

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

---

Mexican American Studies Faculty Publications  
and Presentations

Interdisciplinary Programs and Community  
Engagement

---

2011

## Language and Literacy in the Borderlands: Acting upon the World through Testimonios

Cinthy M. Saavedra

*The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/mas\\_fac](https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/mas_fac)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Saavedra, C. M (2011). Language and literacies in the borderlands: Children acting upon the world through testimonios. *Language Arts*, 88(4), 261-269.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Interdisciplinary Programs and Community Engagement at ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mexican American Studies Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact [justin.white@utrgv.edu](mailto:justin.white@utrgv.edu), [william.flores01@utrgv.edu](mailto:william.flores01@utrgv.edu).

Cinthya M. Saavedra

## Language and Literacy in the Borderlands: Acting upon the World through *Testimonios*

*The use of the Latin American literary genre known as testimonio is presented as a new way to work with/for children in the borderlands.*

The first time I read Latina/o literature was in my “Mexican American Writers in the US” course as a junior in college back in 1995. I remember reading works by Sandra Cisneros, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Ana Castillo, to name a few. My first thoughts were “Wow, *no lo puedo creer*, you can write and express yourself this way!” followed by “The world makes sense.” For the first time in my *vida*, I could relate to “American” literature, not because it had words and phrases in Spanish (and many of the pieces were actually written all in English), but because they wrote about the struggles, *tensiones*, and ironically the beauty of straddling multiple worlds, languages, and identities. I also connected with many of the authors who wrote about their resistance to traditional gender roles and ways of being *mujer*. I wondered with some anger why I was denied this literature growing up in Texas.

As I worked on my graduate studies in education, I began to make connections between my miseducation and that of other immigrants, minorities, and marginalized students. I realized that it wasn’t just the fault of teachers, but an educational system that had failed to recognize, embrace and, more important, center the *vidas* of our *estudiantes* (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas; 2006; Elenes, 1997; Freire, 1998) in its theories of teaching and learning. I also began to question the neat categorization of groups. After all, this was not about teaching *to* Latina/os and other minorities as groups that can be easily categorized. This was about centering the *experiencias* and *cuerpos* of all students in all facets of the curricula. The disconnect I felt was also due to a lack of attention to multiple *experiencias* transpiring in my classroom and community as a child, adolescent, and even as a young adult in college.

In this article, I want to introduce the Latin American literary genre known as *testimonio* (Beverley, 2005; Elenes, 2000; Jara & Vidal, 1986) as a way to expand our current understandings of language arts, especially as it is applied to immigrant, border crossers, and transnational students. I draw from Chicana/Latina feminism (Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1994; Cruz, 2001; Elenes, 1997; Pérez, 1999; Saldivar-Hull, 2000; Villenas, 1996) as a theoretical framework that inspired my search for *nuevas posibilidades* in the margins and in the different places that pedagogies and theories can be found. I use the *movimiento* of writing in English and Spanish because it captures the *vidas*, *frontera* realities, and contexts of myself and the many Latina/os, transnationals, and border crossers young and old (Sánchez, 2001). I also think about the power of producing and reading academic work in multiple and hybrid languages, as well encouraging all our students (pre-k–12+) to draw from their *vidas y experiencias* in expressing themselves in the best way they can. I utilize *testimonio* to share my own story about language and literacy as a first-generation immigrant from Nicaragua, bilingual teacher in Texas, and an academic in the field of early childhood ESL/bilingual education.

I begin with a brief explanation of Chicana/Latina feminist theoretical framework, then introduce the Latin American literary genre *testimonio*. I weave *testimonios* of three moments in my life to exemplify language and literacy across, among, and between my borderlands. Finally, I present *nuevas posibilidades* for using *testimonio* with children as a tool to center their stories, *experiencias*, and *identidades*; these examples demonstrate how *testimonio* continues the projects of critical pedagogies that stem from the body of knowledge about young children in the classroom. In this way, we allow movements and shifts in the language arts curricula of the 21st century.

## CHICANA/LATINA FEMINISM

For Chicana/Latina feminists, it is imperative to question taken-for-granted theories and pedagogies that have constructed our identities and the politics that surrounds our lives. In order to do so, Chicana/Latina feminists challenge dominant conceptions and productions of theory, knowledge, and pedagogy (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). For example, they highlight different pedagogical spaces, such as the conversations at the kitchen table that transpire between mothers and daughters, illuminating the wisdom that is exchanged in these settings (González, 2001; Trinidad Galvan, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001). Chicana/Latina projects problematize how the “West (or North) continues to articulate knowledge for the rest of the Americas and the world, constructing the colonized (Gandhi, 1998) or the brown, and queer ‘other’” (Villenas, 2006, p. 660). The recognition of positionality and of the multiple and fluid identities that are embodied in and through the brown/Chicana body are also central themes, as well as tools for theorizing (Tellez, 2005; Cruz, 2001; Villenas, 1996). Consequently, new possibilities for constructing theory, knowledge, and pedagogy have been birthed from the experiences of living, working, and teaching in the literal and metaphorical borderlands. These critical illuminations have led to new ways of reimagining our work and lives.

It is this kind of scholarship *que me inspira* to keep excavating more deeply for knowledges and pedagogies that are focused on social justice. As such, it forms my theoretical framework in this article. I believe that when we turn research and knowledge upside down, we can conceive new and unimagined possibilities with children (Cannella & Viruru, 2004) and acknowledge the fragility of our taken-for-granted truths, thereby opening new spaces for reinvention and creation.

But in order to change the world, I must change myself (Anzaldúa, 1987). For me, this has meant recognizing of the history and conditions of people of color in the United States and seeking and forging new alliances. Anzaldúa believed, “[T]o the immigrant *mexicano* and the recent arrivals we must teach our history. The 80 million *mexicanos* and the Latinos from Central and South America must know of our struggles” (1987, p. 87)—the struggle of colonized subjects

in the United States. Chicana/Latina feminist interrogations offer new insights into the political project of schooling. Through Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogy and research, we can forge new ways to (un)learn dominant forms/norms of existing. I contend that *testimonios* can serve as an avenue to explore our common/different politics and *nuevas posibilidades* in the language arts curriculum.

## TESTIMONIO

*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, 2005; Elenes, 2000; Jara & Vidal, 1986). Usually, these narratives are told to someone with access

to take the *testimonio* narrative to a larger audience and bring awareness to conditions faced by oppressed peoples. One famous example is *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984). The 1992 Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Rigoberta Menchú recounted her story of struggle and survival while growing up in Guatemala. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* exemplified the purpose of *testimonio*, which was to connect Menchú’s narrative account of events, life circumstances, and struggles with that of the indigenous experience of repression and violence by the Guatemalan military with support from the United States (Beverly, 2005; Carey-Webb, 1996). Menchú’s *testimonio* brought critical attention to the conditions of Guatemalan people.

*Testimonios* have been a powerful way for Chicana/Latinas to share their stories and, more important, to find solidarity with others who share in their struggles (Castillo, 1994; Elenes, 2000; Flores & Garcia, 2009; Saldivar-Hull, 2000). According to Elenes (2000), *testimonios* problematize the universal individualistic subject that is endemic in Western canon and ideology. She goes on to note the particulars of *testimonios*, “these embodied narratives explain the world through the vantage point of the oppressed and thus are the product of situated knowledge . . .” (2000, p. 115). The narratives produced through *testimonio* become a “map of consciousness” (p. 115) for people who have been constructed by patriarchal and colonialist relations of domination and subordination. As such, *testimonio* as written

**Testimonios have been a powerful way for Chicana/Latinas to share their stories, and to find solidarity with others who share in their struggles.**

and performed texts in the language arts curricula have important implications for marginalized children, *los deslenguados*/without tongues (Anzaldúa, 1987; Demas & Saavedra, 2004).

## MEMORY AS LANGUAGE/LITERACY

As a first-generation immigrant, reading and hearing about the struggles of other first-, second-, and/or ninth-generation immigrants/citizens have allowed me a critical space to share in that struggle, to become aware and “to act not react,” as Anzaldúa posits (1987, p. 79). What follows are three *testimonios* from my life. They relate to the difficulties and challenges of being an immigrant second-language learner, a bicultural/bilingual teacher, and a Chicana/Latina feminist in a university’s teacher education program. What is attractive about *testimonio* is the concept of agency. Beverley claims, “[W]hat *testimonio* obliges us to confront is not only the subaltern as a self-represented victim, but also as the agent—in that very act of representation . . .” (2005, p. 553). *Testimonios* are “both an art and a strategy of subaltern memory” (p. 553). In other words, *testimonios* can serve as a cultural mode of expression as well as a survival strategy for marginalized populations.

### Marginalizing Language and Identity in My Childhood

When I think back on my childhood in Texas, many emotions transpire. *Me acuerdo de los momentos felices* with my family. I remember our “vacations,” which were driving seven hours to visit my maternal grandparents in Brownsville, Texas. Dressing up to dine out at my Papa Bernardo’s favorite restaurant—El Luby’s Cafeteria. *Me acuerdo* of all the philosophizing my brothers and I did at nighttime. We would wonder if, when we got up the next morning, everything we had en *los Estados Unidos* would be gone; we wondered if we might all be just sharing a dream of living in the United States but would instead wake up in Honduras—the last place we lived before *el viaje al norte*. Borderlands real and imagined were part of our conversations.

Mixed emotions arise when I think of my education. I remember constantly hiding my Nicaraguan heritage and my Spanish language in schools. In Brownsville, it wasn’t so bad; many

people spoke Spanish. Many teachers spoke it, and the kids in my second-grade class all spoke it as well. In 1982, when I moved to Uvalde, segregation was alive and well. Uvalde is a small town of 14,000 about 80 miles southwest of San Antonio. Although the schools were legally integrated, the classrooms were divided by reading levels, which also seemed to mean they were divided by skin color. I remember standing in front of my “advanced” students and thinking that Uvalde seemed to have more blonde kids than I remembered from back in Brownsville.

I was placed with a monolingual English teacher. In fact, I was the only child of color in that class, the only one with knowledge of two languages and biliterate. Yet to fit in, I hid my *cultura y lenguaje*, my strengths. Plus, being a light-skinned Latina and passing for “Spaniard” or “Italian” any day, it was easy to go underground with my identity and language. It wasn’t because of anything overt in school that I hid my Nicaraguan identity after only being in the US for a year and

a half. It was probably what was *not* said that encouraged me to go underground with who I was. My most vivid memory of this is my mother speaking to me in Spanish with our *Nicaraguense* accent at the grocery store, “Michelle, *anda agarrame unas latas de maiz*” (go get some cans of corn). I would freeze, look around, and see if I knew anyone in the grocery aisle. Then, I would pretend not to hear her. I hated when she did that, exposing my secret in public, even using my other name. Reflecting back, I now think that if schools had embraced the multiple identities, language, and literacies that were always present, perhaps I wouldn’t have hidden mine.

### Resisting Colonizing Identities and Bodies with My Bilingual Third-Grade Students

As a bilingual third-grade teacher in Austin, I made concerted efforts to embrace, respect, and center my students’ *experiencias* in the classroom. Unfortunately, my efforts were often thwarted by the emphasis on accountability, standards, and high-stakes testing. I spent a considerable amount of time with other colleagues administering benchmarks, assessing reading and language in Spanish and English. The demands of testing overwhelmed us. I feel that I cheated my

I remember constantly hiding my Nicaraguan heritage and my Spanish language in schools.

*estudiantes*. Often times, I couldn't integrate my Chicana feminist pedagogies because I had to adhere to masculinist versions of teaching and learning to prove to the district that my students could produce acceptable scores. The responsibility was placed on the teacher, students, and parents—the least powerful in the educational system. There were instances in which a student did well in class but did not perform well on the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills). That discrepancy would raise a red flag for parents, administrators, and uninformed school observers, so we literally had to lower that child's grades! Just thinking about this makes me angry. No wonder I left the k–12 classroom.

But there were *momentos de rebeldia*. These rebellious moments came when I listened and centered the *experiencias* of my students. I remember one time when a group of girls were talking about the *telenovelas* (Spanish soap operas). They were discussing how cool it would be if their kids would look like one of the protagonists who was blonde and had blue eyes. I couldn't help but think back to when I was growing up in Nicaragua and one of my uncles-in-law would joke all the time about me being "brown." Now, even though I am light skinned, I do tan easily and have black hair and dark eyes. His daughters, on the other hand, have hazel eyes and dirty blonde hair. Somehow to him I was less than his daughters because of my *morena* look.

Hearing my students' discussion, I interrupted them and asked, "Why do you want your kids to have blonde hair with blue eyes?" Without any hesitation one answered, "Because they are more beautiful." Pain and sorrow shot through my body. I thought to myself, "Colonization has taught us well to hate ourselves—our brown, black skin, our brown eyes, our bodies." I knew I could not allow my third graders to leave that year with those colonizing thoughts about themselves, their bodies.

I decided to introduce eight- and nine-year-olds to the concept of colonization. I would hold 10–15-minute mini-lectures about European colonization. Developmentally appropriate dogma would have us frown upon the idea of lecturing to children. However, I proceeded in this matter for several weeks. My students responded

overwhelming well. They were so attentive. Many would come in the morning and ask, "*Maestra, vamos hacer social studies today?*" I can't claim for sure why they connected, but I can guess. I think that they appreciated the honesty and, in some way, it made sense to them, to their current contexts, to their struggles of fitting in a new country as first-generation immigrants. In a way, it was my own void I was filling—the void left by an educational system that attempted to strip my multiple identities and languages. I think I would have loved for someone to speak to me the way I spoke to my *estudiantes*. I would have loved for someone to point out what was in my subconscious, my body, my spirit.

### Language and Identity in the University Classroom

In the academy, I'm in the margins of theory. My politics are alive and well, and at every possible moment, I challenge and question. These challenges and questions are manifested through

the marginalized knowledge I bring to my pedagogy, the content I teach, and the lenses that frame my *investigaciones*. However, there is a delicate balance and dance I must

perform. My education was Western, and years of living under Western thought is hard to undo and unlearn. Maybe *no puedo* rid myself of it completely. My *ganas* and disposition only go so far.

The resistance to any new kind of rethinking and reimagining is debilitating, if not futile, when one tries to (un)learn Western research and teaching. Research's and teaching's scientific roots, spirit, and rituals run deep, and constantly (re)appear like *fantasmas* in a haunted house—when you least expect it. When I least expect it, I search for truths, which once "found" only serve to limit our multiple ways of living and existing. When I least expect it, I become a colonizer and reinscribe colonialist relations of domination/subordination. When I least expect it, I construct *los otros*. When I least expect it, I embody whiteness, like a *fantasma—el Casper* the friendly ghost. And when I least expect it, I vivisect not only my mind from my body but my research participants as well. All this happens while attempting to perform *criticalist* research and teaching! What keeps me going is the search

"Colonization has taught us well to hate ourselves—our brown, black skin, our brown eyes, our bodies."

for what Pérez (1999) coined the decolonial imaginary. Pérez believed that the decolonial imaginary occurs in the interstitial spaces of the colonial and postcolonial, the interplay between the dominant and the marginal. New knowledges and identities are created that move beyond the domination/subordination way of functioning and existing, thereby creating a third space where “otherness” is decolonized. As Chicanas, Latinas, transnationals, and women of color, we are living examples that power is not all-encompassing but is renegotiated and reconstructed in our lives, helping us to forge ahead to reinvent our communities and identities.

For my university students in my Second Language Acquisition in the Classroom course, it means exposing them to critical readings on hybrid languages, marginalized languages, and bilingualism, and not just the linear clinical view of learning a second language decontextualized of histories and bodies. I engage them in discussions of what it means to *have* a language. I infuse a broad understanding of language and its ties to political, social, and historical underpinnings. Furthermore, I want my students to see language and identity as twin skin. I also want them to see language as a living organism that is not predetermined and defined but always shifting and changing. To have language is to be in the process of becoming and being. It is not a final end point, but rather a vehicle for making sense of the world around us.

I provide my students many examples of my own *testimonios* about language and literacy. I solicit from their memories, times in their education where their language and literacy practices were marginalized. Many students instantly connect to the struggles that second language learners might encounter in the US classroom. Most of my students are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and many travel to different countries for their two-year mission. What I first saw as a roadblock, I began to see with a new lens—the lens that invites us to consider how we renegotiate and reconstruct dominant ideologies. By asking my students to think about their struggles with language and literacy in their missions, we find a common experience that for a moment transcends our many and multiple differences—a decolonial moment, perhaps.

## **NUEVAS POSIBILIDADES: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

In this portion of the article, I want to offer some suggestions for classroom pedagogy. In each section, I connect the theoretical concepts of *testimonio* (Beverly, 2005) with ideas for classroom implementation. I present them in this way so as to not vivisection the larger theoretical implications and potential that *testimonio* can offer in our classroom. Allowing students to voice their stories is much more than just permitting them to speak of relevant experiences. If we really listen, if we really hear, we can turn language arts on its head, decenter our adult conceptions of language/literacy, and create *nuevas posibilidades* for teaching and learning in the language arts curricula.

### **Beginning with Our Own Story/ Nuestra Historia**

As teachers, we have been taught to vivisection ourselves from our teaching. In sharing my educational *testimonios*, I recognized how connected my pedagogy was and is to my own experiences, my own story, and my body. I urge

I urge teachers que empiezen con su historia/begin with your story.

teachers *que empiezen con su*

*historial*/begin with your story. Learn about our own positionality, excavate our privilege, our marginalization, our language and cultural borderlands, and how we can connect with our students in authentic ways. Although a simple idea, it is a very difficult journey to self-examine, especially when we must confront our multiple privileges. For example, in graduate school, I had to come to terms with my middle class status and my light skin. So perhaps before asking students to share their stories, we may want to find out our own and share ours first in order to create a space of trust and authentic dialogue. Showing our humanity is perhaps our hardest task as teachers.

### **Allowing Children to Act upon the World through *Testimonio***

If we read our current sociopolitical and global context, we can't help but be witness to the mass movement, migration, and displacement of people all over the world (Suarez-Orozco & Qin-Hillard, 2004) due to the “growing globalization of the world capitalist economy” (Acosta-Belen & Bose, 2000, p. 1113). This growing

globalization is problematic on many levels, but it does offer an opportunity for connecting. For example, as students create their *testimonios*, spaces open up for voicing their story and, at the same time, making connections to the sociopolitical and historical conditions that have brought them together. Our first-generation students of color as well as those who may be ninth-generation “Americans” of color find themselves in complex spaces that are riddled with prejudices and self-division, spaces that warrant careful attention and problem posing—a reading of the word and world (Freire, 1998)—in the classroom. This would help our students recognize the long history of oppression in the US history of immigration. Pacheco (2009) urged us to allow students to tap into their political–historical knowledge; *testimonios* would also permit students to be at the center of knowledge, producers of culture with recognition that they are the margin at the center (Beverley, 1992).

### Children Finding Belonging/Community/Solidarity

Beverley (2005) claimed that *testimonio* is an “affirmation of authority of personal experience” (p. 548). Our students are subjects, not objects, of education. Allowing a space where students feel they have authority of personal experiences also means they can become speaking subjects. But this is not to say that they are individualistic subjects. Beverley notes that the speaking subject in *testimonio* is not “separate from the subaltern group or class situation that it narrates” (p. 548). In other words, as children narrate their particular experiences, they also find solidarity of experiences, identities, and bodies with other students and even their teachers.

In our classrooms, we can encourage students to explore with each other the reasons for coming to the US; the conditions of their neighborhoods, now and/or at the time of arrival; obstacles they face(d), whether it was their parents’, grandparents’, or great grandparents’, etc. Have students compare and contrast their stories with those of their classmates in order to make connections. Here, students can begin to find common bonds, despite their many differences. This offers an opportunity for connecting “students

to an increasingly global understanding of themselves and others” (Carey-Web, 1996, p. 5) that could possibly transcend geopolitical borders and belonging—a decolonial moment.

### Children Theorizing the Word/World

The concept of language and literacy *development* is so engrained in all facets of education that we probably could not think of doing language arts if it weren’t for the sole purpose of scaffolding children’s development in language and literacy. But if we just stop for a moment and entertain the notion that students are already engaged in many language and literacy activities (Haneda, 2006), would our language arts time be different? Could we then envision different possibilities for language and literacy with children?

Because children are positioned as underdeveloped and outside of sociopolitical and historical contexts, adults feel compelled to teach them “how” to live, maneuver, and experience such complexities. They are never complete, never whole. Children are marginalized and children of color are the ultimate subalterns. *Testimonios* would give children a space to construct their understanding and interpretations of their world, their stories. Their *testimonios* act as a counter-narrative to adult hegemony—that is, the fact that adults have created a world where children are the perpetual modernist project (Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Smith, 2003). Children are always seen as incomplete, uncivilized, and in need of intervention so that they can become the self-sustained, controlled, and “rational” adult.

In this linear and progress-oriented adult world, children will always have particular “needs” (curricular, social, psychological, etc.) defined by us (adults), but never in relation to how we live complicated lives *with* children (Cannella, 1998).

The act of constructing knowledge from the bottom seems counterintuitive to educational theories that at their core, and even with constructivist undertones (Earick, 2009), still regard children as needing a plethora of experiences, activities, and understandings before they are “ready to learn.” In our Western construction of childhood, a child is seen as ready to learn when he or she exhibits particular skills and knowledge that are derived from the way White middle class families

In our classrooms, we can encourage students to explore with each other the reasons for coming to the US; the conditions of their neighborhoods, now and/or at the time of arrival; obstacles they face(d).

function with their children. Children not exhibiting those skills are classified as “not ready to learn.” However, if we take a closer look at the *testimonios*, we can open up room for not only challenging these rigid definitions of “learners,” but also problematizing what counts as valued skills for learning.

Borrowing from Gramsci (1971), Beverley (2005) asserted that the testimonial narrator functions as an organic intellectual who is able to speak by means of testimony. Children constructing their *testimonios* become speaking subjects of places that have been created as unspeakable—the margins of the self-actualized, contained, balanced adult. Only they can speak of their understanding of the world and their shifting identities as they cross borders and straddle multiple worlds. It is in these moments that children can perhaps tell us (adults) how they negotiate meaning in their lives and what important skills they have learned from their families and communities.

Can we imagine our language and literacy curricula centering children, particularly those who are marginalized, as organic intellectuals? *Testimonio* then becomes a useful tool not only for exploring language and literacy with children, but, more important, it becomes a needed tool as it “displaces the centrality of intellectuals and what they [adults] recognize as culture—including history, literature . . .” (Beverley, 2005, p. 554) and language arts. Moreover, if we adults *listen* to the *testimonios* of our students, it “enacts in its production and reception a relation of solidarity between ourselves [adults] . . . and subaltern social subjects [children]” (p. 554). As we hear their *testimonios*, we can also connect with them and address the inequalities they might be experiencing in our schools.

For example, as a child, my awareness of difference could have been a topic of discussion in my class. It could have allowed me to be an organic intellectual at age 8! Voicing my interpretations while at the same time making sense of what I was experiencing in this country . . . I would have been theorizing on my own terms. Facilitating these types of activities would have allowed me—and also other students—to negotiate how our diverse localities produce different readings of the world. We were capable of

examining our lives, in our terms, with our own language and bodies.

### THE POLITICAL ACT OF REMEMBERING THROUGH *TESTIMONIO*

The very act of looking outside the United States for new discourses of resistance and pedagogy is a form of transnational feminism. This type of transnational feminism sees our global struggles as intimately connected. Sánchez (2001) contended that transnationalism “offers ‘flexibility’ and movement” (p. 378). My transnational *identidad* that incorporates Chicana

feminist politics keeps me on a continuous search for ways of rethinking our work with children (Saavedra, in press)—in particular, children who are immigrant, transnational,

Latina/o, and marginalized in the schools for not fitting into dogmatic notions of “learner.” What Chicana feminist scholarship has taught me is not to forget my roots (Castillo, 1994) and to look for theories in unlikely spaces (Trinidad Galvan, 2001; Villenas & Moreno, 2001).

I use Chicana feminism as a way to revolutionize the story of childhood in order to reimagine *nuevas posibilidades* for working with children (Saavedra, 2009). One way to revolutionize the story of childhood is to step outside the US and its hegemonic views of teaching and learning. I’m inspired by Latin American revolutionary pedagogies and struggles, such as the Zapatista movement, to find a different story about working with children. One important lesson I’ve learned from the Zapatista movement is the belief that we can imagine a world where different worlds are possible. I contend that *testimonios* in the classroom could offer such a possibility. *Testimonio* could be an example of how students can engage in transnational projects that can revolutionize belonging, identity, and citizenship, as well as our language arts curricula. Do our language and literacy practices need revolutionizing in the 21st century? I believe so, especially with young children.

*Testimonio* can also be seen as an important extension to critical pedagogy. Because the political act of remembering is crucial in *testimonio*, it is a way to reconnect language with body and consciousness—a way to start from the language and understanding of the oppressed (Freire,

Can we imagine our language and literacy curricula centering children, particularly those who are marginalized, as organic intellectuals?



1970), in this case with marginalized children. Thiong'o (2009) posited that "memory and consciousness are inseparable" (p. 40). Thus, the very act of asking immigrant children to remember their stories, narratives, and histories becomes a political journey to recover and offer new possibilities for decolonizing our pedagogy, theory, and body. Asking our students to share their *testimonios* is an invitation to retrieve memory and thus language in their own terms.

Because children then become the center of this pedagogy through their *testimonio*, it decenters the teacher, and the student/teacher role is reversed. Students become the center of knowledge and teachers become students. As Freire (1970) stated, "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher–student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students" (p. 53). In using the concept of *testimonios*, we relinquish our authority as transmitters of knowledge and allow our students' stories to teach us in their own terms, in their own language.

These complex and difficult stories and *testimonios* must be heard, shared, and contemplated further. *Testimonios* become extremely important, allowing us to work more effectively with English language learners and with immigrant and minority communities. *Testimonios* of our marginalized students help those of us interested in working with immigrant and minority children in the US approach our work with more diligence about the complex ways children use their knowledge, language, and experiences as tools to navigate in their new communities (Orellana, 2001).

As we increase our understanding, we may offer ways to build on the strengths of immigrant children, rather than dwell on the cultural-specific skills they may lack (Campano, 2007; Saavedra, in press). Our immigrant, transnational, and minority children are not just passive language minorities that need fixing. They are actors and agents in their families and communities. Immigrant children are intimately tied to cultural practices, sociohistorical conditions, and political contexts. It is in centering experiences in the schools and in their new communities that we can gain a deeper understanding of what it means to holistically educate/*educar* our children. Ultimately, I hope to inspire the notion that border crossers and transnationals have the power

to decolonize language and literacy in the 21st century.

## References

- Acosta-Belen, E., & Bose, C. (2000). U.S. Latina and Latin American Feminism: Hemispheric Encounters. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, 25, 1113–1119. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Beverly, J. (1992). The margin at the center: On *testimonio* (testimonial narrative). In J. Watson & S. Smith (Eds.), *Decolonizing the subject: The politics of gender, in women's autobiography* (pp. 94–118). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Beverly, J. (2005). *Testimonio*, subalternity, and narrative authority. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.) (pp. 547–556). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Campano, G. (2007). Honoring student stories. *Educational Leadership*, 65(2), 48–54.
- Cannella, G. S. (1998). Early childhood education: A call for the construction of revolutionary images. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *Curriculum: Toward new identities* (pp. 157–184). New York: Garland Publishing.
- Cannella, G. S., & Viruru, R. (2004). *Childhood and postcolonization: Power, education, and contemporary practice*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Carey-Webb, A. (1996). Transforming voices. In A. Carey-Webb & S. Benz (Eds.), *Teaching and testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American classroom* (pp. 3–18). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Castillo, A. (1994). *Massacre of the dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Cruz, C. (2001). Towards an epistemology of the brown body. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14, 657–669.
- Delgado Bernal, D., Elenes, C. A., Godinez, F. E., & Villenas, S. (Eds.). (2006). *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminist perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Demas, E., & Saavedra, C. M. (2004). Reconceptualizing language advocacy: Weaving a postmodern *mestizaje* image of language. In K. Mutua & B. Swadener's (Eds.), *Decolonizing research in cross-cultural contexts: Critical personal narratives* (pp. 215–234). New York: SUNY Press.
- Earick, M. E. (2009). *Racially equitable teaching: Beyond the whiteness of professional development for early childhood educators*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Elenes, C. A. (1997). Reclaiming the borderlands: Chicana/o identity, difference, and critical pedagogy. *Educational Theory*, 47, 375.
- Elenes, C. A. (2000). Chicana feminist narratives and the politics of the self. *Frontiers*, 21(3), 105–123.
- Flores, J., & Garcia, S. (2009). Latina testimonios: A reflexive, critical analysis of a 'Latina space' at a predominantly white campus. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 12, 155–172.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (Myra Bergman Ramos, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

- Gandhi, L. (1998). *Postcolonial theory: A critical introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- González, F. E. (2001). Haciendo que hacer—Cultivating a mestizaje worldview and academic achievement: Braiding cultural knowledge into educational research, policy, and practice. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*, 641–656.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Haneda, M. (2006). Becoming literate in a second language: Connecting home, community, and school literacy practices. *Theory into Practice 45*, 337–345.
- Jara, R., & Vidal, H. (Eds.). (1986). *Testimonio y literatura*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literatures.
- Menchú, R. (1984). *I, Rigoberta Menchú. An Indian woman in Guatemala* (E. Burgos-Debray, Ed., A. Wright, Trans.). London: Verso.
- Orellana, F. M. (2001). The work kids do: Mexican and Central American immigrant children's contributions to households and schools in California. *Harvard Educational Review, 71*, 366–389.
- Pacheco, M. (2009). Expansive learning and Chicana/o and Latina/o students' political-historical knowledge. *Language Arts, 87*, 18–28.
- Pérez, E. (1999). *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Saavedra, C. M. (2009, April). Chicana qualitative research as political challenge to neoliberalism. Paper presented at American Educational Research Association annual meeting, San Diego, CA.
- Saavedra, C. M. (in press). De-academizing early childhood research: Wanderings of a Chicana/Latina feminist researcher. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 10*(4).
- Saavedra, C. M., & Nymark, E. (2008). Borderland-mestizaje feminism: The new tribalism. In N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Lincoln, & L. Tuhiwai-Smith (Eds.), *Handbook of critical and indigenous methodologies* (pp 255–276). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Saldívar-Hull, S. (2000). *Feminism on the border: Chicana gender, politics, and literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sánchez, P. (2001). Adopting transnationalism theory and discourse: Making space for a transnational Chicana. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 22*, 375–381.
- Smith, D. G. (2003). Curriculum and teaching face globalization. In W. F. Pinar (Ed.), *International handbook of curriculum research* (pp. 35–51). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Suarez-Orozco, M. M., & Qin-Hilliard, D. B. (Eds.). (2004). *Globalization: Culture and education in the new millennium*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Tellez, M. (2005). Doing research at the borderlands: Notes from a Chicana feminist ethnographer. *Chicana/Latina Studies, 4*(2), 46–70.
- Thiong'o, N. (2009). *Something torn and new: An African renaissance*. New York: BasicCivitas Books.
- Trinidad Galvan, R. (2001). Portraits of *mujeres desjuiciadas*: Womanist pedagogies of the everyday, the mundane, and the ordinary. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*, 603–621.
- Villenas, S. (1996). The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity, marginalization, and co-optation in the field. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*, 711–731.
- Villenas, S. (2006). Latina/Chicana feminist postcolonialities: Un/tracking educational actors' interventions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 19*, 659–672.
- Villenas, S., & Moreno, M. (2001). To valerse por si misma between race, capitalism, and patriarchy: Latina mother-daughter pedagogies in North Carolina. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*, 671–687.

**Cynthia M. Saavedra** is assistant professor of Bilingual/ESL/Multicultural Education at Utah State University in Logan.

## NCTE LITERACY EDUCATION ADVOCACY DAY 2011: APRIL 28

Join NCTE members from across the nation for NCTE's Literacy Education Advocacy Day on Thursday, April 28, 2011. NCTE members attending Advocacy Day will learn the latest about literacy education issues at the federal level and have a chance to interact with people highly involved with those issues. See <http://www.ncte.org/action/advocacyday> for details.