities and it has strong links to *feminista* traditions revealing an epistemology of truths and the process of understanding them (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012b).

MAPPING TESTIMONIO ROOTS

Testimonio is a practice rooted in Latin America and although there are no set dates on its exact establishment, it is generally agreed that it emerged around the 1970 (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012 Reyes and Rodriguez 2012). Reyes and Rodriguez (2012) explain that “the main feature of the testimonial text is the construction of a discourse of solidarity... [*testimonio* also is] a result of the liberation efforts and the geopolitical resistance movements to imperialism in the Third World nations...” many of the *testimonios* tend to focus on difficult and particular social events such as military interventions, oppressive governments, political disappearances, etc. (526). As North American scholars began to use and reshape *testimonio*, the particular social events expand to include more experiences such as those within the institution of education. I use *testimonio* as a methodology because, *testimonio* provides the necessary language and tools to situate my exploration and analysis of qualitative research in education.

In reading about the contours of *testimonio*, this kind of writing is intentionally a voice from the margins documenting the struggle, resistance, and to a large extent the recovery of knowledge production. *Testimonio* functions as a product and process that challenges “objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance” in

research (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012: 363). Chicanas/Latinas using *testimonio* shift understandings of who is considered subaltern or marginalized. This continues to be an important and challenging conversation across qualitative research. Delgado Bernal and Elenes (2011) explain:

[S]ome scholars point to the idea that the very possibility of “writing one’s life” (Beverly, 2005: 548) implies that the narrator is no longer in the situation of marginality and subalternity that her narrative describes. Part of Gayatri Spivak’s (1998) argument is that “being subaltern means...not mattering, not being worth listening to, or not being understood when one is heard” (Beverly, 2005: 551). Stated another way, if the narrator has attained the cultural status of an author (and general 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. (111)

This interpretation challenges dominant notions of who can speak and create knowledge. *Testimonio* as a methodological tool unveils tensions, contradictions, and possibilities for investigating how we use research to analyze inequities. For example, further unpacking and negotiating the dichotomous lines in qualitative research (researcher/subject, academia/community, activism/scholarship, and colonized/colonizer) extends our understanding of using *testimonio* as a methodological tool. *Testimonios* definitely provides a space to speak to contradictions and allows for methodology to retool itself.

QUICK REVIEW ON TESTIMONIO AS AN APPROACH TO CONDUCTING RESEARCH

There are several approaches to using *testimonios* as knowledge. Some examples of *testimonio* include poetry, cultural boxes, and speeches. Technology influences different forms of *testimonios*, such as Benmayor's (2012) digital *testimonios*. The writing process of most *testimonios* involves two or more people. It is written and/or audio recorded in first person. Often the writing and the collection of the *testimonio* is done between an interlocutor and *testimonialista*. The interlocutor is the person who is an "outside activist and/or ally, [who] records, transcribes, edits, and prepares a manuscript for publication" (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012:365). The interlocutor works closely with the *testimonialista* to highlight the *testimonialista's* community experiences. The *testimonio* is based on the account or experience of a *testimonialista* with a particular social event but it circulates back to those whose lives have been affected by the social event as well. A *testimonio* is a critical reflection of their lived experiences.

Testimonio places a lot of value and responsibility on the concept and praxis of relationship building and development. Scholars who use it as a methodology explain that relationships are what make the *testimonio* possible, and that is why relationships are important to the process of collecting and analyzing the *testimonios* (Benmayor 2012). First, there has to be a level of *confianza* built between the interlocutor and *testimonialista*. Even when there is no interlocutor, a relationship between the *testimonialista* and the people or space supporting the process of creating and sharing a *testimonio* is needed. However, I don't want to essentialize this process. This process has contradictions because many speakers, writers, and listeners are still conditioned to

work through and from a perspective of master narratives and practices. The master narrative is what is commonly used to analyze history that centers white or European ancestry. When research is approached from a white perspective it leaves many narratives and perspectives on the margins and/or omitted. Yet, *testimonio* challenges both interlocutor and *testimonialista* to speak, write, and listen differently and you must allow yourself to have *confianza* (Haig-Brown 2003).

Like most scholars who use *testimonio* in their work, Chicanas/Latinas place focus on the silences, revealing the critical reflections of the *testimonialistas* within education in the U.S. (in many cases themselves). By using *testimonios*, they attempt to create bridges between their experience with educational equities, systemic oppressions, and *papelitos guardados* (protected papers) and other areas of their lives like those having to do with *familia* (family), chronic health problems, migrations, etc. (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). At the core they underscore how *testimonio* engages others to "understand and establish a sense of solidarity as a first step toward social change" (Delgado Bernal et al. 2012: 364). The "cornerstone of *testimonio*, like oral history, is not the speaking of truth, but rather, the telling of an account from an individual point of view whose conscience has led to an analysis of the experience as a shared component of oppression" (Reyes and Rodriguez 2012: 528).

CONCLUSION

Testimonio enables researchers to question power dynamics while making meaning and expanding and embracing alternative ways of knowing and being. *Testimonio* is more than a "data collection tool" it is a process that allows researcher and contributor to theorize lived experiences in the context of doing research, and it is a process that encourages more

egalitarian relationships between scholars and the *testimonialistas*. Calderon et al. (2012) state that we should move “not to recover the silenced voices by using hegemonic categories of analysis but to change the methodological tools and categories to reclaim those neglected voices” (60). Hence, *testimonio* allows researchers to practice this type of innovative inquiry and analysis.

OTHER RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT TESTIMONIOS

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1990. *Making face, making soul/haciendo caras: Creative and critical perspectives of feminists of color*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.
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