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The telling is political & intentional: resistance through testimonio for Latinas in higher education

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**The Telling is Political & Intentional:
Resistance through *Testimonio* for Latinas in Higher Education**

A Thesis

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Education is often marketed to the Latinx¹ community as an opportunity to move up the social class ladder, and attain success in this country. While the number of Latinx students in higher education has risen over the years, there still continues to be a lack of conversation among Latino families and in academic spaces about the Latinx experience in higher education. When talking about Latinx students attending college, we tend to talk only about the pre-college experience (e.g., applying, being accepted, etc.) and then actual graduation, or, in some cases, not making it to graduation. But what happens during the 4+ years that we are in college? Why do only some of us graduate? What are the structures and forces that shape our experiences? In this thesis, I examine the challenges, difficulties, and triumphs of Latinas in higher education—the motivation of our families, the feelings of guilt and alienation, and much more. I develop this analysis through a close reading of the 22 *testimonios* in Jessica De Leon’s *Wise Latinas*. I argue that it is important to not only acknowledge the experiences of Latinas in higher education, but to also recognize how these experiences are tied to larger structures of power and oppression. Through this argument, I also want to affirm the strategies of resistance and resilience that Latinas engage in to make their way through college, based on our race, class, and gender identities that are “Othered”² within the academy. I demonstrate that while academic spaces

¹ Throughout this project I use the term Latinx as a non-binary inclusive term for “Latino”

² “Other/Othered” is referring to those whom are marginalized based on race, gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.

silence the voices and experiences of many People of Color³ (PoC), especially of Latinas, some of us learn to navigate through them while others are discouraged from them and leave academia. I ground the project in Critical Race Theory because it sheds light on the marginalization of PoC voices, and affirms how *testimonios* is a form of theory making that helps us to reclaim our space in academia and that validates our experiences and knowledge.

As a Latina student who has been a member of academia for several years, and who has future interests in working in academia, my thesis is not intended to remove hope and motivation, but rather to provide a sense of community among us, a community that strives for *neplanta*. In *Luz en Lo Oscuro*, Gloria Anzaldúa defines *neplanta* as the state of in between-ness and a space of resistance. Anzaldúa refers to *neplanta* as not only a space of resistance but as a bridge that can *connect* struggle to strength; she writes, “las neplantas walk through fire on many bridges by turning the flames into a radiance of awareness that orients, guides, and supports those who cannot cross over on their own.”⁴ My goal is to encourage Latinas to enter academic spaces and change the space to one that is more inclusive for us. I argue that we must build *neplanta*, and remember that to be in academia as a Latina is an opportunity to “continually [challenge] institutionalized discourses” and oppressive systems of power within higher education.⁵ At times it may seem as if academia is a hopeless place that continues to oppress us, but we need to remember that it is also a place that brings awareness to our own oppression.

³ I capitalize People of Color (PoC) to position agency and validation to all people who identify as People of Color that are often marginalized.

⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, *Light in the Dark: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality = Luz en lo Oscuro* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). 152

⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Making Face, Making Soul = Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990). 25-26

Therefore, to be in higher education gives us the opportunity to not only fulfill our families' wishes of helping ourselves and our families *seguir adelante* in this country, but to also demand the denied “knowledges [that] have been kept from us.”⁶ Demanding academic spaces that are inclusive gives us the opportunity to disrupt “the dominant culture's interpretation of 'our' experience, of the way they 'read' us.”⁷ Academic spaces should give us the opportunity to share and tell our *own* stories, to develop our *theories in the flesh*. As Norma Elia Cantú suggests, we might see the persistence of racism, sexism and other inequalities in academia as motivation “to do work that matters and make it a better world for those that come after.”⁸ We must continue to “[*escribir*] *nuestras historias*,” and share our *testimonios* that “reveal [our] painful personal experiences and triumphs” because at the end of the day “*todas tenemos casi los mismos problemas*” in academia, *y juntas tenemos que seguir luchando* for a space that validates us and includes us.⁹

Latinas in Higher Education: Seguir/Salir¹⁰ Adelante and other Motivations

A key motivation for Latinx people to pursue higher education is the concept of *seguir adelante*. Latinx students are seen as investments for a better living and socioeconomic future for many Latinx families. Activist and feminist scholar Aída Hurtado talks about how “among communities of color there has been a strong commitment to advancing the group through acts of

⁶ Anzaldúa 25-26

⁷ Anzaldúa 25-26

⁸ Norma Elia Cantú, “Derrumbando Muros along an Academic Path” in Jennifer De Leon, ed. *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014) 138

⁹ Patricia Zavella “Tenemos que Seguir Luchando” in *Telling to live: Latina feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004). 348

¹⁰ Throughout this thesis I use *salir* and *seguir adelante* interchangeably not based on their literal definitions but based on cultural nuances of moving forward towards success

self-help because there [are] very few avenues for group advancement” due to social barriers that limit the opportunities of the entire group. This means that “educational achievement cannot be conceptualized as an individual process” but a process and achievement for the entire family.¹¹ Education is seen as “a set of master keys that [unlocks] multiple doors--career, money, travel, health, relationships, even love” for Latinx individuals in higher education and for their family.¹² Therefore many parents emphasize the importance of education as key to *salir adelante* in this country.

Ashley-Marie Vollmer Hanna and Debora Marie Ortega define *salir adelante* as a “conceptual framework [that] highlights how immigrants negotiate racism, prejudice, discrimination, and fear through their strong work ethic and the belief in their ability to” succeed in this country regardless of the obstacles one may face.¹³ According to Vollmer Hanna and Ortega, rather than its literal translation to “get ahead” by stepping over others for individual satisfaction and success, to many Latinx immigrants, “salir adelante” means “the need to fight against structural barriers or fight for [the] family” and to help the family “move forward toward a better life, upward mobility” to better the social, educational, economic, etc., situation of oneself or one’s family.¹⁴ Overall, education has been thought to be the magic formula to

¹¹ Aída Hurtado, *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996). 32

¹² Aída Hurtado et al., “Infinite Possibilities, Many Obstacles: Language, Culture, Identity, and Latino/a Educational Achievement” in Enrique G. Murillo et al., eds., *Handbook of Latinos and Education: Theory, Research and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2010). 284

¹³ Ashley-Marie Vollmer Hanna and Debora Marie Ortega, "Salir adelante (perseverance): Lessons from the Mexican immigrant experience," *Journal of Social Work* 16, no. 1 (2016): doi:10.1177/1468017314560301. 53

¹⁴ IBID 57

succeed in this country, and therefore many Latinx families continue to emphasize that education is the ticket that guarantees a better life and *un progreso que se ve*.¹⁵

The Marginalization of Latinas in Higher Education

While the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 created a foundation for the creation of affirmative action, and aimed to “prohibit racial discrimination in any institution receiving federal assistance,”¹⁶ this act has not stopped racial discrimination in academic spaces. While the enrollment numbers of Latinas in academic institutions continue to rise, our voices continue to be marginalized and unheard. To better understand the factors that contribute to this alienation and discrimination toward Latinas, we must look at the barriers and practices that contribute to marginalization and discrimination. George Lipsitz’s *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, argues that whiteness seeks its rewards and privileges at the expense of other racialized groups.¹⁷ Through interpersonal and institutional acts of whiteness and racism, these practices serve as “a system for protecting the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities (and protection) for asset accumulation and upward mobility,”¹⁸ and ensures that People of Color maintain a subordinate and marginalized position in US society.¹⁹

¹⁵ Luz Del Alba Acevedo, “Daughter of the Bootstrap” *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004). 139

¹⁶ Catherine Medina and Gaye Luna, "Narratives from Latina Professors in Higher Education," *Anthropology Education Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2000):, doi:10.1525/aeq.2000.31.1.47. 47

¹⁷ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: how white people profit from identity politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). 3

¹⁸ Lipsitz vii

¹⁹ Pérez Huber 165

In “Critical Race Theory, Racial Micro aggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates,” Daniel Solórzano discusses how nonverbal gestures, stereotypical assumptions, lowered expectations, and racially assaultive remarks lead to racial battle fatigue, which leads to mental, emotional, and physical strains.²⁰ Derald Sue elaborates on the meaning of micro aggressions through the following; “(1) micro assaults, or intentionally and explicitly derogatory verbal or nonverbal attacks; (2) micro insults, or rude and insensitive subtle put-downs of someone’s racial heritage or identity; and (3) micro invalidations, or remarks that diminish, dismiss, or negate the realities and histories of People of Color.”²¹ This Eurocentric and oppressive perspective not only marginalizes non-white knowledges, but it does not take into account the various obstacles, like racial battle fatigue, that PoC need to learn to navigate and overcome in order to pursue an education, and reach academic success.

Maylei Blackwell’s *Chicana Power!* discusses the emergence of Chicana feminism as a response to racial and sexist practices that Chicanas faced in the Chicano movement in Southern California and throughout the Southwest. She also highlights the *testimonios* of Chicanas who experience academic racism. One is the story of Ana NietoGomez, a Chicana activist and theorist who later pursued a career in academia and faced the same discriminatory challenges that she faced as a student. Blackwell states that during NietoGomez’s time as a professor in a Chicano Studies program at California State University, Northridge, she was denied tenure due to her

²⁰Tara Yosso et al., 661

²¹ Derald Wing Sue et al. “Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice.” in Tara Yosso et al., “Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 4 (2009): , doi:10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m707l. 662

feminist pedagogy for liberation within her own Chicano community.²² Her feminism for racial *and* gender liberation was seen as a "distraction" from the movement's priorities because it disrupted the monolithic narrative that both Chicanos and Chicanas experienced oppression in the same way. This experience is important to highlight because unlike our Latino counterparts, Latinas fight for race and gender equality inside academia and within the liberation movement, a point that is often overlooked. The *testimonios* in *¡Chicana Power!*, shed light on the marginalization of Chicanas/Latinas and reinforces that the telling of these experiences is a political tool that serves to highlight the racial and sexist obstacles that Latinas face while pursuing higher education.

While *¡Chicana Power!* is based on narratives of Chicanas in academic spaces in the late 1960s and 1970s Chicano movement, Catherine Medina's and Gaye Luna's article, "Narratives from Latina Professors in Higher Education," continues the conversation concerning the discrimination and alienation of Latina professors in higher education in the early 2000s. Medina and Luna interviewed three tenure-track professors about their experiences. Similar to the stories in Blackwell and De Leon's work, many of the interviews exemplify experiences of discrimination in their professions based on but not limited to race and sex. Medina and Luna conclude that the feelings of alienation and lack of support stem from sociological structures that shape academic spaces and serve to marginalize People of Color. Academic spaces are spaces in which "the dominant cultural group has the power, resources, and authority to define itself in positive, normative ways and to define the out-group [minorities] in negative, dysfunctional ways-thus rationalizing the continuation of vesting power in itself and away from other

²² Maylei Blackwell, *¡Chicana Power!: Contested histories of Feminism in the Chicano movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015). 198

groups."²³ Overall, the authors conclude that discriminatory practices towards PoC are “reinforced in institutions of higher education,” through stereotypical assumptions, lack of PoC perspectives and knowledges in curricula, etc. all of which Latinas experience in higher education.²⁴

In “Dialoguing the Latina Experience in Higher Education,” Xaé Alicia Reyes and Diana I. Ríos discuss the professional process and development as Latina academics, and the possible structural “reasons for the underrepresentation of minority individuals in politics and in high ranking administrative positions in business.”²⁵ Overall, they confirm underrepresentation of PoC in certain spaces as purposeful alienation by larger structures of power, control and tradition. When it comes to high schools and colleges, Latinx students “more often than not (have) been tracked into general courses with little career counseling or pre college advisement.”²⁶ The ethnic prejudice and discrimination in academia is nothing new, rather the “historical discrimination or the long history of racism in the United States [has] lead [Latinx]to distrust white institutions” as places that are not welcoming to students of color, and a place of constant oppression.²⁷ This thesis aims to shed light on these injustices by highlighting the various obstacles in the academic system that are rooted in racism, sexism, and classism by

²³ Medina & Luna 47

²⁴ IBID 48

²⁵ Xaé Alicia Reyes and Diana I. Ríos, "Dialoguing the Latina Experience in Higher Education," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 4, no. 4 (2005):, doi:10.1177/1538192705280079. 377

²⁶ Medina & Luna 54

²⁷ IBID 53

validating the experiences of Latinas as knowledge producers.²⁸ Regardless of the level of education, or the field in which we work, Latinas will continue to face experiences of work-related discrimination, and we must use *testimonios* to shed light on these institutional barriers and learn strategies to overcome them.

Latina *Testimonios* Disrupt the Monolithic College Narrative

In this thesis, I argue that Latinas are challenging the hegemonic narrative about higher education and creating a new base of knowledge and experience about how we navigate through higher education. We must do so in order to better understand our experiences, to build solidarity and resilience. I also argue that we must to make *testimonios* more present in college conversations inside and outside of the academy so that our experiences are not seen as isolated or an individual problem. Using a Critical Race Theory framework, I argue that since the academy marginalizes voices and experiences of PoC, it is important that we center the experiences of Latinas in higher education by using *testimonios* to disrupt the monolithic college narrative. Chicana feminists, like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, highlight the importance of “theories in the flesh” and *testimonios* as a form of theory making and as channels to express the unspoken truths and conversations that many of us face as people of color. Moraga defines a theory in the flesh as “one where the physical realities of our lives-our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings-all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity.”²⁹ It is for these reasons that *testimonios* serve as a tool for many Latinas in higher education to voice and express the unspoken truth of prejudice in academia. It is through sharing these

²⁸ IBID 49

²⁹ Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983).

testimonios that “despite our success in the academy and in our creative endeavors, we all could point to moments and events that [are] deeply painful.”³⁰ These *testimonios* are not small in number, there are hundreds of Latina narratives to be heard, however these stories are not showcased to many of us until we are in academic spaces ourselves. With that said, we can use *testimonio* as a political and intentional tool that highlights our experiences of marginalization and alienation in academia. Through our *testimonios* we can learn from one another, our commonalities and differences, the importance of an education to our Latinx families, and how our families influence us and/or can limit us from achieving our dreams.

Given that I want to highlight the complexities and commonalities of the Latina college experience, I offer a thematic analysis of the 22 *testimonios* in *Wise Latinas*. To develop my thesis, I shed light on the complexities, similarities, and differences among the Latina college experience while also analyzing them in relationship to the research that has been done of Latinas/Latinx in higher education. I do so in order to provide more context and understanding of the narratives not as isolated experiences, but as interconnected with one another, and as a collective struggle that Latinas face while pursuing a higher education. I specifically chose *Wise Latinas* because I appreciated Jessica De Leon’s motives for putting together the collection as she sought to “unveil the truth about [Latina] educational experiences and to challenge the stereotypes,” and challenge the mainstream media and those in power of writing history.³¹ De Leon emphasizes the need for authentic stories by Women of Color (WoC) in order to dispel myths and labels placed upon the Latina college experience.

³⁰ Luz Del Alba Acevedo et. al; introduction to, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004). 13

³¹ Jennifer De Leon “Introduction,” in Jennifer De Leon, ed. *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014) 4

The *testimonios* in *Wise Latinas* remind us that it is not our duty to adapt to the monolithic narrative of higher education, and that we are not alone in the struggles we face. She shares how in college she yearned for a book about other Latinas that could help her feel less alone in her struggles. Not only do these *testimonios* remind us that we are not alone, but also that higher education is structured in a way to be inclusive to only a white, middle-class community. These *testimonios* remind us it is still our space and through *testimonio* we have the power to change it into what we need and what we want to see for Latinas in higher education. These *testimonios* encourage us to reclaim our space and to voice our experiences in order to disrupt the dominant narrative of the college experience and challenge the academic structure that marginalizes PoC, experiences, and voices. They encourage me to voice my own experiences in the classrooms, and to contribute to the conversation that many other Latinas have started before me, and to connect them to a larger structure that marginalizes our experiences, which is what this thesis does.

These *testimonios* discuss some of the Latina experiences with *cultural intuition* which Dolores Delgado Bernal terms as, “the forms of knowledge we have gained from our personal, professional, and academic experiences.”³² The *testimonios* serve or give voice to as what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as *la facultad*, a survival tactic developed by those who have suffered and experienced oppression. The *testimonios* offer an opportunity for readers to read and hear the experiences of 22 Latinas from various universities and across/spanning pan-Latinx ethnic identities, who share their story that is often left out of the dominant college-life conversation.

³² Delgado Bernal in Lindsay Pérez Huber and Bert María Cueva, "Chicana/Latina Testimonios on Effects and Responses to Microaggressions," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (2012): doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698193. 397

By sharing our experiences, we are speaking up about these injustices which we are not complicit to but which oppress us. As Xaé Alicia Reyes and Diana I. Ríos state in “Dialoguing the Latina Experience in Higher Education,” “silence is often a result of oppression and the role that power and politics plays in the production of knowledge.”³³ Therefore, when we provide spaces to voice our experiences, not only are we able to better understand our experiences but we are also challenging the oppressive systems that we live in by no longer remaining silent.

The thesis is divided into the following chapters: 1) In Chapter 1, I discuss how Critical Race Theory challenges Eurocentric knowledge and centralizes PoC experience and knowledge in academia. 2) Chapter 2 highlights how *testimonio* serves as a political tool that challenges monolithic narrative and centralizes Latinas as knowledge producers who are reshaping higher education. 3) In Chapter 3, I analyze some of the *testimonios* in *Wise Latinas* and highlight my findings, such as how Latinx families impact and influence the academic success for many Latinas. 4) The final chapter of this thesis underscores some the Latina experiences in *Wise Latinas* around feelings of discrimination and alienation while pursuing a college degree, and draws attention to the ways in which Latinas learn to navigate these institutional obstacles in academia.

Chapter 1: How Critical Race Theory challenges Eurocentric knowledge

When examining Latina experiences in higher education, it is important to use a framework that specifically focuses on critiquing and challenging power structures. A Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework highlights how racial hierarchies have been and continue to be ingrained in United States culture and society, including in educational institutions. Through this

³³ Alyssa García, "Counter Stories of Race and Gender: Situating Experiences of Latinas in the Academy," *Latino Studies* 3, no. 2 (2005): doi:10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600138. 261

framework, we can critique, analyze, and gain helpful knowledge to challenge and deconstruct the oppressive white, Eurocentric, traditional ideologies in the academy, while centering and validating the experiences of PoC, specifically in this thesis, Latinas. Methodologically, a Critical Race Theory framework places the experiences of marginalized people at the center of analysis, and “[directs] us to capture the stories, counter-stories, and narratives of marginalized people[s].”³⁴ Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel Solórzano define CRT in education as “the work of scholars who are developing an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education,” it “works toward identifying and challenging racism as a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination.”³⁵ This theoretical framework is known to be an “invaluable tool for critical scholars who seek to expose and disrupt oppressive conditions within educational institutions in the U.S.”³⁶ This is an approach that not only points out and analyzes oppressive structures, but also centers the lived experiences of PoC, suggests strategies for change, and aims to “understand how everyday racism, and other forms of oppression, intersect to mediate life experiences and outcomes.”³⁷ Daniel Solórzano outlines five defining elements of CRT in relationship to educational research: (1) the importance of

³⁴ Lilia Fernández, "Telling Stories About School: Using Critical Race and Latino Critical Theories to Document Latina/Latino Education and Resistance," *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002); doi:10.1177/1077800402008001004. 46

³⁵ Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel G. Solórzano, "Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 18, no. 3 (2014): doi:10.1080/13613324.2014.994173. 300

³⁶ Lindsay Pérez Huber, "Building Critical Race Methodologies in Educational Research: A Research Note on Critical Race Testimonio," *FIU Law Review* 4, no. 15 (2008); <http://ecollections.law.u.edu/lawreview/vol4/iss1/15>. 159

³⁷ Pérez Huber & Solórzano 301

transdisciplinary approaches, (2) an emphasis on experiential knowledge, (3) a challenge to dominant ideologies, (4) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, and (5) a commitment to social justice.³⁸ Solórzano suggests we must validate transdisciplinary approaches, intersectional experiential knowledges, and knowledges of those who are oppressed, in order to dismantle oppressive systems.

Richard Delgado (1984), defines the dominant Eurocentric paradigm as imperial scholarship that limits discourse, ideologies, and perspective, “where a single [Eurocentric] perspective can define an entire field.”³⁹ Gary Okihiro’s *Third World Studies: Theorizing Liberation*, presents the intellectual history of Third World Studies as a call to challenge the existing dominant Eurocentric paradigm in academia. In chapter 5, Okihiro focuses on the United States’ education system and specifically highlights the lack of inclusivity in academic spaces. He calls out its various structures of power that have lead the academy to be become a space of oppression with the pressures of compulsory assimilation.

Through Third World Studies, Okihiro believes academic spaces can be more inclusive and can de-centralize U.S. white Eurocentric ideologies. He references the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where Freire “characterizes schooling for colonialism,” and gives an example of how education was a tool of colonization and assimilation for Indigenous peoples. Through forced assimilation and practices of whiteness, hegemonic Eurocentric power and knowledge was put into place in order to diminish indigenous cultures,

³⁸ Daniel Solórzano, “Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars.” in Dolores Delgado Bernal, "Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Critical Raced-Gendered Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge," *Qualitative Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2002): doi:10.1177/107780040200800107. 109-110

³⁹ Pérez Huber 162

knowledges, and practices. Okihiro specifically highlights the unfortunate experiences of Indigenous peoples to prove that the “genealogy of American education reveals its hegemonic power as an imperial and colonial project,” to teach Eurocentric curriculum and colonizing practices that objectifies the “Other.”⁴⁰ In regards to PoC in academia, the lack of physical and academic inclusiveness, exemplifies how “race is a fundamental organizing principle of social relations” that places PoC at the bottom of the hierarchy for the benefit of whites at the top.⁴¹ Therefore, Okihiro argues for the need of Third World studies and theoretical frameworks that analyze and dismantle oppressive social structures. He shares the story of the 1968 Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State College, which was a student activist movement fighting for change, and overall inclusivity of all peoples in the academic spaces. The demand for inclusivity focused specifically on the rights of oppressed peoples and a more diverse curriculum that exemplified more than just Eurocentric knowledges and practices. He states that these student activists knew that “educational transformation was essential for the liberation of their minds and bodies from the chains of colonialism.”⁴²

In "Building Critical Race Methodologies in Educational Research: A Research Note on Critical Race Testimonio," Lindsay Pérez Huber further discusses how a CRT framework can help analyze systems of oppression in academic spaces. She begins this argument by referencing the work of Delgado Bernal & Villalpando and what they call an *apartheid of knowledge*

⁴⁰ Okihiro 99

⁴¹ Okihiro 126

⁴² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in Gary Y. Okihiro, *Third World Studies. Theorizing Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). 93

ingrained in higher education.⁴³ They argue that the academy has historically functioned from Eurocentric epistemological⁴⁴ perspectives that marginalize non-white truths, realities, and knowledges. This apartheid of knowledge “effectively marginalizes, discredits, and devalues the scholarship, epistemologies, and other cultural resources,” if they are not part of the Eurocentric dominant narrative.⁴⁵ Due to the marginalization of non-white ideologies, CRT scholars conclude that the knowledge produced and validated in the academy displays a discourse of Eurocentric power, “where power to decide what is considered truth or not, is tied to the power to legitimate that truth.”⁴⁶ The marginalization of non-white ideologies remind us why it is so necessary that we interrupt this process upstream of who controls knowledge production, and how knowledge production controls how PoC are treated more broadly in society. By recognizing the racial dynamics within knowledge production in the academy, we can identify from where the alienation and discrimination of PoC stems from and begin to dismantle the discrimination within academia.

To protect this white norm and white narrative, various forms of violence like marginalization and silencing come into play, one of them being racism as a tool to protect white privilege and superiority. Racism can take place in a variety of different forms, both personal and

⁴³ Pérez Huber 161

⁴⁴ Epistemology/epistemologies refers to the production of knowledge and that influence the way one knows and understands the world.

⁴⁵ Dolores Delgado Bernal & Octavio Villalpando, “An apartheid of knowledge in academia: The struggle over the ‘legitimate’ knowledge of faculty of color” in Tara Yosso, William A. Smith, Miguel Ceja, and Daniel Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates," *The Journal of Negro Education*. 69 (2000);, doi:10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m707l. 672

⁴⁶ Pérez Huber 161

institutional, all of which aim to marginalize non-white ideologies, and thicken the binary between white and the “Other.” A common CRT definition of racism, defines racism as “the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at [the] victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s own privileges or aggression.”⁴⁷ So how does racism play a role in the Eurocentric paradigm and the oppression of PoC? Audre Lorde defines racism as “the belief in the inherent (white) superiority of one race over all others and thereby the ‘right’ to dominance,” over non-white others.⁴⁸ CRT scholar Solórzano, has framed racism as an institutional power that has been rooted in white supremacy that includes the following fundamental premises: “(1) one group believes itself to be superior, (2) the group that believes itself to be superior has power to carry out the racist behavior, and (3) racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups.”⁴⁹ By manifesting this idea of racism, Manning Marable argues that racism becomes “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color.”⁵⁰ These definitions suggest that racism is an institutional tool of power and domination stemming from white supremacy, that marginalizes

⁴⁷ Albert Memmi, *Racism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). 180

⁴⁸ Audre Lorde *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* in Margaret L. Andersen and Patricia Hill Collins, *Race, class, and gender: an anthology* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001). 496

⁴⁹ Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students," *Journal of Negro Education* 69 (2000):, doi:10.17763/haer.79.4.m6867014157m707l. 61

⁵⁰ Manning Marable, *Black America: Multicultural Democracy in the Age of Clarence Thomas, David Duke and the LA uprisings* (Westfield, N.J. (PO Box 2726, Westfield NJ 07091): Open Media, 1992). 5

and silences PoC experiences from the college narrative.

In order to critically challenge this Eurocentric paradigm and perspective, CRT scholarship and research utilizes and encourages qualitative methods to document and analyze the complex ways that this Eurocentric paradigm impacts and oppresses the lives of PoC. CRT allows us to critique and challenge power structures and racial systems by centering the voices of marginalized people. By gathering qualitative data, researchers can “seek to centralize the experiences of People of Color whose lives are mediated by oppressive conditions and to challenge dominant ideologies that perpetuate those conditions,” rather than ignore them.⁵¹ Not only do they serve as valid data, but “using counterstories includes not only telling non majoritarian stories but also learning how to listen and hear the messages in counterstories.”⁵² By listening and reading PoC counterstories, one can see how “everyday racist events are systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (i.e. structures and processes), and guided by ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over non-dominant groups.”⁵³ This framework not only highlights these oppressive practices but also “recognizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination.”⁵⁴

When using such methods, it is important to consciously incorporate an anti-racist and anti-hierarchical approach that deconstructs power dynamics of the researcher-subject binary that Eurocentric research tends to uphold. One way of doing so is by creating space for PoC to share

⁵⁴ Yosso et. al 663

our own stories and experiences rather than to be expected to align with the white narrative. Delgado Bernal states that “using counterstories includes not only telling non majoritarian stories but also learning how to listen and hear the messages in counterstories.”⁵⁵ Through counterstories, auto auto-ethnographies, and *testimonios*, CRT methods can serve as “powerful tools to challenge majoritarian stories rooted in a dominant Eurocentric perspective that justifies social inequalities and normalize white superiority.”⁵⁶ More specifically, CRT claim PoC experiences as knowledge producing, making it a framework that validates and includes PoC students’ experiences in academic spaces. These methods serve as an opportunity to disrupt the normative interpretation of the college experience and begin to validate the various aspects of our experience that are often silenced. By telling and sharing our lived realities through *testimonio* we can begin working towards deconstructing the “apartheid of knowledge,” and create an inclusive space for Latina experiences in higher education.

Chapter 2: Resisting through Our Stories: Chicana Feminism & the Power of Testimonio

Testimonios function as a way to validate and honor oppressed peoples’ experiences and knowledges, and as Lindsay Pérez Huber states, “*testimonios* seek to document, analyze, and validate the experiences of PoC as well as the researcher while working towards dismantling the apartheid of knowledge that perpetuates white supremacy and the forms of oppression it manifests within and beyond the academy.”⁵⁷ These *testimonios* help cultivate a space of

⁵⁵ Delgado Bernal 116

⁵⁶ Pérez Huber 167

⁵⁷ "Building Critical Race Methodologies in Educational Research: A Research Note on Critical Race Testimonio," *FIU Law Review* 4, no. 15 (2008): <http://ecollections.law.u.edu/lawreview/vol4/iss1/15>. 172

knowledge where “we [begin] to see common themes and parallel experiences despite differences in of national, ethnic, or regional background[s].”⁵⁸ Personal narratives also “serve to reorient theories about the relationship between the individual and the social by calling attention to the social and cultural dynamics through which individuals construct themselves as social actors” in our society.⁵⁹ Ultimately validating human subjects and experiences as producers of knowledge. This meaning that the production of knowledge is not limited to academia but also to those outside of academia who generate knowledge from lived experiences. Mariana Ortega’s “Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-knowing,” argues the need for *conocimiento* with oneself and the understanding of our place in this world and as a method of resistance, in order to decolonize⁶⁰ ourselves and the knowledge we validate/use/produce. Ortega argues that we need to challenge Eurocentric ways of colonization in academic spaces, in order to create space for PoC inclusion in the classroom and in curricula. Ortega argues that “certain local histories and certain bodies are being erased from conversation altogether,” and through our *testimonios* we can validate and center our PoC experiences and knowledges.⁶¹ Therefore she calls in and advises scholars to question such forms of homogeneity and partake in “decolonial woes,” which she explains as “resistant practices aimed at dismantling the hegemony of Eurocentric

⁵⁸ Luz Del Alba Acevedo et. al; introduction to, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004). 13

⁵⁹ Maynes, Mary Jo., Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett. *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. 2

⁶⁰ Through this piece I refer to colonization as the act or process of establishing control over the “Other” and stripping away rights, practices, knowledge, and overall individuality. Hence, to decolonize oneself is to gain that agency back for oneself and/or one’s peoples.

⁶¹ Mariana Ortega, “Decolonial Woes and Practices of Un-Knowing,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 3 (2017):, doi: 10.5325/jspecphil.31.3.0504. 509

thought.”⁶² These practices include but are not limited to “the negation of dominant ways of knowing,” and “negat[ing] knowledge that we have disclosed.”⁶³ By stating our *testimonios* we can begin to validate our knowledges and experiences within academia, and overall begin to decolonize ourselves and our knowledges from the dominant white narrative in higher education.

What is *testimonio*?

Testimonios have and continue to be a strong component of Latino culture and are political and intentional ways of sharing our stories that are often left out of history books and overall conversations inside and outside of the classroom. Unlike oral histories, interviews, and storytelling, *testimonios* allow the narrator to share personal life stories and experiences from their own point of view. They highlight a reality and experience that is not the dominant story, producing a sense of awareness about different narratives and experiences that resist the status quo. Through *testimonio*, a person can “identify the forms of oppression that have affected their experiences, rather than the researcher defining those experiences for them.”⁶⁴ As Kalina Brabeck states in “Testimonio: A Strategy for Collective Resistance, Cultural Survival, and Building Solidarity,” “testimonio moves beyond a narrative, biography or oral history because it is born out of the speaker’s (and not the researcher’s) political agenda aimed at resisting oppression.”⁶⁵ It is the speaker’s decisions what is shared, how it is shared, and when it is shared, *testimonios* allows the speaker to have agency in all aspects of their owned lived experience.

⁶² Ortega 510

⁶³ IBID 512

⁶⁴ Pérez Huber 169

⁶⁵ Kalina Brabeck, "IV. Testimonio: A Strategy for Collective Resistance, Cultural Survival and Building Solidarity," *Feminism & Psychology* 13, no. 2 (2003): doi:10.1177/0959353503013002889. 253

Rooted in 1960s and 1970s Latin American rights struggles, “testimonios were first used to convey the experiences and enduring struggles of people who have experienced persecutions by governments and other socio-political forces in Latin American countries.”⁶⁶ *Testimonios* allow the narrator to reflect and express personal life experiences. Since its origins, the methodological objective of *testimonios* has been to bring voices from the margins to the center, to question power structures and to reclaim the authority to narrate our own experiences and realities. In *Haciendo Caras/making face, making soul: creative and critical perspectives by women of color*, Anzaldúa reminds us that, “testimonio is used as a collective, political act of resistance,” and “it is a methodology informed by a Chicana feminist stance, used by us and for us.”⁶⁷ This form of methodology incorporates actual lived experiences that can be connected to larger structure and/or the lived experiences of others. Echoing this stance on *testimonio* as methodology, scholars like Brabeck believe that, “testimonio is the expression not of a single autonomous account but of a collectively experienced reality.”⁶⁸

According to Yosso et. al, *testimonio* expresses a reality that holds power in the way that it disrupts the apartheid knowledge. *Testimonio* disrupts traditional knowledge production because it challenges normative interpretations of what constitutes as knowledge and who is given legitimacy to produce knowledge. As Brabeck argues, “testimonio emphasizes the validity

⁶⁶ Dolores Delgado Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga, and Judith Flores Carmona, "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political," *Equity & Excellence in Education*, July 07, 2012, , doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698149. 464

⁶⁷ Anzaldúa in Lindsay Pérez Huber and Bert María Cueva, "Chicana/Latina Testimonios on Effects and Responses to Microaggressions," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (2012): doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698193. 397

⁶⁸ Brabeck 253

of experiential and/or lived knowledge,” and reminds us and others that we do not all experience the world in the same way, and that our identities impact those experiences.⁶⁹ It allows an opportunity to pay attention to the complexities of our identities, our realities and experiences, and the systems that marginalize people, creating a process of *reflection* and *resistance*.

How do Latina *testimonios* contribute to knowledge making?

Whereas traditional western forms of knowledge production tend to disregard the mind and spirit and often do not include everyone’s lived experiences, *testimonios* embody people's lived experiences by embracing the mind, body, and spirit. Unfortunately, the realities that combine the mind and body are often questioned in regards to credibility (based on a scientific/western ideologies) and left out of the conversation. In "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political,” Dolores Delgado Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga, and Judith Flores Carmona state that, “testimonio is and continues to be an approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories” whose objective is to bring change through consciousness-raising.⁷⁰ Unlike oral histories and interviews, where the researcher can take control over the narrative (asking specific questions, translating responses, etc.), *testimonios* were/are born out of the speakers, and the speaker has complete control over what they share and how they share their story. *Testimonios* are an opportunity to share how one’s race, class, gender, sexuality, impacts our experiences, and they illuminate experiences that are not part of the white, hetero, middle class dominant knowledge and narrative. Brabeck argues that unlike common assumptions, “testimonio produces knowledge, not as empirical facts, but as

⁶⁹ IBID 256

⁷⁰ Delgado Bernal, et. al 364

a strategy of cultural resistance and survival.”⁷¹ *Testimonios* allows PoC to center our experiences, and for our stories to not be forgotten, and/or overshadowed by the dominant narrative. They give us the opportunity to share our journey(s) of struggle, pain, and triumph, and for our stories to be spoken into existence.

The Latina Feminist Group argues that the method of *testimonios* they use, was ultimately framed by “common political views about how to create knowledge and theory through our experiences,” making the product and process inseparable.⁷² In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks challenges the popular and traditional notion that there is a split between the body and the mind. hooks suggests that as educators and theorists we need to remember that mind and body are one, and to validate intersectional experiences that include our various identities. WoC feminist epistemology has influenced Chicanas and empowered them to “develop the narrative format as redemption--as takers of the stories, as readers of the narratives, and as creators of analysis,” as Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez state in “Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources.”⁷³ Chicana feminisms have specifically emphasized the importance of history counter narratives, *testimonios*, and *autohistorias*, all of which share a personal narrative while preserving and documenting experiential knowledge of Chicanas and Latinas throughout history. As argued by Lindsay Pérez Huber and Bert María Cueva, *testimonios* voice experiences that have been erased by imperial, colonial, and hegemonic

⁷¹ Brabeck 256

⁷² The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004). 8

⁷³ Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez, "Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (2012): doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698571. 526

feminist discourses, and serve as a response to micro aggressions.⁷⁴ In *Haciendo Caras/making face, making soul: creative and critical perspectives by women of color*, Gloria E. Anzaldúa states the following in regards to reclaiming theoretical space as PoC:

Theory, then, is a set of knowledges. Some of these knowledges have been kept from us-- entry into some professions and academia denied us. Because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is *vital* that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform the theorizing space.⁷⁵

Echoing hooks' argument of embodying body and mind experiences, Moraga's and Anzaldúa's definition of theory in the flesh also credits "the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born of necessity," as knowledge producing.⁷⁶ Pérez Huber & Cueva then describe theory in the flesh as "a conceptual tool that allows for an explicitly racialized feminist approach to constructing knowledge from the body, lived experience, and Chicana subjectivities."⁷⁷ Rather than accepting the "Western metaphysical dualism"⁷⁸ that bell hook discusses in *Teaching to Transgress*,

⁷⁴ Pérez Huber & Cueva 395

⁷⁵ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Haciendo Caras/making face, making soul: creative and critical perspectives by women of color* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation, 1990). xxv

⁷⁶ Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981). 23

⁷⁷ Pérez Huber & Cueva 395

⁷⁸ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress; Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 1994). 1991

theories in the flesh, like *testimonios* offer insight into the Other⁷⁹ way of knowing. They reveal how the body and mind remember the pain and trauma of racist nativist micro aggressions over time.⁸⁰ *Testimonios* embody and validate theories in the flesh, hence becoming another way of speaking back and challenging traditional western knowledge and narrative that ignores PoC experiences. WoC feminists like The Latina Feminist Group emphasize that our *testimonios*, “tell how our bodies are maps of oppression, of institutional violence and stress, of exclusion, objectification, and abuse.”⁸¹ Through *testimonio* we critically reflect on our own experiences within various socio political realities (sex, race, class, sexuality, etc.) and we learn to validate our own experiences as part of knowledge production. By telling our stories and experiences we are theorizing our oppression and resistance by bringing them out of the margins. They build a base of knowledge about Latinas because they create a new way of understanding oppression and resistance. In the context of this thesis, the *testimonios* create new ways of understanding how Latinas experience and navigate higher education, an understanding that has otherwise been erased and/or misrepresented.

Chicana scholars, along with other WoC, embrace *testimonio* as “emerging power” that makes us “agents of knowledge.” In Tara J. Yosso’s, “Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth,” Pierre Bourdieu argues that, “the knowledges of upper and middle classes are considered capital valuable to a hierarchical society,” that places

⁷⁹ “Other,” referring to marginalized identities (PoC, WoC, lower class, LGBTQ+ community, etc.)

⁸⁰ Pérez Huber & Cueva 401

⁸¹ Latina Feminist Group 12

white knowledge(s) and experience at the top of the hierarchy.⁸² Prieto & Villenas, argue that “women of color have long made the case that theory and the production of knowledge cannot be disassociated from people’s lived experiences,” and *testimonios* does just that, connects the body, mind, and spirit knowledge to people’s lived experiences.⁸³ In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins discusses how allowing and recognizing marginalized people as creators of knowledge, we are able to “speak to the importance that oppression, [and] the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people.”⁸⁴ As WoC who experience various forms of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) it is important that we critically reflect, analyze, and challenge these systems of oppression and highlight the various strategies that we use to navigate these systems like academia. As Anzaldúa states, “if we have been gagged and disempowered by theories, we can also be loosed and empowered by theories.”⁸⁵ As PoC, we have constantly been left out history books and conversations, and our experiences have also been ignored, especially within higher education. With the lack of inclusivity in academia, many PoC students often feel discouraged, which can be a possible reasoning for the high dropout rate. Books like *This Bridge Called My Back*, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, and *Wise Latinas* discuss and demonstrate the power of vocalizing our struggles through *testimonio* and triumphs as WoC and bridges marginalized narratives into the dominant conversation. More specifically, Bernal,

⁸² Tara J. Yosso, "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005);, doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006. 70

⁸³ Prieto & Villenas 414

⁸⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991). 221

⁸⁵ Anzaldúa xxvi

Burciaga, and Carmona state that the *testimonios* within those works emphasize to “challenge objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance.”⁸⁶ As Anzaldúa states, *testimonio* not only exposes brutality and disrupts silencing by sharing our experiences but they also build solidarity among WoC and includes them in conversation.⁸⁷

Testimonios as Resistant Capital

Testimonios can serve as *resistant capital* because they highlight power and privilege imbalances among people by creating a spaces for those of marginalized communities to voice their struggles. Native American theologian and activist, Vine Deloria Jr. refers to *resistant capital* as “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.”⁸⁸ Hence, categorizing resistant capital as a form of cultural wealth that is, “grounded in the resistance in the legacy of resistance to subordination exhibited by Communities of Color.”⁸⁹ *Historical testimonios* remind us that we come from resilient and ingenious people who have survived and thrived, even as we have been colonized and oppressed, and we can continue to do the same. In academia, the vocalized and published *testimonios* like those in *Wise Latinas*

⁸⁶ Delgado Bernal, et. al 363

⁸⁷ Anzaldúa (1990) in Dolores Delgado Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga, and Judith Flores Carmona, "Chicana/Latina Testimonios: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political," *Equity & Excellence in Education*, July 07, 2012,, doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698149. 363

⁸⁸ Freire, Giroux, McLaren, Delgado Bernal, and Solórzano in Tara J. Yosso, "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): , doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006. 80

⁸⁹ Deloria in Tara J. Yosso, "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006 80

remind us of the resilience that comes from struggle, creating a space of resistance and community.

In, "Creating spaces: Testimonio, impossible knowledge, and academe," Celia Haig-Brown argues that *testimonios* "[are] not simply a personal matter; rather, it is the story of an individual who is also a part of a community. A *testimonio* presents the life of a person whose experiences, while unique, extend beyond [them] to represent the group of which [one] is a member."⁹⁰ Supporting Haig-Brown's argument, Prieto and Villenas state how *testimonios* highlight systematic subordination of marginalized people and "inform people outside a community/country of the circumstances and conditions of people's lives," and invites others to take some form of action.⁹¹ *Testimonio* then, not only tells a story but it is able to manifest a discussion of larger structural issues that cause harm by marginalizing certain people and realities. *Testimonios* then remind us that we are not alone in our struggles, and are about building bridges to our collective power.⁹² They build bridges in the sense that they create dialogue across differences and similarities in our experiences that are impacted by the racialized, gendered, and classed world that we live in.

From a Latina/Chicana feminist perspective, *testimonio* is connected to Anzaldúa's process of *conocimiento*, which she describes as a seven-stage spiral process without start or end point, moving forward continually and non-chronologically that coming to a spiritual and

⁹⁰ Celia Haig-Brown, "Creating spaces: Testimonio, impossible knowledge, and academe," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 3 (2003); doi:10.1080/0951839032000086763. 420

⁹¹ Prieto & Villenas 414-415

⁹² IBID 427

political awareness that moves from inner work to public acts. Pérez Huber and Cueva, state that *testimonio* is connected to *conocimiento* in the sense that, “it allows one to enter the process of healing through reflecting, recounting, and remembering the past.”⁹³ *Testimonio* then articulates a sense of inner work, of reflection, and in between-ness, *neplanta*. *Neplanta* is the second stage of *conocimiento*, which Anzaldúa defines as a space of reflection, frustration, discomfort, and always improvised visionary modes of teaching and learning.⁹⁴ When we share our lived experiences, our *testimonios* become an opportunity to do inner work and reflect on our experiences, which then becomes a resource for understanding not only our individual experience but our collective experiences and connect them to larger structures of power and oppression. More specifically, *testimonios* help us build the theory of our practice and the practice of our theory.⁹⁵ In academia, Reyes and Rodríguez believe that *testimonio* is a pedagogical aid that helps students develop an analytical that frame that critiques and challenges structural marginalization inside and outside of the classroom.⁹⁶ For example, Pérez Huber and Cueva state that using “testimonio in educational research can reveal both the oppression that exists within educational institutions and the powerful efforts in which students of color engage to challenge and transform those spaces.”⁹⁷ *Testimonio* then is a way to share experiences, connect experience, and engage in possible ways to challenge and diminish oppressive structures.

⁹³ Pérez Huber & Cueva 397

⁹⁴ Prieto & Villenas 412

⁹⁵ Latina Feminist Group 19

⁹⁶ Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez 527

⁹⁷ Pérez Huber and Cueva 392

The Latina Feminist Group specifically highlights the *testimonios* of women in Latin America and how, “[those] texts are seen as disclosures not of personal lives but of the political violence inflicted on whole communities.”⁹⁸ In Brabeck’s piece, she references an exemplary use of *testimonio* by a woman in Latin America, Guatemalan Maya Rigoberta Menchú and her book, *I...Rigoberta Menchú*. Within her book, Menchú, a human rights activist, discusses some of her experiences as a Maya woman during Guatemala’s 34-year Civil War, and through the collaboration with Venezuelan anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray her experience reached an international level.⁹⁹ Menchú’s book exemplifies *testimonio* because her work voices her experience during the war, and ties her experience to those of others. She does this in a way to not speak on behalf of others, but to let others know that her story is one of many. Brabeck gives a short overview of the Maya tradition and importance of relationships to build solidarity for survival, a practice that was not allowed during the war and was instead substituted with forced silence in order for survival.¹⁰⁰ A silence that while it saved lives, it led to people’s feeling isolated, engendered mistrust, and interfered with traditional Mayan practices. However, through Menchú’s work, readers are able to gain insight on her reality during the Guatemalan Civil War, a reality that was forced to be silenced in order for survival. Through her *testimonio* she shares her individual story, but makes sure to connect it to a collective identity without making claims to universal representation. Menchú emphasizes the following:

I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to me has happened to

⁹⁸ Latina Feminist Group 13

⁹⁹ Brabeck 254

¹⁰⁰ IBID

many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experiences is the reality of a whole people.¹⁰¹

Menchú's *testimonio* creates awareness and opens the door for dialogue by describing the particular experience she and her community endured during Guatemala's Civil War, and letting others know what about those realities, which is the true purpose of a *testimonio*.

Similar to *testimonios* deriving from Latin American struggles, in academia, *testimonios* are a critical tool for understanding the experiences of communities of color. *Testimonio* then serve as a methodology that unveils systematic subordination of students of color, disrupts silence, invites connection, encourages collectivity, and challenges the status quo by reclaiming our experiences as human and intellectual realities. As Prieto and Villenas state, "*testimonio* then names the workings and abuses of institutional power, the human costs, and our collective *sobrevivencia* (survival and beyond)."¹⁰² Through our *testimonios* we, PoC, are able to connect with one another and find commonalities and differences in our struggles, and share our methods of survival. As WoC, who experience various forms of oppression, it is important that we bring our experiences of discrimination, alienation, racism, and of triumph and success to the surface. It is often assumed that as people within the system of academia we have "made it," however scholars like Delgado Bernal and Elenes (2011) argue that "a group identity and group marginalization continues to exist in academia even when we have attained a relatively privileged status," through our education and professions.¹⁰³ With that said, it is important to

¹⁰¹ Burgos-Debray and Menchú in Kalina Brabeck, "IV. Testimonio: A Strategy for Collective Resistance, Cultural Survival and Building Solidarity," *Feminism & Psychology* 13, no. 2 (2003): doi:10.1177/0959353503013002889. 255

¹⁰² Prieto & Villenas 415

¹⁰³ Delgado Bernal & Elenes in Prieto & Villenas 415

discuss the obstacles that many of us experience and overcome throughout our academic experience, reflect on those experiences, connect, and highlight the various strategies we use to navigate those spaces. By doing so, we can reveal some of the complexities and struggles Latinas face in higher education such as; class, family, religion, sexuality, etc. These *testimonios* together tell others that we do not all navigate through academia in the same way. Through *testimonios* we can emphasize the complexities of our realities, the pushes and pulls from our families, the feelings of alienation, the financial restraints, the language barriers, etc. By recognizing the complexities of our identities, we can begin to have a *real* conversation of what the college experience is like for many PoC, and can also perhaps encourage other marginalized groups to vocalize their everyday realities as well.

Chapter 3: The Impact of *Familia* in Latina Success

In many Latinx families and in the *testimonios* in *Wise Latinas* it is common to see a theme of unity, collective effort, and support when Latinas pursue a college education. With this encouragement, there are also a lot of expectations, responsibilities, and challenges Latinas face. There is a pressure to succeed from our families, not just for ourselves, but for our family and loved ones. For many of us it is our first time being away from home, in a new city, state, or even country, yet we try to ignore these feelings of fear and continue to strive toward success for ourselves and the whole of our families. While some of us have the support from our parents and family, sometimes the support is mixed and for some, there is no support. In other words, a higher education is much more than obtaining a college degree, but an experience full of both struggles and triumphs, pushes and pulls, and mixed emotions. This experience is a privilege that not everyone has, and those of us who do have the privilege to pursue a higher education rarely have the opportunity to share our experiences of struggles and success. It is up to us to voice our stories, and bring to light our experiences that are often left unspoken and left in the shadows. By

sharing our experiences, we begin to create a conversation of our realities within our families and within institutions of higher education, and we contribute to a body of knowledge about the Latina experience in higher education that is often missing. In this chapter, I draw from narratives in *Wise Latinas* to discuss some of the complexities around the themes of collective success and moral support, gendered *familismo* and independence, and the sense of guilt many Latinas experience when pursuing a higher education.

“*Salir/Seguir Adelante*”: Family support in Latina Success

For many Latinx there tends to be a common goal for success in this country, to better oneself, our families, and our communities. It is a collective success, as much as it is individual. There is a traditional *salir/seguir adelante* mentality among Latinx families that serves as a pressure for Latinas to pursue a higher education. For many Latinas, this mentality is passed on to us from generations before us, and becomes a key motivator to pursue a college degree. In feminist scholar and activist Aída Hurtado’s book, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms*, Hurtado states that “among communities of color there has been a strong commitment to advancing the group through acts of self-help because there [are] very few avenues for group advancement,” which is exactly what many Latinx students do when seeking an education.¹⁰⁴ This motivational mentality of *salir or seguir adelante* has been shared by immigrants and parents of color and comes from a place of love, hope, and support. For many of us, education is the key that opens the door to many opportunities, to *salir adelante*, and overcome “the ongoing struggle for socioeconomic mobility and acceptance in U.S. society.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Aída Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak out on Sexuality and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). 26

¹⁰⁵ Sarah M. Ovink, ““They Always Call Me an Investment”,” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 2 (2013): doi:10.1177/0891243213508308. 5

While the belief of striving for something better is rooted in love and hope, at the same time, it poses many questions about those who have come before us and who did not have the opportunity to pursue a higher education. If to *seguir/salir adelante* means to be better, what is that saying about those before us and our commitments to them? What does it mean for those who did not have the opportunity to move forward and *seguir adelante*? In “No Quiero Salir Adelante,” Barbara Sostaita challenges this notion of *salir adelante*, and argues that even though it is rooted in love and support, it “leaves us unprotected and uprooted, looking for validation and a sense of worth from a society that wants to erase us, dilute our differences, and silence our realities.”¹⁰⁶ She argues that the mentality to “salir” and “seguir” literally translates to leave out of somewhere and leave something behind. She discusses how often times to *salir/seguir adelante* means to assimilate to whiteness by leaving our families and culture behind and proposing that all those who seek a higher education want to leave our families, history, and culture behind. However, she does not discuss how for many of us, the motivation to *salir/seguir adelante* is not to leave anyone behind or for our own individual success, but for the success of the collective, of *la familia*. Success often promises less financial struggles, more opportunities for growth, and access to knowledge and experience. This is a success that many of us Latinas do not selfishly keep to ourselves but share and/or introduce to our families as well. In the efforts to *salir adelante*, our families are carried with us through our growth and success.

The Significance of Moral Support

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Sostaita, “No Quiero Salir Adelante.” Huffington Post. (Yale University). Dec. 7, 2017 https://www.huffingtonpost.com/barbara-sostaita-/no-quiero-salir-adelante_b_9662472.html.

For many Latinas, parents or guardians are the key supporters when it comes to seeking new opportunities and to pursuing a higher education. There is a common saying that it takes a village to raise a child, and in the Latinx culture, family (nuclear and extended) support plays a big role in not only raising a child, but helping the child succeed. When discussing support, it is important to highlight and validate all the various forms of direct and indirect forms of support Latinas receive from their families, especially their parents. There are many indirect forms of support that are not as tangible as physical attendance at school events, help with homework, and financial support. These tangible forms of support are often offered by white, middle-class parents, who are usually college educated and middle-class, and are seen as the most beneficial. For many Latinx parents, the number of responsibilities (multiple jobs, caretaking of children, etc.) prohibit them from physically and financially supporting their children. This is especially common among low income or working class communities, communities of color, and/or first generation students. Indirect support, such as motivational support, may be the only source of support that we receive while pursuing an education, and it is significantly important.

For many Latinx families, moral support is a strong component of their involvement with their children's academic journey. In "If the Student is Good, Let Him Fly: Moral Support for College Among Latino Immigrants," Susan Auerbach emphasizes that "this moral support encompasses practices such as stressing the value of education and hard work; encouraging students to study, do well, and go to college; and sharing *consejos* (narrative advice) and other stories to reinforce the message."¹⁰⁷ The emphasis on the importance of education and hard work

¹⁰⁷ Auerbach (2001, 2004a), Deldago-Gaitan & Segura (1989), Olivos (2003) in Susan Auerbach, "If the Student Is Good, Let Him Fly': Moral Support for College Among Latino Immigrant Parents," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 5, no. 4 (2006): , doi:10.1207/s1532771xjle0504_4. 276

is a common theme among Latinx families and the moral support is an important asset when pursuing an education. It is foundational in how parents engage with their children's schooling and provide support. However, this moral support often goes unrecognized. As mentioned earlier, many Latinx parents use this more intimate form of support for various reasons, including lack of educational experience, financial restraints, heavy work schedules, lack of Spanish-speaking school staff, shame, or discomfort dealing with educators.¹⁰⁸ Through moral support, like *consejos*, a more indirect teaching, students receive a sense of nurturing advice from parents that is used to guide and encourage young people. To *echarle ganas*, is a common *consejo* among Latinx students, that reminds us to apply ourselves to our school work, engage in learning, and work hard so we can have a better life. This *consejo*, like many others, follows the common idea that *if we work hard now and go to school, we can live more comfortable later*. I speak about these indirect forms of support to shed light on one of the many way Latinx parents support Latinas along the academic journey, and while is it rarely recognized, moral support continues to be an important aspect of the Latina college experience.

This notion of moral support that Auerbach discusses, a support that does not require money nor a degree, can be seen in majority of the *testimonios* in *Wise Latinas*. In "To My Younger Self," Erika Martínez shares some of her financial struggles when beginning to look for colleges and universities during her high school years. She shares her experience of emigrating from Santo Domingo, Republica Dominicana, and how her mother encouraged her to seek a better life through education. While Erika truly valued and appreciated her Mami's hard work as a blue-collar worker, her mother was not able to support her financially because she never made

¹⁰⁸ Susan Auerbach, "'If the Student Is Good, Let Him Fly': Moral Support for College Among Latino Immigrant Parents," *Journal of Latinos and Education* 5, no. 4 (2006); doi:10.1207/s1532771xjle0504_4. 277

more than \$15,000 a year. Her mother constantly told her, “*yo te veo con la esperanza de ir a la universidad, pero tu tienes que saber que yo no te puedo ayudar.*”¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless her mother continued to encourage her by reminding her that she could succeed through an education. For many Latinas like Erika, moral support is the constant reminder that their hard work will pay off.

In Jennifer De Leon’s *testimonio*, which is the “Introduction” to *Wise Latinas*, she shares her experience as a Guatemalan student at Connecticut College and her relationship with her mother. Her mother had immigrated to the U.S. when she was only 18 and, like many other Latinx parents, her mother would give her *consejos* that encouraged her to pursue a higher education to seek a better life. Her mother believed that education, “provided a set of master keys that unlocked multiple doors---career, money, travel, health, relationships, even love.”¹¹⁰ More importantly, because De Leon and her sisters pursued a higher education, they were living out the life their mother had imagined for herself, making them their mother’s aspirational capital. This is a term coined by Tara J. Yosso who refers to aspirational capital as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.”¹¹¹ Those who seek and work for aspirational capital display resiliency by allowing themselves to dream and work for possibilities beyond present circumstances, even when lacking the objective means to attain those goals.

¹⁰⁹ Erika Martínez, “To My Younger Self” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 179

¹¹⁰ Jennifer De Leon, “Introduction” in Jennifer De Leon ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 4

¹¹¹ Linda Prieto and Sofia A. Villenas, "Pedagogies from Nepantla: Testimonio, Chicana/Latina Feminisms and Teacher Education Classrooms," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (July 1, 2012): , doi:10.1080/10665684.2012.698197.414-415 417

Similarly, Blanca Torres' experience as a Mexican student at Vanderbilt University, and a daughter of Mexican immigrants exemplifies this familiar encouragement to succeed. Growing up, her parents told her that education was the most important aspect of life, and by receiving an education, they hoped for a socioeconomic leap. They told her that her hard work would one-day payoff and she would not only secure a professional job and good pay, but also a world of education, bright people, and amazing opportunity. Torres shares that regardless of the various struggles of applying to college, receiving rejection letters, and more, she knew she had to keep moving forward to achieve success. She reminded herself to keep trying because her father had faced various obstacles when arriving to the United States, and she should not let his pain and sacrifices go without compensation. This idea of validating our immigrant parents' struggles and sacrifices that Torres shares is a common motivation for many Latinas too, because we do not want our parents to regret the sacrifices that they have made for us. For Torres, being accepted into Vanderbilt allowed her to seek an education that would "help [her] attain a different place in the world," and perhaps lead her to the socioeconomic leap her family hoped for her. This motivation to succeed in order to validate our immigrant parent's sacrifices and to fulfill our parents' expectations is common among many children of immigrants as seen in many of the in the *testimonios* within *Wise Latinas*.¹¹²

Similarly, Jennine Capó Crucet's, *testimonio* "How to Leave Hialeah," exemplifies another experience of Latinas' aspirational capital of collective success. Capó Crucet shares her experience as a Cuban undergraduate student at Florida State University who grapples with the struggle to become aspirational capital in order to validate her parents' sacrifices. She discusses

¹¹²Auerbach 278

various things she is willing to lose and to do, in order to gain an education, because she is her parents' American Dream.¹¹³ She shares her growing feelings of loneliness, anger, and confusion, as she pursued her education.¹¹⁴ Capó Crucet's *testimonio*, exemplifies the sacrifices many Latinas are willing to make to simply attain personal success as well as our parent's American Dream.

For Beatriz Terrazas, a Mexican undergraduate student at the University of Texas-El Paso, she also felt the pressure to fulfill her parents' "American Dream" in this country. For Terrazas, her immigrant parents reminded her that "as immigrants, [her] parents knew that in order to have better jobs and livelihoods than they did, their kids had to get an education," because "a college degree [would] open more doors for [them]."¹¹⁵ Being the oldest in the family to pursue a higher education, Terrazas expresses some of the obstacles that she faced as a first generation student at a predominantly white institution (PWI). Her confusion began as early as applying for college, a journey that she stumbled through blindly, working towards the piece of paper her parents promised her would unlock a door of opportunity and success. However, wasn't able to talk with her family about the battles that she faced along the college road. For her, education is something that created a gap between she and her parents--a gap of knowledges, languages, ideas, and philosophies that lead to arguments around "cultural mores, and religious dogma" that she believed no longer made sense in the modern world.¹¹⁶ However, it was thanks

¹¹³ Capó Crucet 195

¹¹⁴ IBID 209

¹¹⁵ Beatriz Terrazas, "The Weight of Paper" in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 164 & 169

¹¹⁶ Terrazas 169

to an education that exposed her to new ideas that she challenged traditional beliefs, and also worked toward increasing choices for women toward basic human rights. For this work, she was recognized through awards and prizes, yet these were honors that she could not fully explain to her parents, nor did her parents truly understand. Yet, through her success she overcame the obstacles she had faced on the college road because her parents found pride in her obtaining an education, an opportunity that was given to Terrazas through sacrificed time, money, and dedication. Her education was a sense of pride to her parents, a pride that also fills many immigrant parents' lives regardless of what they had left behind in their home countries. A feeling so strong that even after Terrazas' mom, whom had Alzheimer's, and often forgot her own daughter's name, would not forget that her two daughters went to college at the University of Texas-El Paso.

Gendered *familismo* and Earned Independence

In Sarah M. Ovink's, "They Always Call Me an Investment": Gendered Familism and Latino/a College Pathways," Ovink displays how many Latinas "[feel] pressure from parents to succeed both educationally and financially at a much higher rate than Latinos."¹¹⁷ Many times, Latinx families "[encourage] women to equate completing a college degree with achieving independence and avoiding traditional, patriarchal power structures they saw their mothers and aunts struggle with."¹¹⁸ This structure is rooted in patriarchal power and often limits and oppresses Latinas because unlike our male counterparts we must work on earning our independence through and education while also caring for our families, an expectation only

¹¹⁷Sarah M. Ovink, "They Always Call Me an Investment." Gendered Familism and Latino/a College Pathways," *Gender & Society* 28, no. 2 (2013); doi:10.1177/0891243213508308. 274

¹¹⁸ IBID 277

placed on Latinas. This gendered *familismo*, works as a push/push mechanism that encourages Latinas to achieve independence *through* education in order to live a comfortable life without the financial support of a partner and yet are expected to fulfill certain gendered duties.

As stated earlier, for many Latinas the pressure to succeed stretches beyond our personal goals and satisfaction; there is a pressure to succeed for our family and loved ones. In Ovink's study she highlights how *familismo*, the prioritization of family needs over our own, influences many Latinos and Latinas, and does so in different ways. Ovink bases this argument on 136 longitudinal interviews in the San Francisco East Bay Area with a cohort of 50 Latino/a college aspirants. In her project, she defines Latino/a *familismo* as being when "family and collective needs are privileged above individual ambitions."¹¹⁹ It is a trait, and a "social pattern that privileges family interests above those of the individual, [and] has been associated with Latino/a groups."¹²⁰ The notion of *familismo* is seen "a response to Latinos/as' ongoing struggle for socioeconomic mobility and acceptance in U.S. society," and a response that sees college as a necessary resource for the collective to succeed.¹²¹ However, its application does not result in uniform results among Latinos and Latinas due to different gender expectations.

While many Latinas physically may leave the home, our physical absence does not mean that the traditional caregiving responsibilities are diminished. Rather the expectations to help around the home remain, and that often leads to a higher rate of stress due to balancing family obligations and educational aspirations for Latinas. These obligations also often lead to conflict

¹¹⁹ Ovink 266

¹²⁰ IBID 267

¹²¹ IBID 269

with parental and gender role expectations. In Roberta Espinoza's, "The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands," she discusses some of the school-family issues that Latinas face while pursuing a higher education, and argues that the Latinas' management of "the multiple demands of school and family relationships is a theoretical discussion that needs more empirical attention."¹²² In *Wise Latinas*, the balance of work, family, and academic responsibilities was a common theme that Latinas learned to do and more often than not never discussed with their family and/or in the classroom.

In "Derrumbando muros along the Academic Path," Norma Elia Cantú explains her experience as a Chicana who, due to her financial restraints, was unable to attend college after high school. She first worked full-time at an electric company and began attending night classes at the community college in Laredo, Texas. She knew that staying at the community college would not get her the teaching degree she so aspired to have. Needing the financial support of her full-time job, she asked for a transfer to a different location where she would be closer a university, but each time, the company consistently denied the transfer.

In addition to the barriers of accessibility and economic restraints, Cantú grappled with her family's demands and needs, including the poor health of her father, the death of her brother, financial issues at home, and the needs of her younger siblings, with which she felt obliged to attend. She was constantly "torn between pursuing [her] dream of higher education and [her] *compromiso*, her allegiance to [her] family."¹²³ Luckily, in 1970, Kingsville's Texas A&I

¹²² Roberta Espinoza, "The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 9, no. 4 (2010):, doi:10.1177/1538192710380919. 318

¹²³ Norma Elia Cantú, "Derrumbando Muros Along the Academic Path," in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 139

University opened up a branch in her hometown of Laredo and she was able to enroll and maintain her full-time job. Still, the demands between home, work, and academia did not go away. She continued to balance all of her responsibilities and reminded herself that while the path was difficult, and regardless of all of the obstacles, she would succeed. She soon came to find out that she no longer wanted to be a high school teacher, and instead continued her education in an MA program in Kingsville. This decision made her father unhappy because she was leaving the home for an education. She wondered if he feared that she would leave the family and never come back and a fear that his daughter would become a stranger to him, while in the process of seeking a higher education.¹²⁴ This was another pull on her sense of responsibility to her family while she was also striving to succeed in school.

While both Latinos and Latinas may feel the pressure to succeed, and connect a college degree as a tool for class mobility, Latinas also see a college degree as necessary for *earned independence* from a man.¹²⁵ The motive of economic independence is also linked to gendered *familismo* and gendered motives because unlike Latinos, Latinas are told that if they earn a college degree, they will be able to get good paying jobs and not have to financially depend on any man, a motive that is not often stated to and by Latinos. Thus the idea of earned independence through an education is complicated when our families continue to pull us back to help out in the home.

Like Torres, Celeste Guzman Mendoza an undergraduate at Barnard College, had a similar mentality throughout her college career. Her parents reminded her that, “the future that

¹²⁴ Cantú 140

¹²⁵ Ovink 269

todas nuestras familias had worked so hard to have us lead, the future they left behind in their *paises de origen* so we could be in that dorm room together and become what we left behind-family.”¹²⁶ In Guzman Mendoza’s *testimonio*, “Las Otras,” she discusses her experience as a first-generation self-identified Mexican American, Chicana, and Latina who like Torres, was always told that education was a way of family progress. She was seeking an education as a way to fulfill her parents’ dream, as aspirational capital, but also as a way to rebel against the gendered notion of being a woman and the expectation solely being focused on marriage instead of higher education.¹²⁷ This traditional gendered expectation was one that her other colleagues and friends could relate to, and did not want to abide in. Pursuing an education became a rebellious act and an act that her parents did not agree with at first. They especially disagreed when they learned that she would be leaving San Antonio to seek an education, something that no other woman in her family had done. However, her motives in seeking an education were not just rooted in her own interest, because she always kept her families sacrifices in mind. This exemplifies how these themes are interconnected. The desire for independence and for individual aspirations does not cancel out a simultaneous desire to contribute to the family’s wellbeing.

For some Latinx families, going to college seems like something completely out of the gendered norm, and therefore not supported. In “Only Daughter,” Sandra Cisneros shares her experience of patriarchy and sexism within her Latinx family. Cisneros, the only daughter of a Mexican working-class family of nine, expresses how she pursued different academic and professional opportunities against the will of her father. While he constantly expressed the

¹²⁶ Celeste Guzman Mendoza, “Las Otras” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 67

¹²⁷ Guzman Mendoza 65

importance of an education, for her, her father's only expectation was for her to become someone's wife.¹²⁸ To him, "college was good for girls--good for finding a husband," and when she obtained a college degree and no husband, her father expressed that she had wasted all of that education.¹²⁹ However, he did not respond the same way when her brothers' achieved academic success.¹³⁰ Her experience exemplifies a common patriarchal expectation among many Latinx families, that a woman is meant to stay in the home and to attend to the needs of her family and/or husband.. It also displays how for many Latinas, regardless of the academic and professional success we may attain, our families measure our success through gendered and cultural expectations, like finding a husband to marry.

Ruth Behar's "La Silla," shares her experiences as a first-generation Cuban immigrant attending Wesleyan College as a student and then her experiences as a faculty member. While her mother was supportive and advised her to seek a higher education, her father, like Cisneros' had a more traditional mindset of what a woman should pursue in life. Behar's dad, believed that, "a good girl stayed in her father's house until a man came along and married her," a belief that she hoped would change once she started to receive the acceptance letters, but it did not.¹³¹ However, her mother's moral support overcame the questioning and discouragement of her father. Rather than accepting her father's beliefs at face value, Behar began to wonder whether her father's anger and resentment were rooted in his own childhood, rather than solely about

¹²⁸ Sandra Cisneros, "Only Daughter" in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 212

¹²⁹ IBID 210 & 211

¹³⁰ IBID 210 & 212

¹³¹ Ruth Behar, "La Silla" in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 157

gender. During her father's upbringing, her grandfather had forced her Papi to become an accountant at the University of Havana instead of pursuing his dream of studying to become an architect.¹³² Her father prioritized the needs of his family at the time and was unable to fulfill his individual dreams and desires. Such mixed feelings are common among Latinx families; as Auerbach discusses in "If The Student is Good, Let Him Fly." She suggests that feelings of regret and anger among Latinx parents can also stem from their missed opportunities when they were younger, therefore highlighting and encouraging their children to not do the same.¹³³

This, however, does not seem to be the case for Ruth Behar's father. Even after achieving a doctorate degree and becoming chair of her department, her parents did not truly understand the honor, nor did her father congratulate her or fully support her. Behar continues to wonder whether her father truly thought that education was wasted on her, as a woman, or if she had not shown appreciation for her father's sacrifices all this time. Regardless of all her academic achievements, she was still waiting for validation and a gold star from her father. The sense of validation, approval, and/or affirmation is a common theme among Latinas, especially those whose are expected to abide to the traditional woman gender role of staying within the domestic sphere.

As discussed earlier, many Latinas see education as a way to help break away from these chains of submission that are placed on women. In "Stories She Told Us," Daisy Hernández, a Colombian-Cuban student at William Paterson, discusses how she needed to leave home to learn more about herself, and to gain tools to challenge the patriarchal culture in which she grew up. In college, she took Women's and Gender Studies courses to theorize her and her family's

¹³² Behar 158

¹³³ Auerbach 282

experiences and to challenge the ways they were shaped by patriarchy; because “like [her] mother, [she] [was] expect[ed] to become Victoria Ruffo: beautiful, *casada*, tragic,” and that was something she did not want.¹³⁴ She began to see feminism as a path to liberation, a way to free oneself from the patriarchal chains that keep us from being happy and successful.¹³⁵ Through this exposure to ideas about liberation and feminism she also realized the lack of inclusivity within feminism. She saw how her syllabi lacked Women of Color feminisms, and how her own Latinx culture was rooted in so much anti-blackness. It was through higher education, what it offered her as well as what it lacked, that she began to question what had always seemed to be the norm and to gain the tools to seek her own liberation and the liberation of those around her.

Guilt: Balancing Family and Academic Obligations

Whether Latinas seek an education for the well-being of the family, or simply to break away from traditional gender education, when seeking a higher education, Latinas often have to balance both academic and family obligations. These competing expectations create a double-edged sword for Latinas. In reading these *testimonios*, it is evident that pursuing a higher education places many Latinas in a cultural dilemma that generates many feelings of hope, struggle, and guilt. Chicana feminist, Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1987) describes this conflict and tension between the needs of the home, and the demands of the Anglo world, as a dual mestiza identity that is “characterized by resiliency that allows the [Latina] to shift in and out of habitual formations and movement from a single goal to divergent thinking.”¹³⁶ For many of us that go

¹³⁴ Daisy Hernández, “Stories She Told Us” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 85

¹³⁵ Hernández 79

¹³⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera the New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). in Roberta Espinoza, “The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family

away to school, leaving our families behind creates, we experience this tension as a sense of **not** fully being able to attend to familial duties nor to meet academic expectations. Many fear becoming a bad daughter and/or bad student when not being able to fulfill competing obligations at the same time.¹³⁷

In “The Good Daughter: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands,” Espinoza shares some of the in-depth interview responses of Latina doctoral graduate students and their efforts to integrate family and school demands to maintain their status of “good daughter.” The status of a “good daughter,” according to Espinoza is connected to *familismo* and the cultural value of *marianismo*, which is “modeled on the Catholic Virgin Madonna, prescribes dependence, subordination, responsibility for domestic chores and selfless devotion to family.”¹³⁸ Espinoza explains the tension between managing the multiple demands of family, a collectivist-oriented culture, and school, a more individualistic-oriented culture. Espinoza references Anzaldúa’s, *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*, where she describes the conflict and tension that arises when one holds a dual identity and is torn between the needs and

and School Demands," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 9, no. 4 (2010);, doi:10.1177/1538192710380919. 321

¹³⁷ Susan R. Sy and Jessica Romero, "Family Responsibilities Among Latina College Students From Immigrant Families," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (2008);, doi:10.1177/1538192708316208. in Espinoza, Roberta. "The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 9, no. 4 (2010): 317-30. doi:10.1177/1538192710380919. 322

¹³⁸ Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), Stevens (1973) in Roberta Espinoza, "The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 9, no. 4 (2010): , doi:10.1177/1538192710380919. 319

expectations of two cultures. In this case, the dual identity referring to academia and the Latinx culture, where the demands require us to establish a “fluid identity” at any point in time.”¹³⁹

The feeling of guilt is a common theme in the stories of Wise Latinas. Rosean Moreno identifies this guilt “as an act of counterculture and breaking away from the cultural values of putting the families’ needs before [our] own,” even though for many of the reason why we go to college is for our family and the collectives’ needs.¹⁴⁰ This guilt was first associated with Holocaust survivors in the 1960s by William Niederland, and referred to those who had survived. Later on, scholars like Geraldine Piorkowski (1983), connected this guilt to first generation college students as well as Latinx students more broadly.¹⁴¹ This association highlights the pressure to *seguir adelante* and to be more successful than our parents have been and simultaneously the feeling of leaving the family behind. As Moreno writes, “college students struggle with the concept of going to college and being successful while not being able to bring their family with them to this new life they are experiencing.”¹⁴² More specifically, “survivor guilt may rise from years of oppression of certain communities such as communities that are low income or of color and making those who break away from that oppression feel guilty for moving away from the norm.”¹⁴³ This guilt stems from various places, such as feeling horribly

¹³⁹ Cherríe Moraga in Roberta Espinoza, "The Good Daughter Dilemma: Latinas Managing Family and School Demands," *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 9, no. 4 (2010): , doi:10.1177/1538192710380919. 321

¹⁴⁰ Rosean Moreno, *The Guilt of Success: Looking at Latino First Generation College Students and the Guilt They Face from Leaving Their Home and Community to Pursue College.*, PhD diss., California State University, Long Beach, 2016. 67

¹⁴¹ Moreno 10

¹⁴² IBID 10

¹⁴³ IBID 12

guilty for leaving a parent behind, to feeling guilty for not being able to solve problems at home when one is physically away or for not being able to help with daily familial tasks as Iris Gomez shares in her narrative, “Independence.”¹⁴⁴

Gomez explores this push/pull relationship with her family. Gomez grew up learning that a woman could not be independent, because a woman who was alone was vulnerable, and therefore needed her family to be protected. Like the previous *testimonios* mentioned, Gomez shares how one of her motives for seeking an education was to support her family, and yet by doing so she practiced and gained her own independence. She discusses how going away to school reminded her to “practic[e] the *i* in independence,” even when her mother’s support began to decrease once she shared with her that she planned to seek a graduate degree.¹⁴⁵ In her family, leaving home and seeking an education and career meant that she was not fully devoted to her home and to being her Mami’s *confidante*, which placed a sense of guilt over her. Due to this guilt, and the sense of responsibility of helping her family, Gomez constantly tried to send extra money home from the paltry part-time job and loans she received. By doing so, she believed that if she contributed financially to some family problems, her mother would be more accepting and less dependent on her when she moved on.¹⁴⁶ In a way, her financial support was a way to cope with the sense of guilt that she felt for not physically being there with her mother, a feeling that many Latinas feel when not being able to fully devote their time and efforts to the family.

¹⁴⁴ Iris Gomez, “Independence” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 75

¹⁴⁵ Gomez 77

¹⁴⁶ IBID 75

For others like Chantel Acevedo, a Cuban student at the University of Miami, the guilt followed her throughout college, and “[hung] around [her]neck as securely as those academic hoods drape[d] over [her] during graduation ceremonies.”¹⁴⁷ Her parents had migrated from Cuba as Cuban exiles, leaving her brother behind and because of this, she felt great guilt to leave her family to pursue her academic goals, even though they were a major reason for this pursuit. In her narrative, Chantel shares the impact that leaving home had on her parents, especially her mother. After moving out of state with her husband so he could pursue a PhD, her mother became depressed. Her mother called every night, and every night she ended the call with tears, causing a heart ache for Chantel.¹⁴⁸ Yet, the heart ache leaving home, hearing her mother cry, and missing family gatherings created tremendous guilt, a feeling that many Latinas feel when leaving home.

Conclusion

The themes of collective success, familismo, independence, moral support, and guilt in these *testimonios* highlight how much families inform and shape Latina experiences in higher education. As Latinas, and/or educators, we should create a space to share these *testimonios* so we can discuss how family dynamics and individual struggles are linked to larger structures of capitalism, racism, and sexism that pressure us to seek a college degree in order to be financially well off in order to survive. We must acknowledge the pain and guilt we sometimes feel when striving for such success, but also find ways to build resilience and strength in these struggles among ourselves and with our families. We must validate these experiences so others can begin

¹⁴⁷ Chantel Acevedo, “Leaving Miami” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 58

¹⁴⁸ Acevedo 56

to understand the complexities and depth of struggles that Latinas face, and so other Latinas that share similar experiences do not feel isolated in their struggles. Rather, through the sharing of our experiences we can begin to create a space for conversation around the Latina college experience, and the impacts of our families as we strive for a college degree.

Chapter 4: Navigating Institutional Barriers

In this chapter, I discuss issues of economic access and institutional belonging, and the invisibility and marginalization of Latinas in higher education. I do so in order to shed light on the lack of understanding of Latina experiences, and as evidence of possible reasons as to why many Latinas leave higher education. Some of these obstacles refer to the financial restraints, the sense of not belonging, the lack of knowledge and resources in academia, and invisibility and marginalization of Latinas in academic spaces. All of these contribute to an idea that Latinas do not belong and/or are not welcomed in higher education. I focus on these experiences not only to highlight common struggles, but also to create awareness and action to dismantle such barriers. By creating a space to make visible these obstacles, institutions of higher education can begin to better understand students who are facing institutional barriers and to provide resources to help overcome them. I say this because in order to understand the increasing dropout rate, we must first understand the barriers that have been setup to prevent academic success for Latinas. In order to continue encouraging Latinas to seek a higher education, we must challenge the social and institutional barriers that are told through our *testimonios* and provide resources to overcome these barriers as a community of Latinas, family, and/or educators.

In an episode of *Latino USA*, “Navigating the Maze of Higher Education,” Antonia Cerejido brings into light some of the barriers Latinx students face when in college. To frame the conversation of Latinx students in U.S. colleges and universities Cerejido highlights the

following statistics to display the increase in Latinx enrollment and dropout rate in U.S. colleges and universities:

Today, Latino students are entering college at unprecedented numbers. Over the last decade, Latino college enrollment has gone up by 82%. Yet, Latino students are also leaving school at higher rates. The number of Latinos between the ages of 18 and 34 who left college without completing their degree has gone up by 35 percent in the last decade while the general non-completion rate has only gone up by seven percent that time period.¹⁴⁹

These statistics spark the question as to why are Latinx students leaving school at such a high rate when the enrollment is so high? The episode specifically highlights some of the common obstacles Latinx students face when pursuing a college degree, as experienced by Jasmine Meraz and Miguel Paniagua, two undergraduate seniors at Oregon State University (OSU). Both Latinx students, Meraz and Paniagua discuss some of the obstacles they have faced while at OSU. Meraz, shares her experience as a current “standing senior” at OSU who has studied abroad in Uganda, interned at Capitol Hill, and volunteers with her sorority. While Meraz shares some of her college achievements, she also shares some of the struggles she has learned to navigate throughout her time in college such as dealing with anxiety and depression, and finding scholarships to financially support herself through school. Like Meraz, Paniagua has also faced many challenges while at OSU, one of them being the lack of financial funding. These are

¹⁴⁹ Research conducted by Community Service Society *in* Antonia Cerejido, "Navigating the Maze of Higher Education," Latino USA, April 27, 2018, <http://latinousa.org/navigating-the-maze-of-higher-education/>.

common experiences that Latinx students navigate through on a day-to-day basis, and they are also possible reasons for many leaving the university.

Like Paniagua, many Latinas face financial obstacles. Many do not have to pay for college applications, tuition, personal expenses. Many have to balance outside employment, and many experience consistent uncertainty in relation to receiving financial aid and/or financial support from parents. As mentioned in a previous chapter, many Latinas seek a college degree in order to gain financial independence and/or to support our families financially. So what happens when we leave for college, and our bills are piling up and we do not have the money to pay them? We begin seeking job opportunities on and off campus to help financially support ourselves and our families, and more often than not, that adds a stressor to our lives as students, daughters, sisters, etc.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett argues that “social class, rather than ethnicity, may play a bigger role during emerging adulthood because those who are more economically advantageous can defer adult roles and explore more work and educational opportunities.”¹⁵⁰ I bring Arnett’s findings into this conversation, because like race and ethnicity, social class has a big influence on how Latinas navigate academia. In “Family interdependence and academic adjustment in college: Youth from immigrant and U.S. born families,” Vivian Tseng found that, “[students] from immigrant families spent more time fulfilling family responsibilities because of their low SES,¹⁵¹” this meaning that if a student does not have the financial support from their parents, the

¹⁵⁰ Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in Bernadette Sánchez et al., "Tryin' to Make It During the Transition From High School: The Role of Family Obligation Attitudes and Economic Context for Latino-Emerging Adults," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 25, no. 6 (2010): , doi:10.1177/0743558410376831.

¹⁵¹ SES: Socioeconomic Status

student to work throughout college; balancing family, school, and work obligations ¹⁵² While improving the family's SES is a key motive for pursuing a higher education, these structural inequities are what shape our college experience.

Access & Institutional Belonging

In “*Derrumbando muros* along the Academic Path,” Norma Elia Cantú shares how she felt out of place when pursuing a higher education due to the combination of racism, sexism, alienation, and the imposter syndrome. Cantú discusses her PhD graduate journey as a Chicana at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and expresses that while graduate school felt easier for her than her undergraduate years, she continued to experience racism, sexism, and isolation while pursuing her PhD. University staff and faculty presumed her incompetent and questioned her status and overall belonging. When she lost her university ID, the clerk assumed that she was a part of the janitorial staff. Students and faculty often questioned her about where she was from. And, she constantly had to remind people that she was a teaching assistant in the English department. She felt that she was continually reminded that Chicanas were not expected to be in an academic space as a student or teacher. At one point, during her time at the University of Nebraska, Cantú along with other PoC doors, had drawings of swastikas on their doors. On a different occasion, one of Cantú’s students dropped her classes, claiming that “a Mexican could not teach him English,” hence assuming she was incompetent and not capable of teaching due to her being Mexican.¹⁵³ This idea around who belongs has long been ingrained in academic spaces

¹⁵² Vivian Tseng, "Family Interdependence and Academic Adjustment in College: Youth From Immigrant and U.S.-Born Families," *Child Development* 75, no. 3 (2004): , doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2004.00717.x. 975

¹⁵³ Cantú 142

and is practiced through acts of questioning, the lack of institutional support, and the direct acts of bigotry.

It is important to voice these experiences and acts of violence, and it is just as important to acknowledge the strength and bravery of Latinas who, like Cantú, overcome these obstacles and continue to strive forward as scholars and activists. She states, that “the persistence of racism and sexism as well as inequalities at various levels in academia spurs [her] continued desire to do work that matters and make it a better world for those that come after.”¹⁵⁴ For many, like Cantú, higher education has opened the door for many opportunities and achievements, but has also been a place where we feel alone and sometimes not supported. It has become a space that reminds us that there needs to be more like *us* in academia. For Cantú, the place where her belonging was often questioned, was also the same place where she proudly embraced the term *Chicana* and found the importance of teaching. Rather than letting these challenges defeat her, Cantú has used her personal experiences as a Latina to influence her work, and not only motivate other Latinas and WoC to do the same, but to remind us that we are not alone, and that academia is our home too.

Throughout “Rapunzel’s Ladder,” Julia Alvarez uses a Rapunzel metaphor where she describes education as a tower that removes us from our family and our community both physically and ideologically due to the new knowledge we receive. More specifically, Alvarez discusses how the content of education was not inclusive to her, but rather, “it labeled us (Latinas) in ways that marginalized us.”¹⁵⁵ She shares how as a Dominicana who had been born

¹⁵⁴ Cantú 144

¹⁵⁵ Julia Alvarez “Rapunzel’s Ladder,” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 126

in the U.S. but raised in the Dominican Republic, she constantly felt institutionally marginalized as a student, and later as a non-PhD faculty member. This was due to the fact that what she was asked to learn “did not include [her] own style and story, [her] ways of perceiving and moving in the world.”¹⁵⁶ Due to universities prioritizing Western knowledge production and experiences, curricula and overall university environment does not incorporate nor make visible bodies, minds, and souls of Latinas, nor our histories, bodies of knowledge, and epistemologies. Rather than validating intersectional experiences and knowledges, as Women of Color feminism emphasizes, students are expected to only apply themselves mentally, and ignore all other intersecting factors, like family, spirituality, etc. The question becomes how do Latinas navigate through this space that does not include all of our identities and experiences and often makes us feel as if we do not belong. Alvarez grapples with this question and discusses how the traditional structure of academia resists interventions to fix the limiting and marginalizing practices it upholds. Alvarez writes:

What’s amazing to me is how many of us felt the same way (like an outsider). Not just women, not just Latinas, not just minorities, not just scholarship students. Institutions, bless them, often start out as a responsive living structures. But the problem is that they become codified, claustrophobic, limiting, and we have to keep reinventing them. And they resist reinvention. In fact, ‘they’ dig their heels in and fight back.¹⁵⁷

For Alvarez and her family, education became a matter of survival and betterment for the collective “we” when arriving to the U.S. in 1960 after fleeing the dictatorship of Trujillo in the

¹⁵⁶ Alvarez 126

¹⁵⁷ IBID 126

Dominican Republic. However, attaining an education in the United States was not an easy process but a rigorous one that was much different from the Dominican and Catholic culture in which she grew up. It was a process that was discriminatory and did not incorporate her full self (body, mind, and spirit), but instead asked for a divided self. She states that while the education system aims to educate us, it also limits us in what we learn, and how we learn. For instance, due to panic attacks, she was unable to take exams, but it did not matter to her teachers because it was/is the traditional form of measuring learning. Instead of taking her social and historical circumstances into consideration, she was expected to conform to this measurement of learning despite the anxiety and panic that would seize her. In order to shed light on these complexities and challenges within academia, Alvarez believes that social justice education is the key to challenge the status quo within academia. It encourages the reconsideration of the ways academia promotes and maintains hierarchies and includes the knowledges and experiences of all people, a true representation of the world we live.

While at times, these barriers and challenges discouraged Alvarez from continuing her education, these challenges were also the same reasons as to why she decided to teach at a high school and university level. More specifically, Alvarez felt a sense of responsibility to help guide those after her, she believed that if nothing else, “[she] could contribute what was missing for [her]--the presence of others like [her],” and help create a more diverse space.¹⁵⁸

For many Latinas, going away to college is the first time we leave our families, and it can be very intimidating to go out in the world without our parents or siblings around us to tell us what to do or how to do things. While at first leaving home may bring a sense of relief and freedom, going away to school on our own also opens the opportunity for confusion and self-

¹⁵⁸ Alvarez 134

doubt. This is especially true if we are going to spaces in which the people around us do not look like us, which can create feelings of confusion, alienation and sense of not belonging.

For first generation Latinas, this sense of confusion can begin as early as the college application process, especially if racial assumptions are placed on us that label us as non-college bound. This is a rigorous process that not many Latinx students know how to navigate, especially if we are the first ones in their family to attempt the application process. In Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés' narrative, "Who Goes to College?" she shares some of this confusion as a first-generation Cubana, who was expected to attend college, regardless of all the barriers she might encounter. In her *testimonio*, she writes that, "[she] didn't know anything about the application process or securing letters of recommendation or personal statements or even such a thing as open enrollment," due to the fact that she did not know anyone who had gone to college.¹⁵⁹ She states that during her upbringing in the 1960s and 1970s, urban young women were expected and trained to be secretaries while young men were expected to be blue collar workers. With that said, when her mother obtained her degree it was a surprise rather than inspiration for the community. It was an accomplishment that was not expected to be reached by a Cuban immigrant woman, especially in an upper-middle class, and entitled community. This same stereotypical assumption was made evident when Rodríguez Milanés requested high school transcripts from her high school counselor, and he automatically assumed she was going to the community college without asking her first, an assumption she did not appreciate. Rodríguez Milanés' *testimonio* is one of many Latina experiences where stereotypical assumptions shape our experiences, and how these stereotypes can result in a college journey where we have to

¹⁵⁹ Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, "Who Goes to College?" in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 102

constantly have to prove ourselves as scholars, a task that our white peers often do not need to do.

Invisibility & Marginalization in the Classroom

In, “On Becoming Educated,” Joy Castro a Cuban-American first-generation student shares her experiences as a Latina whose experiences and knowledge were not validated, and who was often presumed incompetent. She begins her story by sharing her introductory encounter at a bagel shop with a feminist professor of law while in grad school in the 1990s. The professor was working on a provision article in the Violence Against Women Act, and while Castro shares her and her mother’s experiences with domestic violence, the professor grimaces and shakes her head. The professor then stated that she did not plan on sharing her article with the everyday people in Castro’s life, like her mother and aunts, all survivors of domestic violence, but with other scholars. Her story displays how her and her mother’s lived experiences, *theories in the flesh*, continue to be disregarded and not considered credible knowledge because they are not tied to traditional Eurocentric forms of knowledge production. Rather, the article being written was to be shared with other scholars, instead of reaching millions of ordinary women, hence, creating a bigger gap between academia and the community. Therefore, as Latinas in academia we should disrupt the idea that all people have the same experiences, and that only people in academia produce knowledge. Instead we should emphasize that “academics don’t share a monolithic experience,” and push for a more diverse curriculum and conversation that validates PoC lived experiences, and sees lived experiences as knowledge that is worthy of sharing in and outside of academic spaces.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Joy Castro, “On Becoming Educated,” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 151

In “The Power of the Latina Professor in the Classroom,” Bernadette Sánchez, a psychology professor at DePaul University, discusses the powerful experience as a Latina professor at a predominantly white institution. Sánchez shares her experience teaching a Latinx psychology course, where the majority of students were Latinx. In her class, the students, “explored and discussed psychological research on topics such as stressors related to immigration, ethnic and racial identity, acculturation, gender, and discrimination towards and among Latinxs in the U.S.”¹⁶¹ More specifically, in her class the students were able to discuss their own personal experiences to these topics, an opportunity that Castro was not able to have in her college experience. Sánchez discusses the importance of validating these experiences, because for many of her students, it is “the first time that their experience was normalized in the college classroom and where they could discuss the diversity among the Latinx experience due to ethnicity, history, gender, race, generation, immigration status, religion, etc.”¹⁶² This opportunity, and conversation is often missing when white professors, and/or professors do not use an intersectional and inclusive approach in the classroom. Sánchez emphasizes the importance of having Latinx professors leading these conversations in the college classroom. She supports this argument by including a research study¹⁶³ that concludes that, “racially similar teachers were also more likely to explain things differently if they noticed that their students did not understand the material,” and students “were more likely to report that their teachers cared

¹⁶¹ Bernadette Sánchez, "The Power of the Latina Professor in the Classroom," *Latino Rebels*, April 09, 2018, <http://www.latinorebels.com/2018/04/09/the-power-of-the-latina-professor-in-the-classroom/>.

¹⁶² Sánchez

¹⁶³ “The Many Ways Teacher Diversity May Benefit Students” by Anna J. Egalite and Brian Kisida

about them, were captivated by what they were learning, and were happy in the classroom.”¹⁶⁴

More importantly, students feel in community when others in the classroom share similar experiences, and feel validated when professors/teachers validate these experiences and include them in conversation. For Sánchez’s psychology class, these results were evident when, “some students reported that the course empowered them because they felt that they *belonged*, that their experience and voice mattered, and that they, too, could make a difference in their community and society at large.”¹⁶⁵

For Castro, the lack of inclusion in the classroom, resulted in her believing that while her presence in graduate school was to be seen, and not heard. In a graduate feminist theory course, she noticed the lack of women of color feminist dialogue and suggested a piece by bell hooks to her professor. While Castro provided printed copies to her professor, her professor took them but the piece was never discussed. In another graduate seminar on multicultural literature, the professor assigned Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, and like before, the book was never discussed. This time however, there was a reason. The professor stated that they would not discuss Anzaldúa’s book because of its *angry* content, that was not relatable according to the professor and the rest of her peers. This was a disappointing experience because for Castro, Anzaldúa’s book was, “the most incredible book [she had] ever read. It [spoke] straight to [her].”¹⁶⁶ Her *testimonio* highlights how for many Latinas there is a lack of inclusivity in regards to experience and knowledge in the classroom. Therefore, “the academy must find ways to preserve itself as a place for thought to flourish--yet everyone needs to be

¹⁶⁴ Sánchez

¹⁶⁵ Sánchez

¹⁶⁶ Castro 148

invited to think. The discussion has to matter to everyone, and everyone's voice must be heard."¹⁶⁷ While Latinas are expected to discuss white experiences that are sometimes not relatable, our peers are not expected to understand and/or learn different knowledges produced and experienced by Latinas and People of Color more broadly. Castro emphasizes that we must voice our experiences, rather than be shaped by the voices and experiences that we hear and do not relate to or understand.¹⁶⁸ For Castro, the opportunity to create space for all voices comes through serving on an advisory board of a university press, screening scholarly projects for publication, and serving as a mentor for a Latina-Lakota teenager.

In "How to Leave Hiialeah," Jennine Capó Crucet shares some of her experiences while overcoming financial restraints during her college years. Capó Crucet discusses how regardless of the numerous barriers she would face while in college, she was determined to learn how to overcome them because she was her Cuban family's "American Dream." In addition to these efforts, she would try to not let her family know of the issues she faced and pretend like everything was going smoothly every time she called home. However, once in a while she would break down on the phone with her mother and tell her she did not fit in even though she was part of the commitment to diversity at Florida State University. Additionally, unlike many of her peers, the financial restraints were taking a toll on her that she decided to become a resident assistant (RA) to help reduce her financial restraints and the ones of her family. She shares that while the Office of Diversity told her that she was important to the university community, she felt they did little to nothing to make her feel included. The feeling of not fitting in followed her throughout graduate school when she was the only person in her graduate program who was not

¹⁶⁷ Castro 152

¹⁶⁸ IBID 152 & 153

white, and her work around Latinx communities was often discredited. It is important to highlight that her sense of non-belonging and the discrediting of her knowledge production was not her fault, but rather were linked to institutional structures and practices.

Capó Crucet shares how she had to change advisors several times because her advisors often referred to her as “the Mexican one” whose work did not apply to “regular” communities, a problem that other Latinas at her university also faced, because they did not feel included in the classroom nor supported in their academic interests.¹⁶⁹ She concluded that the problem was a system-wide issue because curricula and conversations often lacked and/or did not validate the work, knowledge, and realities of Latinx communities. Not only that, but on one occasion, she heard her program coordinator telling someone over the phone that they could not wait to get rid of the “trouble maker,” which was unprofessional and racist of the professor and was another point of hurt for Capó Crucet.¹⁷⁰ While it was discouraging to hear those words and lack of support, Capó Crucet used that anger and disappointment to fuel her work and “[made] it [her] personal mission to educate the middle of the country about Latinos.”¹⁷¹ More specifically, she made it her mission to share her story of a Latina overcoming obstacles when pursuing a higher education. She states that this experience is very personal, but nonetheless she continues to share her story because “[her] story tells us that we are not alone, and that we will be okay,” her

¹⁶⁹ Jennine Capó Crucet “How to Leave Hialeah,” in Jennifer De Leon, ed., *Wise Latinas: Writers on Higher Education* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014). 201

¹⁷⁰ Capó Crucet 203

¹⁷¹ IBID 202

testimonio like those of the other Latinas reflect our own experiences as Latinas in higher education.¹⁷²

These *testimonios* remind us that we do not need to assimilate to the white narrative of higher education, but rather we should disrupt this monolithic view of how students experience college. These *testimonios* highlight that not all of us experience college the same way due to the various identities that we hold. They give testament to why so many Latinas struggle through college and sometimes do not make it graduation, and yet these are the same stories that are often overlooked and silenced. At the same time, for many Latinas, these struggles serve as learning experiences that fuel our resistance to make change and shed light for the Latinas that follow behind us. Unfortunately, for others, it is the reason as to why they might not pursue a higher education or the reason as to why they leave. Nonetheless, our experiences and *testimonios* carry power and resilience in the sense that they disrupt a narrative that does not include us, and by sharing them we create space for others to also share their story and these *testimonios* show those in power that we are not condoning to these marginalizing practices, but rather we are working together to make academia a more inclusive place for Latinas.

Conclusion: The Telling is Intentional & Political

“If you don’t write your story and document it, it is as if your history never happened or your important person never existed.”

-Sandra Cisneros

When we are given the dominant narrative about what it means to get a college education in this country, many Latinas feel as if our lived realities are not being taken into consideration. This is a narrative constructed on the culture, experience, and expectations of the white middle-

¹⁷² IBID 209

class. Our culture, our families, our motives, and our financial status are often assumed to be like those of our white counterparts when in reality they are not. Unlike the narrative that college is an individual pursuit toward independence and autonomy, for many of us, pursuing a college degree is not just for ourselves, but for our families as well. Nowhere in the dominant narrative is there a space to talk about the specifics of our lives – the impact of *familismo* and the approach to success as collective and familial. Our parents see education as tool to *seguir adelante* for ourselves and our families in this country. They often see us as aspirational capital for building a better life. For us, family is not a separate component of our lives, but very much engrained in the choices we make and how we navigate through college and the world.

This thesis, grounded in a Critical Race Theory framework, situates Latinas experiences in higher education within a system of structural and institutional racism and seeks to validate and center the *testimonios* of Latinas who are knowledge producers. It is written in an effort to remind Latinas, and those who read this, that *testimonio* is a political and intentional tool of resistance that disrupts silence, and challenges the monolithic narrative and structure that often disregards PoC experiences and histories. It is also written in an effort to encourage Latinas to question power structures that exclude us, and to share their *testimonios* of struggles, triumphs, and the complexities of our lives, both inside and outside of the classroom.

As Latinas, we must remember that we did not create these institutional obstacles nor are they easily avoidable but we can build strength and resilience through the sharing of our *testimonios*. The obstacles within academia are tied to larger structures of power that are meant to marginalize PoC through capitalistic, sexist, xenophobic, and racist practices. Nonetheless we must resist by vocalizing our experiences and making them more visible in conversations in the classroom, rather than hold them internally. We can also share them with educators, school

counselors, and college administrators as a way to let them know that these practices of alienation that are so engrained in academia are not okay and that they must change.

We can also share these stories with other Latinas to remind ourselves that we are not alone in the struggle. We can share them with our families as a way to shed light on the struggles of academia and remind them of the strong daughters they have raised. I emphasize the importance of these conversations because there are more Latinas like us who are going through similar experiences of guilt, family pressures, and who question whether they belong in academia. They might find strength in reading/hearing our stories just like I did when reading the *testimonios* in *Wise Latinas*. These *testimonios* continue to remind me that I am not the only one and that these feelings and experiences are tied to larger structures of power that need to be challenged and dismantled. Most importantly, they remind me of how powerful it is for Latinas to share our *testimonios* of struggle, strength, and success in order to empower one another to reclaim our space in higher education.

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