

**Receta del Testimonio Mole:  
A Value-Rich Recipe for Folklórico Resilience Testimonio**

**Manuel Alejandro Pérez**

*University of San Francisco*

**Abstract**

This testimonio explores the story of three hermanas and their connections to comunidad, familia, and self-esteem through Mexican folklórico. Each testimonio is positioned within a Latin Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) framework and further explored through Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. The stories within this paper allow each hermana's Truth to take shape in a way that is authentic to their experience through the voice, structure, and tone of each testimonio. In this way, testimonio is used as methodology in radical storytelling (Cruz, 2012). The hermanas explore their relationship to ethnic identity and cultural heritage as Mexicanos who have a relationship to traditional Mexican folklórico. Within their stories, each of the hermanas testimonialistas discuss the unique ways in which their ethnicity intersects with other aspects of their identities, including gender, sexuality, and nationality. These stories are examples of testimonio as both a product and a process. More importantly, these testimonios illustrate the ways in which marginalized communities make sense of the world around them in a way that empowers and uplifts the MindBodySpirit.

**La Receta del Testimonio Mole: A Value-Rich Recipe for Folklórico Resilience Testimonio**

*1 barra de chocolate  
3 cuentos de amig@s  
1 Google Hangout after dance practice  
1 bunch of giggles about oral history  
Un pellisco de café con leche  
3 chiles tatemados  
1 hermana's failed entrance to la música de Lady Gaga  
1 coming out testimonio  
4 hermanas  
Best served bien caliente.*

This article highlights folklórico resilience testimonios as a value-rich process, which I cariñosamente refer to as “la receta del testimonio mole.” This recipe frames the key ingredients for the Truth of the queer Mexicanos within this testimonio. This recipe is also a tool for sense making and a script for understanding their stories. In order to learn about how to acquire the aforementioned key ingredients, you must start from the beginning. This testimonio begins with a queer Mexicanito from Sacramento who started dancing traditional Mexican folklórico over twenty-years ago. Folklórico is a traditional dance form that tells the history of the Mexican people through dance, song, and movement. Folklórico has always been a way for me to make sense of my identity. Through my adolescent, teenage, and young adult years, I grappled with how my ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation intersected and collided with one another simultaneously. My perception of what I believed to be the socially acceptable thing for good Mexicano boys to do was overwhelming. The one place that provided me relief from my stressful overthinking was folklórico, or danza. I had always been curious about Mexican history and culture. This interest was coupled with a growing curiosity in what it could mean to be both Mexican and queer. In her research on community cultural wealth, Yosso (2005) challenges the perception that students of color come to education at a deficit with no valuable skills and resources to enhance their student success. Moreover, Yosso (2005) illustrates the contradictory nature of schools to promote education and empowerment that directly and indirectly fosters oppressive spaces for certain communities. Within educational institutions, students of color often learn about their identities from a lens that marginalizes their narratives to the fringe of the dominant narrative. In my experience I learned about my culture and identity within my community and outside of school.

Folklórico became an essential element to my schooling beyond the classroom. Folklórico became a moment of liberation in which I was able to learn about my ethnicity and cultural heritage in a space that embraced my brown skin, that welcomed my Spanish/English/Spanglish, and that provided a brave space for me to explore my sexuality. As I moved through my education in the classroom, I read stories of historical characters who did not have names that sounded like mine, who did not speak the languages that I spoke, and who did not live in spaces or barrios like mine. In his research on Latino family epistemologies, Hidalgo (2005) highlights the value of conducting research that is inclusive of the various intersections of identity and that give rise to a Latino consciousness. An awareness of Latino

core values and familism reveals the success strategies and skills that Latinos use to overcome barriers, especially within the educational system. This research is embodied within the values and objectives of Mexican folklórico. In many ways, folklórico became the way that I learned more about myself as a queer Mexicano. This education beyond the classroom helped me to envision a harmony amongst all aspects of my identity.

In this article, I highlight the testimonios of three hermanas who turned to folklórico as they moved through various stages of their lives. These three hermanas identify as male, masculine-of-center, queer, and Mexican. Through their bonds of amistad and closeness, these three hermanas have framed their friendship as a sisterhood. As adults, the hermanas reflect on their past and current experiences moving through educational systems, while maintaining a connection to folklórico. In this article, I will first explore how testimonio as a methodology helps to excavate and highlight the unique experiences of the hermanas in a way that honors their voice within the narrative. Next, I will offer a brief background on our relationship to one another and to folklórico before sharing their testimonios. Lastly, I will weave their testimonios with emerging themes from their own cuentos.

### **Testimonio as Resilience Methodology**

This testimonio of resilience and orgullo gives voice to the intersections of identities that exist within Mexican folklórico. As such, this testimonio is a cuento that tells stories in English, in Spanish, and in Spanglish. Italics have historically been used to identify language that is not part of the dominant language and is a visual reminder to the reader that the language is different and foreign. The relationships within these folklórico testimonios are born of Spanish, English, and Spanglish tongue. They are home. They are not foreign. This language choice is *The Story, is Our Story*. These testimonios are their Truth. In honor of this Truth, I do not use italics to distinguish any part of this testimonio that is not written in English. Their testimonio was shared authentically in the name of hermandad. Thus, their testimonies of power and resilience will stay true to their original form.

In this way, testimonio as methodology allows for risk-taking in incorporating the MindBodySpirit into the research process. Delgado-Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona (2012) describe testimonio as product and process and as a way for the mind, the body, and spirit to

be sources of knowledge and transformation. In his research on testimonio from a postmodernist lens, Yudice (1991) takes on the role of researcher in testimonio. Yudice (1991) argues for the elimination of the scholar researcher as the spokesperson for the voiceless. Instead, testimonios should tell the story—the cuento—of the testimonialista. The literary components of testimonio provide stories about identity that is not shared solely for the purposes of self-defense and survival, but also for the aesthetic. In this sense, testimonio is artful resistance.

In an exploration of testimonio in urban classrooms, Cruz (2012) refers to testimonio as a tool for radical storytelling. Cruz (2012) paints the image of testimonio as a visceral process that is healthy, nourishing, and necessary for the subversion of dominant narratives. Cruz (2012) asserts that the testimonialist is not so focused on story-sharing for an individual gain. Rather, testimonio is methodology that transforms and uproots the narratives that so often exclude the voice of the marginalized. Testimonio provides a space from which the reader can position critical self-reflection.

I would argue that it is not the goal of testimonio to parallel dominant structures. As Cruz (2012) asserts, testimonio challenges, invites, and reminds readers to practice a constant critical consciousness. Yudice (1991) also posits to preserve the aesthetic and transformative literary value of testimonio within academic research. Testimonio is dynamic. Testimonio grips at the center of a story to transform the landscape of contested truth for the writer, the reader, and the testimonialista in the construction and reproduction of the testimonio. In this spirit, the goal of my research is to present the following testimonios in a way that honors the voice and authenticity of the storyteller. I also hope to create a space for testimonio to honor the history of our cultural identities and also invite new third spaces from which to witness folklórico testimonio as resilience (Anzaldúa, 1987).

### **Hermanas en el Folklore**

For purposes of this research, I invited three dancers to share their testimonios of multiple intersecting identities and of the relationships that each of them have with one another as hermanas. All identify as gay, Mexicano folkloristas. Two of the hermanas are current members of folklórico performing companies in Northern California, and one of the hermanas paused his folklórico dancing in 2010. All testimonialistas, including myself, shared several years

of dancing in the same performing company in Northern California from 2006 through 2010. The testimonios of each of the hermanas were collected in multiple ways: in-person meetings, one-on-one meetings, virtual video meetings as a group, and via independent email submissions of testimonio stories. Each of the hermanas was given a brief overview of testimonio as methodology. They were also provided a prompt to respond to: *folklórico is educación beyond schooling*.

In the following section, you will read accounts of how each of the hermanas chose to introduce themselves within the framework of their testimonios. This section is immediately followed by a group dialogue that all three hermanas had with one another relative to folklórico as educación beyond schooling.

### **Mario Dasaev – “Dasa”**

*Yo soy Dasa.*

*I am Mario.*

*Yo bailo folklórico.*

*I dance traditional Mexican regional dances.*

My name is Mario Dasaev Sosa Mendoza. I only allow my family and people from mi rancho to call me Dasa, a shortened version of my middle name, Dasaev. I love identifying as both Mexicano and American, Mexican-American. I have the privilege of loving two countries equally. I am a graphic designer because of my love for the visual and I am a dancer because of my love for performance. And I am pretty bad ass.

I started dancing so that I could be more social. I think that folklórico also satisfied this need that I had to perform. When I was younger I always had three aspirations: to be an artist, a dancer, and a teacher. I joined dance when I was fifteen or sixteen. It helped me to fulfill ideas about myself that I had had since I was a young boy. I remember living in Colusa and being four or five years old and having these same aspirations. Dancing has helped me to achieve all of these things. I actually get restless when I'm not dancing. I miss the movement of my feet. I miss my friends. Both of the companies that I've ever danced for have accepted me for who I am—I am lucky.

I did take a break from dance for about five years. When I came back for the second time, I came back because I was on a break with Fernando, my ex. I remembered folklórico. I

wanted to go back to it. I remember Fernando asking me, “Why did I need to go back to dance?” I just remember thinking, “. . . because I want to.” It’s been such a consistent part of my life since then. It’s a part of me. It’s cute when they tell my little nephew to “dance like DASA.” It gives my family another characteristic of me that’s very special to me. I’m good at these things and I feel good doing them.

I consider you guys my best friends. We just get along so well. Folklórico brought us together. You and I, we are gays from the ranch. We never talked about it. We never mentioned it. It was awkward. But with dance, the door opened up. Let’s keep it real: we were ranch acquaintances . . . I laugh so much when I’m with you. Me, being the diva. Luis being the enabler. You are the leader. The humor that comes out of us makes me laugh out loud randomly sometimes. We all have a goal to hold on to our culture. Ozzy came from Mexico and that’s how he expresses his background. You are very academic and you always want to research everything. I love things that represent where I come from and my culture. If I didn’t go back to dance, then I don’t know where I’d be today. I refer to folklórico for lots of things. I refer to folklórico in job interviews, to help explain context. It makes me stand out. Folklórico is such a part of me that I can never take a break. It’s a support system. It’s just there. It can drive me crazy, but I know in my heart of hearts . . . that it stabilizes me.

### **Oswaldo Ramirez Vidales – “Ozzy”**

*Yo soy maestro, bailarín, y amigo.*

*I am an educator, a dancer, and a friend.*

*Yo bailo cuando siento que la música me hace moverme dentro de mí.*

*I dance when I'm thrilled to hear music that makes me move.*

Buenas tardes, good evening, my name is Oswaldo Ramirez Vidales. I'm originally from Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico raised up to the age of 13. I moved to Sacramento, California where I have lived ever since. I'm fully bilingual and biliterate in Spanish and English. I began my college career at the age of 17 in which I completed an A.A. Degree in Arts-Social Sciences at Sacramento City College in 2003, a B.A. in Psychology with minors in Anthropology and Spanish at UC Davis in 2006, and a M.S. in Career Counseling at CSU Sacramento in 2009. I have worked as an Academic Advisor assisting undergraduate students with their GE and graduation requirements, and I still currently work as Faculty Lecturer with the Department of

Theater and Dance teaching Mexican Folklórico Dance, both positions at CSU Sacramento. Moreover, I've been a dancer for 13 years and 4 of those as Instructor and Co-Artistic Director. The last 3 years with my colleague and one of my best friends, Manuel Perez. Last, but not least, I identify myself as a gay Mexican male who is still developing/shaping who I am today.

I first started dancing folklórico because I missed seeing it danced on a regular basis. Being in Guadalajara, next to la Plaza Tapatia, watching the holidays, the festivals, the Teatro Degollado to see Amalia Hernandez's dance company, to see la Universidad de Guadalajara at mariachi festivals, the fiestas de octubre . . . there was a lot going on back then. I enjoyed watching. Then moving to the U.S. I missed that. It was like, now I'm here. I'm Mexican I need to speak Spanish. I need to keep everything in tact about my culture. El Son del Gusto is the first song that I learned to dance with full choreography and I loved it.

I've made some of the best friendships ever in my life in the U.S. through dance. I have come to embrace performing in front of people—I used to be really scared. I enjoy the complexity of dances and movements, thinking of choreographies. It's like a feeling of belonging and wanting to belong. I don't know what life would be like without dancing. I don't think I would have done anything else too much more productive. In our home videos, we have folklórico performances from elementary school, memories that have stuck with us. We would go to Tlaquepaque at least once a month to see mariachi and dancers with cousins and family. Folklórico has been a very crucial aspect of my family.

### **Luis Navarro – “Luis”**

*I am Mexican, Latino, gay, American.  
Yo soy Mexicano, Latino, gay, American.  
I dance because I am proud of my culture.  
Yo bailo por que me emociona.*

I started dancing because I wanted to feel more connected to my culture. I started in college. It was a difficult time for me —it was an identity thing for me. I was having a really hard time being openly gay. In high school I used to call myself Louis. In college, is when I really started referring to myself as Luis. I learned to admire my culture and it wasn't through a class or anything. I remember going to an event at UC Davis and I remember seeing the danzantes

performing and I loved it. I said 'OH MY GOD' and that's why I joined. I loved it and that was in college. Then I realized that I was trying to find myself so I stopped dancing. I joined a fraternity and I don't know . . . but then I started realizing that I needed to explore and connect with my culture, my community, which is why I think I joined our dance company. I think I saw more people there that did it for their passion. I also saw people who were gay. I saw Ozzy and I knew he was gay. Then you came back from school and joined the company too. It all worked out. I am passionate about dance, but I don't think I'm as passionate as you or Ozzy are. I really admire the passion that you all have for it, more than I do. I feel connected in so many ways.

I think about returning to folklórico all the time. It's hard. It's a part of me. It's my cultura. I have a little bit of that through my job now and I enjoy it. When I relocated to Southern California I had seriously considered returning to dance. I really missed dancing. However, I was in a different place when I went to visit a different company at the time. If I wasn't in such a transitional period, I would be doing that now. You all are my extended family. Folklórico is where I feel the most comfortable. It's home. I miss it. We have similar goals. We have similar interests. Being around each other and having a good time—it's exciting. I love performing. I hate dancing socially, but I love performing. Isn't that funny?

. . . and having you there . . . you were definitely more of the encouraging people that I met. You definitely helped me out with parts of my life that you know about. You pushed me not to give up on many things. I really appreciate that. I joined when I was going through a really difficult time. I was trying to get over my first boyfriend. I needed to feel something. I was really depressed. I needed to turn to my family and I didn't have my family. I remember one of the days that my ex had been such an asshole to me. I remember that I called my mom and they were actually in Hayward that day. I was so depressed. I called my mom and I just went over to be with my family. I mean I was depressed with them too, but I didn't tell them why. I was resistant. I think that's about the time that I turned to folklórico again to avoid depression and it really helped. I mean, we became amazing friends. I remember that my friends from SF were always saying that my dance friends and I were always hanging out, that we were so close, and that we were always together. It was true. We were very close and it was very comforting to me.

I do carry it with me, what you told me that day about not giving up. I think about that often. I don't know if you know that, but I do, and it's meant a lot to me. I want you to know that. Remember my old job at KVIE? I feel like the dance group was a networking opportunity for me too. I would have never known about that job had it not been for the networking that dancing folklórico offered to me. I feel like that's something that our White counterparts always have and that's not something that I ever had growing up. Had I not known about these jobs then I never would have made it to where I am at now in my career. In a way, folklórico was a form of networking career wise. It's done a lot for me.

### **Las hermanas**

For each of the hermanas, folklórico played an important role in shaping their identity, strengthening their voices. Their stories detail the unique ways in which their experiences were impacted by their connection to folklórico. Their collective testimonio as hermanas is also evidence of the value traditional Mexican folklórico had on their relationship.

### **Una Platica Entre Danzantes**

Each of the hermanas' folklórico testimonios represent the resilience found within each of their individual cuentos. As each of the testimonialistas came together to reflect on their friendship as folkloristas and hermanas, the value of their relationships was even more evident as they discussed the experiences that they shared with one another. Through this collective testimonio, the strength of their connections to one another, as a value added to each of their individual journeys in identity, is clearer. The following excerpts of dialogue are a product of their conversation together.

**LUIS:** I think, for me, folklórico was more of a cultural dance kind of thing. It was more about learning about my Mexicanidad. That is what folklórico was for me— it was historical. Kinda like how we learned about Danza de los Parachicos, we learned about the European settlers and the indigenous communities in Chiapas.

**DASA:** There's a historical reason for what we learn—like for example when we learned about how the slave trade got to Veracruz in México. A lot of the movements of the dance come from this blending of history. There's a reason why we do what we do . . . from

the dance style, the dress that we wear . . . it's Cuban, Caribbean, and from Africa. It is educational for us as performers. It shows on stage when we are performing.

OZZY: I think folklórico has a lot do with relearning and reintegrating one's self back into aspects of our own culture that we never knew existed. Then we try to pass this on to other generations. We learned these dances from our ancestors and now we're trying to pass it on to other generations. Folklorico seems more to me like a lifestyle and a way to pass on tradition. It teaches a lot more . . . beyond schooling. It teaches me to be responsible. It helps me with my memory.

DASA: I compare it to an oral history that is passed on. Like, for example, you and Ozzy are going to Durango to learn a specific set of dances. There is no specific or super strict curriculum . . . you'll be with maestros who learned it from their maestros and they learned it from other maestros. Folklorico is like the tradition of oral history.

LUIS: For me, folklórico was more about community. It was a place where I can be with like-minded people, a place where I could be accepted by my peers. Obviously I came out when I was in the dance company—that was a huge step for me. Folklorico allowed me to be proud of my culture but it also opened the door for me to be a gay Latino . . . a princesa.

DASA: I think that you kind of go through life looking for your people . . . your tribe or whatever. For me being born in México and growing up here, I could never really relate to Mexicans because I was different. I was the one who grew up in U.S. We were different. I am not American either though because I was born in México. You seek out the people you relate to most . . . that's what I found with you guys.

LUIS: I don't think I would have been able to have found that with other dance companies though. I think it's also about the people . . . other companies were just at different levels of understanding.

DASA: They just weren't at your level of understanding at that specific moment in time.

LUIS: I think there's a group of us that assimilated in American culture, but also keep Mexican culture. We were college educated at the time that we were dancing or we were pursuing higher education. It's not that other dance companies were not, but I didn't see any of that. We were all continuing to evolve on a regular basis.

DASA: I can add that our dance company was very unique in that we all desired to pursue more than just a high school degree or diploma. We had Bachelor's, Master's, or Ph.D.'s. With my current performing company, I haven't seen that same thing. I think that speaks to the dance company, but also to us individually.

LUIS: I think that could be a function of all of us being there in the company at the same time. Nos hemos apoyado en diferentes maneras. I mean everything that you said to me, Manuel. I mean when I was looking for a job you asked me, "What thing do you want that you have not achieved or gotten?" You said that to me. We support and encourage each other in different ways. We help each other to excel.

OZZY: I want to add two things that I've observed about folklorico. One thing is that some companies are more Americanized, speak more English. Others are not Americanized and not yet fully Mexican, but speak more Spanish. I think the fact that we're bilingual, speaking English and Spanish, had a lot to do with our connection. We were able to share those experiences of coming from México and the U.S., talking about dance, and also helping each other to be successful. Being bilingual, bicultural, biliterate (bisexual?) . . . well, maybe some people, but who knows . . . we were able to shift our mindset through dance. In our dancing we processed everything in two languages. Being bilingual was an important aspect of schooling through dance. I've seen how not many other groups do that.

LUIS: In our company, I saw people in the same situation as me. I saw young guys, my colleagues, my peers, in the same situation as me and living the same experiences I had, and who were openly gay and were still surrounded by other people who were completely ok with it. I thought the environment was welcoming and warm. I thought, "If they did it then I guess I'm going to be ok." It then became a family outside of my own family. I think that's also a really big thing . . . for our culture it's hard to come out to our family. It was hard for me to actually tell them. It was easier to tell my family once I had told you guys. You guys are like my extended family.

## La Receta: Extracting the Flavor and Meaning of the Testimonio

DASA: So hold up, let me see if I got this right and then you let me know if I got it. So testimonio is kinda like how our moms make mole, yeah? So, Ozzy's mom makes mole a certain way, my mom makes mole a certain way, and then your mom makes mole another way. Our moms all make mole but it's different. Then, the internet will have a recipe for mole that will claim to be the "right way" to make mole. So all of these versions of mole are like testimonios, yeah?

In the aforementioned passage, Dasa has taken the concept of testimonio as methodology and placed it within a context that makes sense for his lived experience, and that of Luis and Ozzy, by relating testimonio to Mexican cuisine. It made sense for the testimonialists. Moreover, each of the dancers identified themselves in ways that reference their ethnicity and culture, their identities, their language, and their relationship to folklórico. Testimonio as a product and method of LatCrit Race Theory allows for the exploration of identity through ethnicity and race. LatCrit Race Theory also transcends ethnicity and race to include such things as language, sexual orientation, gender, immigration and citizenship status among many more identities (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Thus, testimonio as a methodology allows for these rich descriptions and intersectional identities to play a vital role in informing the reader about the factors that influence the lives of each testimonialist.

Testimonio cultivates the essential elements of our intersectional identities and allows for three themes to emerge. Through the aforementioned testimonios, the dancers have discussed folklórico as educación sobre comunidad, folklórico as educación sobre la familia, and folklórico as educación sobre el auto-estima, or self-esteem. Through the use of story and personal narratives, the testimonios supercharge the landscape of dominant narratives in academia with powerful cuentos that expose tensions and highlight cultural capital in various languages and formats. Testimonio provides a space for the voice and story of multiple Truths—life as primary text.

In her writing about critical race theory and community cultural wealth, Yosso (2005) highlights six distinct elements of cultural capital that students of color bring to the classroom from their home environments. These elements comprise community cultural wealth and are often unrecognized or unacknowledged. Folklórico embodies each of Yosso's (2005) elements

of community cultural wealth. Each of the elements—aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital—can be found within the three folklórico testimonio themes of *comunidad*, *familia* and *auto-estima*. The dancers address coming out as gay men, finding friendships, and learning about cultural history through a lens of community cultural wealth and in a strengths-based approach to understanding their lived experience.

### **Comunidad, Familia, & Auto-estima**

The theme of *comunidad* within the folklórico testimonios bears a striking resemblance to Yosso's (2005) linguistic, social, and navigational capital. The testimonios are delivered in Spanish, English, and Spanglish. In one instance, Ozzy credits the solidarity of their friendships and relationship with the fact that they can switch between each of the languages effortlessly. This multilingual communication created a distinct flavor within the context of the dance company for all three dancers. This dynamic then consequently made their relationships stronger.

This linguistic capital then made it easier to utilize the skills that each dancer brought to the performing company relative to social and navigational capital. Through these relationships, each dancer's access to skills and resources for navigating social systems was enhanced. Consequently, this additional layer of shared community cultural capital positively impacted each dancer's resilience in the face of obstacles such as disclosing their sexual identity to their family, similar to what Luis shared in his testimonio.

In their testimonios, each of the dancers also highlighted the importance of the folklórico company serving as an additional family structure away from home. Family is a strong element of community cultural capital. Each of the dancers referenced the development of a *familia* within folklórico which positively impacted the development of strong and healthy identities for each of the dancers. With a *familia*-based model of performance, folklórico provides an additional outlet through which youth can accumulate additional cultural capital away from the home, but still within a *familia* structure. This outlet can be beneficial as youth of color push up against social systems that displace their lived experience and make student success more challenging—additional family structures are valuable.

Lastly, folklórico inspires a strong sense of auto-estima in the dancers. The physicality of the movements, the technique of the footwork and styling, and the cultural history component cater to the dancers' aspirational and resistant capital. Folklórico gives youth the opportunity to experience cultural pride in both physical, physiological, and mental contexts. All dancers spoke of the inspirational elements of folklórico, that it just felt right.

In her research on performance pedagogy, Roberts (2011) offers the concept of dance as a critical site of encounter for dancers and their audience in which the pedagogy reflects a raising of awareness, reflection, and social action. In this way, dance becomes a contested site of social action. This consciousness-raising is evident in the testimonios that discuss the personal awareness that comes as a result of folklórico training. In their introduction, each of the dancers began their testimonios with "I am" poems, which borrows from the critical consciousness and praxis elements of Barrio pedagogy (Romero, Arce, & Cammarota, 2009). Through these poems, the dancers were able to position their identities in a critical moment of self-reflection for the sake of empowering their stories. Dancers are shown a variety of ways in which to find inspiration and cultural pride within themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Folkloristas make sense of the world through our cultura. We touch, we sing, and we dance our way to making sense of the world around us because that is how we have come to experience the world around us. We are born of a cultura that embraces, breathes, ebbs, and flows with the expansion of a canvas, the pages of the libro and the rhythms of our movement. For dancers of folklórico, and specifically for these three hermanas, the struggle to find their self and develop a positive identity as they journeyed through education is easier when you can return to a familiar space. More importantly, systems are much more easily navigated when this familiar space capitalizes on the skills and voice that youth of color have always had, but perhaps have not had as many opportunities to practice outside of their home or family structures. Folklórico provides an additional space outside of the home through which youth can practice and strengthen their valuable cultural capital in an effort to create healthy and robust identities.

Folklórico positions the lived experiences of Mexicanos throughout history as central to the story. Through this cultural art form, dancers are instilled with cultural pride and are

encouraged to continue fostering environments that welcome comunidad, familia, and strengthen auto-estima. As evidenced through the testimonios of the dancers, folklórico then provided additional foundations through which to practice bringing their cultural capital into other environments, such as the workplace.

Folklórico teaches dancers to use their bodies, their face, their eyes, their voice, and their rhythm to learn about the past, to learn about the history that informs their brown skin, their dark hair and eyes, and their Spanglish tongue. Anzaldúa (1987) asserts that this contextualizing of the past within current contexts is key to the development of a mestiza consciousness. This consciousness in turn generates a landscape for people of color to thrive within a third space that is neither here, nor there. This third space exists within the borders of contested and multiple identities. Folklórico resilience testimonios create this third space, in what Anzaldúa would consider a Borderland. I call this series of folklórico resilience testimonios “la receta del testimonio mole,” for it is indeed a recipe for Truth as we know it, and it was introduced by the testimonialists as a tool for sense-making and as a script for understanding testimonio in a way that made sense to them.

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**Documenting the Undocumented:  
Testimonios as a Humanizing Pedagogy**

**Laura Ochoa**

*University of San Francisco*

**Abstract**

This article delves deep into the story of “illegal” immigration, while humanizing the issue of those who experience it and its enduring consequences. In so doing, this study seeks to look beyond the broadly articulated claims about undocumented immigrants and shed light on what it really means to be unauthorized in America. This body of research challenges current immigration discourse through personal accounts, by exposing the areas of immigration where understanding is most needed. I use the methodological approach of *testimonio* to conduct, collect, and analyze four *testimonio* interviews of current undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Towards the endeavor, this article seeks to create a rich narrative of human survival and about the struggles and obstacles undocumented immigrants face within our broken immigration system.

**Introduction**

*Migration is fundamentally the story of the human race from its origins to the present. Migration is an integral aspect of life on this planet. People move to survive. They move in search of food. They move away from danger and death. They move towards opportunities for life. Migration is tied to the human spirit, which seeks adventure, pursues dreams, and finds reasons to hope even in the most adverse circumstances. (Parker, 2011, p. 3)*

For as long as we have known, people have migrated in the world. From one village to another, one city to another, one country to another. The United States of America was founded and settled by immigrants. This is a significant part of the demographic history, known as the land of opportunity where newcomers can, through hard work and determination, achieve better lives for themselves and their families. Numbers of foreigners throughout time have traveled to American shores to escape

famine, poverty, political and religious persecution, environmental degradation, and even war. The country itself has always been a beacon to people from across the globe seeking economic opportunities, safety, freedom, and a chance at the proverbial American Dream.

Up until this day, people continue to cross borders, despite the dangers. Over the years, traversing the U.S-Mexican border illegally has become increasingly dangerous and expensive. Migrants wanting to cross into the United States pay thousands of dollars and face kidnapping, rape, and sometimes even murder at the hands of violent drug cartels and ruthless human smugglers. Others are killed in accidents or die harsh deaths of heat exhaustion and dehydration in remote and perilous stretches of scorching, waterless desert (Sterling, 2010). Nevertheless, the cost of coming to the United States without documents is more often than not a very difficult and traumatic experience for immigrants attempting to cross the border.

### **Invisibility**

*Undocumented immigrants have no way to tell you what they have experienced, or why, or who they are, or what they think. They are by the very nature of their experience, invisible. Most of us pass them by—some of us might say a prayer for them, some of us wish they would return to their countries of origin. But nobody asks them what they think. Nobody stops and simply asks. (Orner, 2008, p. 5)*

Despite their contributions, undocumented immigrants continue to live in the shadows of our society. Much of the public discourse around immigration reform either criminalizes or dehumanizes the undocumented population. Both the media and politicians repeatedly use derogatory terms such as “illegal” and “aliens” when describing those without proper documents. National and local immigration policy has only stigmatized and discriminated against migrants, further alienating them from the majority culture. Today’s debates over immigration simply revolve around economic and political aspects, while ignoring the human perspective. In his introduction to *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, editor Peter Orner (2008) writes, “We hear they are responsible for crime. We hear that they take our jobs, our benefits. We hear they refuse to speak English. But how often do we hear from them?”

(p.7). Journalist, David Bacon (2009) in *Illegal People* also echoes these concerns: “Those who live with Globalization’s consequences are not at the table, and their voices are generally excluded” (p. 14). Lacking from mainstream politics is the human face to the immigration debate, the voices, the stories, and the testimonies of those living “illegally” in the United States.

Immigration is not purely a political issue, but a humanitarian one. The reality on the ground is much more complicated than the simple contrast between legal and illegal that characterizes mainstream policy and discourse. Undocumented immigrants are human beings and integral parts of our society and economy. These men and women cannot be summed up by the jobs they perform, countries they come from or even immigration status. These immigrants are people; people with families, people with dreams, and people with desires. Their voices and testimonies need to be at the forefront of immigration reform discourse and policy. To present only the facts, is to miss those aspects of how migration policy actually affects the people it is intended to regulate. If we are to find our way to a solution on immigration, we must examine the social complexity of the problem and bring the voices of undocumented immigrants out of the shadows of invisibility, silence and shame.

### **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This study is grounded in one main theory: Critical Race Theory (CRT) with an emphasis on Latina/o Critical Race Theory (LatCrit); an overarching branch of Critical Race Theory that examines forms of subordination specifically related to the Latina/o community based on immigration status, language, and ethnicity (Huber, 2010). LatCrit theory, like critical race theory, emphasizes the multidimensionality of oppressions, while claiming that race is central in understanding how individuals experience societal structures and form identities accordingly (Fernandez, 2002). In this context, LatCrit allows for specific examination of the ways Latinas/os experience issues of immigration status, race, language, ethnicity, and culture. Thus, LatCrit enables researchers to better articulate the evolution and challenges of the undocumented, through a more focused analysis of the unique forms of oppression this community encounters.

In this study, CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color, specifically Immigrants of Color, as legitimate, appropriate and critical to understanding, analyzing and teaching about racial subordination. Looking through a CRT lens means exploring some of the critical race methodological and pedagogical approaches that can help one understand the contemporary experiences of Latina/o undocumented immigrants in the United States.

CRT in immigration research unapologetically centers on challenging dominant ideologies and disrupting dominant perceptions, understandings, and knowledge about undocumented immigrants living in this country (Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2012). For this field, CRT contributes to the centrality of the experiences of immigrants through personal counter-histories and narratives, as a tool for empowerment. These stories challenge the governing historical narratives and current political platforms of exclusion and continue to give a voice to those that have been silenced by white supremacy. Finally, Critical Race Theory serves as the unifying framework in this study because it places the oral histories, *cuentos*, and testimonies of immigrants in the contemporary and historical contexts, while exposing racism as a main thread in the fabric of American society.

Guided by a LatCrit framework, this study employs *testimonio* as the primary research methodology. A shared definition of *testimonio* is a revolutionary Latin American literary genre that has been used by individuals to tell a collective story and history of oppression through the narrative of one individual (Beverly, 2004). I account for the "other" voices that continue to be consistently excluded from mainstream discourses in our culture through *testimonio*. A *testimonio* can define a life story; yet, at the same time, it can explain the collective history and spiritual struggle of not only one, but of many. The principle of *testimonio* is the phrase: "*Tu eres mi otro yo*," "you are the other me," our struggle is collective, our voice is one. This form of methodology holds particular importance because it allows researchers to document and inscribe into existence narratives reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often ignored in dominant discourses.

### **“Testimonios”**

The significance of this work lies within the compelling stories—the *testimonios*—of the shadowed lives in American society. From a macro and micro perspective of this work, I examine the experiences of undocumented immigrants as individuals trying to survive and settle into a society that, in many ways, rejects their essential humanity. I explore how the media and legal system both portray and affect this population, and utilize *testimonio* as a tool that challenges the morality of our current immigration discourse that continues to oppress these specific people. This article hopes to put a face to the immigration debate and bring awareness to the large-scale impact immigration reform has on individuals, while also providing an alternative perspective to policy makers and the general public, who might be misinformed about the issue or have conflicting views on immigration. Perhaps the opinions of policy makers and others cannot be changed, but counter-narratives to their views can and should be provided. More importantly, this article aims to move public conversation beyond the polarized frames associated with illegality, and position the voices, experiences, and stories of undocumented immigrants at the forefront of research and analysis.

### **Esperanza**

#### **Emmanuel Garcia**

*"The journey towards you, Lord, is life. To set off... is to die a little. To arrive is never to arrive until one is at rest with you. You, Lord, experienced migration. You brought it upon all men who know what it is to live who seek safe passage to the gates of heaven. You drove Abraham from his land, father of all believers. You shall remember the paths leading to you, the prophets and the apostles. You yourself became a migrant from heaven to earth." -- 'The Migrant's Prayer'*

After my father died in 1999, I had to drop out of school and work for my family. I started working in Mexico City, cleaning taxis and recruiting passengers for the drivers. I was 15 years old at the time. I also started hanging out with the wrong people on the street. I began to buy drugs, do drugs, and even sell drugs. I was hustling and making that money. Before I delved in too deep, my mother suggested I leave Mexico and head to Phoenix, Arizona with my *tío* Jose. She worried and wanted a better life for me. I

think I wanted one too. My uncle Jose was headed to Phoenix to find work. He had three kids and a wife that he needed to provide for. During that time, Mexico didn't have many good jobs available, especially for those without an education. My uncle was a carpenter and had some experience in construction. He loved building and designing things. He once told me that if could have studied, he would have been an architect.

In the winter of 1999, my uncle and I boarded an Estrella Blanca bus in Mexico City to a town further north. We didn't have the money or time to apply for an American visa, so we planned to cross into Texas illegally and travel to Arizona. Before we left, my mother gave me a *librito of Santo Toribio Romo Oraciones del Migrante* (a small prayer book of the Saint for Immigrants); she said it would protect me and bring me back to her. Even now, I carry the little booklet with me, everywhere I go. Our journey to the United States took more than a week. We rode a bus, walked some many miles and hopped on a train for two days. Once at the border, we were smuggled across the line in a van and transported to a drop house in a taxi. The journey itself was horrible. I witnessed a lot of things that I never thought I'd see. I would hear woman and young girls scream at night to "stop," while the coyotes raped and abused them. I saw families and individuals give up mid-way because they couldn't go any further. I remember seeing a lot of things like snakes, scorpions and even human remains as we walked. And we walked for hours that felt like days. I had my feet full of blisters and lost some of my toenails from walking so much. There was a time that I think I started hallucinating. But we kept going...

Once over the border, we were dropped off at the *Rio Grande* in South Texas at night and we swam across. The water seemed freezing at the time. There was a group of about seven of us. When we got to the other side, a car that was painted like a taxi awaited us. We were driven to a house in Texas, where we slept for a few days. There were a lot of people at the house. I am talking like hundreds of people, a lot of women and children, but mostly men. We slept in a room like sardines. On the fifth day, we paid our dues and were on our way. From Texas, my tío and I took a bus to Phoenix that same day. We arrived three days later. I hated Phoenix. The city was hot, noisy, impersonal, and lonely. I started school (even though I didn't understand one word of English), then worked at a local Mexican restaurant bussing tables. When I didn't work,

I was often alone. My uncle worked late and I didn't have any friends. I yearned for my life in Mexico, especially on the holidays. In the United States, the holidays were sterile and lonely with no family celebrations or good home cooked food. Christmas in America was nothing like the festive celebrations in Mexico.

Three years later, I graduated high school and spoke enough English to get a job waiting tables. I wanted to be a computer technician, but the lack of papers kept me from going to college. My life changed, when I met a blue-eyed blonde named Tara. I met Tara while waiting on her and her friends one summer day. She was sixteen, the daughter of an unemployed truck driver and a stay-at-home mom. She lived in a trailer park with her grandmother and two other sisters. Her father was a drunk and her mother, unfortunately, a drug addict. We married six months after we met at the Arizona courthouse. We didn't have a party. We didn't have a cake. The only person who attended our wedding was my uncle Jose. It didn't matter to us. We were happy.

My marriage to Tara didn't change anything. I remained undocumented, of course. Since I entered the United States "illegally," my marriage didn't change my status, but I was fine with it. I had Tara and to me that was all I cared about.

Tara and I rented our own apartment in central Phoenix. She graduated high school and began working at Ross as a cashier. I took a series of low-paying jobs to provide for my wife. I sometimes used her social security to work or bought fake documents to land jobs. I assisted carpenters, painted houses, flipped burgers, and washed dishes to make ends meet. In 2005, I was hired as a painter with a crew that painted public funded projects. I painted hospitals, casinos, fire stations, multimillion dollar homes, restaurants and Phoenix's Sky Harbor airport. I made about \$2,000 a month. It was good money, I thought. That same year, I became a father to my first son Miguel. By then, we owned a condo and two cars. I really felt like I was living the American Dream. I had a job, a home, and a small family of my own.

In 2007, Tara gave birth to our second son Mark. She stopped working permanently and became a stay-at-home mom. With me personally, something started to change. I felt tired a lot of the times. I would call in sick at least once a week. My back ached and I felt nauseated most days. One morning, I couldn't even get out of bed, that Tara drove me to the emergency room. After a series of tests, I was diagnosed

with renal disease. I didn't know what the doctors were talking about when they mentioned kidneys. All I knew was that it seemed serious and I needed help. A social worker explained to me that it was necessary for me to receive emergency treatment if I wanted to live. I couldn't afford the treatment needed. The treatment for renal disease was about \$36,000 per year, not including doctor visits. State laws and my undocumented status, unfortunately, prevented me from receiving any financial assistance. Undocumented immigrants were banned from getting any public funded health services in the state of Arizona. I also had no insurance. For most of my time in the United States, I avoided the doctor and hospital at all costs. If it wasn't serious, I wouldn't go. But sadly, there was no avoiding this.

Later that year, my social worker called me and said that I was eligible for emergency medical service, regardless of my status. Apparently, the state of Arizona was forced to pay for my dialysis indefinitely under a disability law because it was a life-threatening emergency. The doctors told me that I could survive on the dialysis for about five years. But after just a few months, I needed a kidney transplant to stay alive. Of course, the state would not pay for a kidney transplant for an undocumented immigrant like me. Plus, transplants weren't considered life-saving emergencies under health regulations. It was then that I realized the gravity of my illness. I didn't have much time to live without a transplant. I had lost control of my life. Nothing seemed easy now. My wife was working two jobs to keep us afloat. My eyesight was failing and my weight dropped from 250 to 200 pounds. We lost the condo. We lost our cars. With less income and more medical expenses, our financial problems mounted. My American Dream had evaporated. No kidney transplant. No condo. No health insurance. No documents. And soon no money.

After just a year of dialysis, collection agencies called every day. Without me working, we weren't making the bills on time and couldn't afford to live in Phoenix anymore. I decided I was going to move back to Mexico to be with my mother. In Mexico, transplants and dialysis were free. My mother and sister were also willing to donate a kidney to me. Everything seemed more hopeful in Mexico City than in Phoenix. My family and I would take our \$4,000 in savings and move to Mexico. In April of 2009, I went to my last dialysis before leaving for the airport. I knew that if I didn't

have a dialysis before I left, I risked dying. I had a plan. We were going to go to Mexico, get a transplant, save money and come back to Phoenix. That was the plan.

Once in Mexico City, my plans began collapsing. I had no transplant donors. My mother, sister and wife were no match. Because I never worked in Mexico, I didn't qualify for funded medical assistance. I had to pay for my dialysis and medicines. And it was too much. Our savings had dwindled from \$4,000 to \$1,800 because of my medical costs. There were days that I wondered if I was going to make it. With the money we had left, we decided I'd go back to Phoenix to get the medical help I needed. I couldn't get a transplant, but I could still get dialysis. I felt like a fool. Why hadn't I just stayed in Phoenix in the first place? Now I had to go back and leave my family behind, to stay alive. I set out to cross the border through Nogales, Sonora. I called my *tío* Jose to make arrangements to be picked up. I did make it to Phoenix again.

A few months after I arrived, Chandler police and federal agents conducted a raid where I had started working, arresting all undocumented immigrants. At that time, I was working at a local car wash in Phoenix, cleaning cars. The raid terrified me. I was told that the people of Arizona wanted "illegal aliens" gone and I too would soon be deported...I was taken to a county jail at first, then transported here, to this detention center. It didn't take long for them to learn that I was ill. I passed out in a van, as they transported me to the detention facility. Since being detained, my treatments have dropped down to twice a week with little medication. I sleep a lot. I feel worse than before, but try to hang on. I want to see my family again, even if it's for the last time...