



***Testimoniando El Presente* under COVID-19: A pedagogical reflection on the *Testimonio* essay assignment**

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Accepted: 28 January 2021 / Published online: 3 May 2021
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Grounding this reflexive essay within the context of COVID-19, the academic institutional response, and associated challenges with online teaching, I describe the development of an assignment that leveraged *testimonio* as a pedagogical resource to foster a sense of community among college students within the context of an online learning community. I describe the *Testimoniando El Presente* essay assignment, which students were encouraged to complete as way for them to process and document their own and their families' and/or communities' experiences of loss, amid the public health and unjust conditions under COVID-19. The *Testimonio* assignment called for students to connect course content, concepts, and theories in Latinx studies in order to process and practice the act of *testimoniar el presente*. The intentions of the assignment were to encourage students to engage with community stories under the pandemic and to develop their critical thinking and writing. Furthermore, and equally important, was to facilitate a sense of community grounded in LatCrit theory through a reflexive writing exercise: the *Testimonio* assignment.

In offering my reflections on the assignment—from its development to its implementation and implications—it is my intention that educators, especially those grounded in LatCrit theory, will turn to the discipline of Latinx studies for guidance and *sabiduría* as they adjust their pedagogy to online platforms. Specifically, how we can leverage the multidisciplinary of Latinx studies as a field, along with our communities' strengths, to guide us in our pedagogical praxis of teaching–learning via critically reflexive dialogues, like *testimonio*, and in community with others. I conclude with a reflection on the possibilities, and the challenges, of utilizing *testimonio* to contend with and uplift our communities and ourselves *en el presente*.

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Testimoniando El Presente essay assignment

The Testimonio assignment was incorporated as a reflexive, dialogic and relational writing exercise in my Chicana/Latina Communities course during the 2020 spring quarter. The assignment provided students with an opportunity for critical reflexivity, social analysis and validation of the challenges that have ensued under COVID-19, including the continuities of systemic racial violence, inequity and injustice. Students were encouraged to identify a friend, family member, or community member with whom they have rapport and to engage them in a *testimonio*-oriented dialogue about how they were experiencing and making meaning of the context under COVID-19. The assignment was given earlier in the quarter, before the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and that amplified the Black Lives Matter movement's calls for racial justice and social change. The public health concerns associated with COVID-19 were exacerbated by the racial violence many were witnessing circulate in the public sphere. Racial violence, along with health and economic inequities, coalesced to further the challenges and concerns associated with COVID-19.

The objective of the Testimonio assignment was to provide students with an opportunity to actively listen to the voices, stories and experiences of a member of their family and/or community. Additionally, students were asked to connect these with the course content, including relevant theories, perspectives, and standpoints that could offer a deeper, more critical understanding of the social conditions associated with COVID-19—among these, any uncertainties and concerns, as well as possibilities for change. Some students opted to connect with a friend or family member, while others sought out a mentor within their network. Students were provided the following assignment guidelines:

Please engage testimonio with someone in your family and/or community. Stories hold wisdom. We can learn so much about ourselves and others, as well as about our past, present and future when we listen to those who have seen and lived through so much more beyond this moment. You will have an opportunity to develop your own questions, or to simply engage testimonio as a free-form reflexive dialogue, an intentional conversation. This is an opportunity for you to actively listen to someone's lived experience, story and voice, especially when some of these voices are often silenced, unheard and/or misrepresented.

In addition to this description, students were required to read a foundational article on *testimonio*, specifically the work of Delgado Bernal et al. (2012).

Following a close reading of the article, students were encouraged to develop their own questions and reflexive prompts, or to modify those offered in the description of the Testimonio assignment. Some of the guiding questions students were asked to consider included these:

What are you experiencing and/or feeling in this current moment?

What challenges and/or struggles have you and/or your family/community experienced under the present sociopolitical context?

What are your hopes and dreams for your family/community and/or the future?



Students were given approximately two weeks to complete the assignment, prioritizing first and foremost the well-being of those whom they chose to engage with, as well as their own self-care. The structure of the essays students submitted ranged from threaded analyses of the *testimonios* with relevant literature in Latinx studies and, in some cases, students' own stories and experiences, or responses to others' *testimonios*. Following the summation of the *testimonio*, students were encouraged to critically reflect through their writings on the experience of witnessing and intentionally listening to another person's story. What surfaced from some of these critical reflections illustrate how *testimonio*, beyond its implications for pedagogy and political consciousness-raising, can also be utilized as a tool to cultivate a sense of community grounded in feelings of relational hope and healing.

Selected excerpts from the Testimonio assignment

Testimonio, as a methodology grounded in a LatCrit *feminista* tradition, is a pedagogical and political tool that can serve as a resource toward cultivating engaged experiential learning and a sense of community associated with the sustaining of hope. In the excerpts that follow, I offer quotes from two students' Testimonio assignment essays. I offer some quotes from Jackie's and Maria's essays without edits and with minimal redactions, to honor the voice of the person with whom students engaged in *testimonio*.

The social conditions under COVID-19 that significantly altered the living and working conditions and well-being of some students' closest family members and friends were highlighted in students' *testimonio* essays. Although parents and caretakers were often those most significantly affected by unemployment and additional responsibilities associated with caring labor, students were similarly affected—and engaged in caring labor. For instance, with the urgencies to close universities and college campuses, many students found their academics, housing, and overall well-being compromised. Jackie engaged *testimonio* with Becky, her friend, to relationally process the university's response to the pandemic. Honoring Jackie's *testimonio*, Becky wrote,

Becky explained to me that, “a big part of my identity is that I am—I was, was a community facilitator.” ... Many students were confused about what their next steps looked like, so they turned to their community facilitators, Becky included, for answers. “And so I have all my residents being like ‘We have to leave? Well what about this, what about this,’ and I’m like, my loves, I just found this out too, let me process.” Becky went on to elaborate that, because she had so many students depending on her for answers she simply did not have, “I got a lot of anxiety because of it, ‘cause my main goal is to support residents, but I am not being well-equipped to support them. And it’s, like, giving me anxiety the fact that they’re so worried, but I can’t answer any of those questions.



Becky's critical social analysis of the lack of support provided to community facilitators by the university echoes similar frustrations of limited or denied resources other students described when critiquing the government's inability to provide sustenance for those most in need. The absence of support, resources, care, and guidance for students left Becky with no assurances on how she would maintain the safety and well-being of the students under her supervision in the residential living area she supervised. Becky is a student herself, and these demands significantly exacerbated her worries and produced heightened levels of anxiety, which challenged her well-being. The concerns that Becky described in her *testimonio* were contextualized through her critical social analysis of the institutions and structures wherein they were located as Latinx students witnessing the inequities unfold.

The university was one significant context where students experienced the challenges of COVID-19. Yet there were other students that, upon returning home to their families and communities, witnessed the cumulative injustices unveiled by the pandemic. Maria's *testimonio* of her brother Luis made visible his concerns over their family's well-being, and more generally Latinx communities, especially those who are working class. Noting Luis's difficulties in responding to her question, Maria shared,

The question about challenges currently experienced was the hardest one for him to answer, but he responded saying, "Well I feel sad but proud at the same time. I know that Latinx people are one of the groups most affected by COVID-19 because you told me. I am thinking about all of our people that are still working in the fields or cleaning. I am also sad thinking about the elote man because he is probably not making money. But I am proud of knowing that Latinx identity describes hard-working people."

Through his *testimonio*, Luis acknowledged the impact of COVID-19 on Latinx communities and their resilience. Luis described pride in identifying Latinx; he associated the community with hard work and perseverance. Identifying the challenges and limitations that have ensued under COVID-19 allowed Luis to empathize with the "elote man," whose earnings he believed have minimized. He connected the lack of financial earning with the sacrificial labor of those working in the agricultural fields and cleaning industries, who are often left with no choice but to work. Luis described himself as being a part of the Latinx community whose struggles are, to a degree, ones he understands and identifies with, given his identities and positionality. The solidarity that he names, which comes through in his *testimonio*, is characteristic of the sense of community he feels with laborers who are risking their health because they have no other options under the economic precarity affecting their families. Among the laborers who put themselves at risk to provide and care for their families are his parents, family members and local community.

Testimonios, because of the relational and introspective elements it facilitates, can sustain and further the process of critically reflexivity in order to envision, imagine and dream anew possibilities that can reconstitute a sense of community, while grounded in hope. This process of connecting, fostering community, through experiential relational knowledge with others and moments that surface hope, was evidenced in some of the *testimonios* students engaged as part of the



assignment. Maria, for example, when reflecting on her motivations for pursuing the Testimonio assignment with Luis, described her desire to establish an emotional connection with her sibling—specifically, one that honored their individual and shared struggles, which Maria reflected in her writings:

I wanted to use this *testimonio* as a way to establish an emotional connection with my brother during this pandemic where we are both internally struggling. My hope was making sure my brother knew that his voice and experience are valid, making sure his *papelitos guardados* are unfolded so that he can heal, and convey a narrative of personal, political, and social realities.

Maria's intentions to hold space for her brother to process the pain, or internal struggles, and through that unraveling to become more restored in his well-being, characterizes the possibilities for *testimonio* as a pedagogical resource, as well as a tool for fostering a sense of belonging. Utilizing *testimonio* as a resource or strategy to help her brother open up about his emotions and feelings allowed Maria and Luis to connect in ways they perhaps were unable previously, or at least not with such depth. By ensuring that Luis' *papelitos guardados*, the unspoken and untold stories, would be brought to the surface and become "unfolded" over the course of the *testimonio*, Maria strived to aid her brother's reflexive process. Well-being, like the wielding of hope, while often described as an individual affective state or condition, is a relational experience that requires at moments reflecting while being in community with others—that is, of experiencing mutual recognitions reflexively that render visible the personal and collective pain, but also hope, through fostering community.

Cultivating opportunities for a sense of community via shared experiences is fundamental to fostering a collective memory that can serve as an antidote against hopelessness. In an edited anthology featuring writers, activists, and artists, De Robertis' (2017) characterizes hope as an experience of remembering the past to recognize or make meaning of the present as one imagines new opportunities and possibilities for the future. By simultaneously reflecting on the past, yet reimagining toward the future, communities are able to cultivate the optimism and agency to leverage their resources, such as their community's strengths and assets, to bring about change conducive to supporting individual and collective wellness (Chavez-Dueñas et al. 2019; Mosley et al. 2020).

Testimonio offered an opportunity to reframe the moment as one of hope and possibilities for change. Through their positionalities, Luis and Becky experienced the challenges of COVID-19 and its impact on communities' struggles, which they shared with Maria and Jackie, respectively. By sharing disquieting experiences, they were striving to make sense of and simultaneously acknowledge the inequities in their own communities and lives. By offering these excerpts from Latinx students' assignment, with minimal analysis or connection to the literatures that guide my own interpretations, I am purposefully honoring their *testimonio*. By having students' Testimonio assignment be their individual and collective testament to the impact of COVID-19, I am offering educators and Latinx studies scholars an invitation to consider how our disciplinary training can be utilized beyond the academic sphere to aid Latinx communities in telling their own stories.



Closing *reflexiones* on *testimonio*

As LatCrit educators, we must cultivate the academic success of Latinx students through the tools, resources and practices that we know—and often practice—within our communities. Sociocultural practices, such as storytelling, are an asset that we can draw on when we must strive to document in order to renew, restore, and affirm hope, healing, and community in dire times. As educators we can leverage pedagogical resources and tools to support the efforts of communities whose stories are often undertheorized, or not provided with the platforms to be heard in their own right. The act of honoring via *testimonio*, for example, is important for supporting communities in struggle who are demanding justice and/or experiencing injustice. In guiding students through the Testimoniando El Presente essay assignment, which I described as a pedagogical resource for aiding Latinx students in documenting the impact of COVID-19 on their communities, I connected LatCrit theory to sociocultural practices like storytelling. The personal accounts shared, along with the reflections and connections that students offered, demonstrate the ongoing process of critical reflexivity, witnessing and holding space for stories as a fundamental value of LatCrit theory. My goal was to bridge the pedagogical and political dimensions of narratives or stories, like *testimonio*, with the literatures and perspectives of Latinx studies. Theoretical foundations that are, and continue to be, informed by Indigenous traditions, critical reflexivity and relational practices can serve to honor *el poder de la palabra*, the power of words.

Currently, educators are being pressed to deliver online course content that is multimodal, inclusive, accessible and up to par with the technologies that could aid our students in their learning. As a teacher-scholar, however, I wonder and continuously ask myself, *How can I make my classes more humanizing for students whose experiences at the white neoliberal university have been all but humanizing?* This is especially the case for Indigenous, Latinx, Afro-Latinx, Black, and African American students, whose identities and positionalities in higher education, and at a predominantly white institution, are marked by the color of their skin and the white arrogance that circulates physically and culturally to shape the (currently virtual) campus climate.

In closing, I offer a critically reflexive invitation: *How can we utilize the skills and resources that characterize the multidisciplinary ethos of Latinx studies to facilitate a process of critical experiential learning and community among students?* These are the intentions that guided the development of the Testimonio assignment, which engaged *testimonio* as a pedagogical resource toward cultivating a sense of community. Confronting the COVID-19 moment calls us to innovate, engage and connect in new and creative ways. As an educator, I invite students and educators to consider *testimonio* as a resource to aid us in documenting, resisting and reclaiming a sense of community in pandemic times.

Acknowledgements With gratitude to the students enrolled in ETHN 122: Chicana/Latinx Communities in the spring quarter of 2020 who engaged in the assignment and granted me permission to include and feature excerpts from their essays.



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