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Making Curriculum from Scratch: *Testimonio* in an Urban Classroom

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Testimonio, as a genre of the dispossessed, the migrant, and the queer, is a response to larger discourses of nation-building and has the potential to undermine the larger narratives that often erase and make invisible the expendable and often disposable labor and experiences of immigrants, the working class, African Americans, and others. This essay explores the use of *testimonio* in urban classrooms in Los Angeles and its use as a mediating tool in critical thinking and community based learning projects. I argue that there is a pedagogy to *testimonio* that is intersubjective and accessible and that, under certain circumstances, re-centers and revitalizes curriculum in this era of standardization and accountability, a hearkening to social justice movements that begin in education.

From our different personal, political, ethnic, and academic trajectories, we arrived at the importance of *testimonio* as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure. (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 2)

Before I became an education researcher, I was a radical teacher, a street outreach worker with LGBTQ youth, an HIV educator, a community organizer, and an activist. With this kind of mission came the commitment and the responsibility to work with and from the communities of people in ways that re-centered voice and story. In my work with young people, I thought about the best and most inclusive ways to develop sustainable leadership, reflexivity, and critical thinking, tools that helped the young people with whom I worked to think praxically and to begin analyzing our own and our sisters', brothers', and others' lived experiences. As a teacher, I wanted to make sense of what was happening in my own and the students' families, communities, and within our own bodies. We were practicing what Moraga (1981) calls "a theory in the flesh" (p. 23) and armed with Freire, Anzaldúa, Marx, safe sex education, liberation theology, harm reduction, and community-based learning, we began by interrogating the lived experience of our bodies, the stories that our bodies tell us through our scars and lesions (Cruz, 2001). In our sharing of critical stories, we practiced radical storytelling in the classroom. In this essay I examine the use of *testimonio* in urban classrooms with at-risk and LGBTQ youth, where the process of radical storytelling starts with an interrogation of our bodies. I begin with my story as a teacher in Los Angeles, California, one week after the civil unrest in Spring 1992.

I LISTEN, YOU SPEAK, AND WE HONE A REPRESENTATIVE VOICE

Yudice (1985) defines *testimonio* as:

an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of the situation (war, revolution, oppression). Emphasizing popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as a representative of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history. (p. 4)

Testimonio, for Yudice, becomes the narrative of the “dispossessed”—the criminal, the queer, a child, a woman who has experienced sexual violence, a community that has organized and talked back to a history of substandard educational opportunities, an African American, the indigenous, a migrant, or a narrator who is illiterate. It is a story of a subject who has experienced or witnessed great trauma, oppression, forced migration, or violence, or of a subject who has participated in a political movement for social justice. Beverley (1993) describes *testimonio* as the “dialogical confrontation” (p. 41) with the global institutions that structure and maintain the dominance of hegemonic discourse. *Testimonio*, for Beverley, is a storytelling that challenges larger political and historic discourses and undermines other official knowledge meant to silence or erase local histories of resistance. Jameson (Stephanson, 1987) notes that while testimonial narratives involve displacement of the “master subject” of modernist literature, they do so paradoxically via the insistence on the first-person voice and proper name of the testimonial narrator:

I always insist on a third possibility beyond the old bourgeois ego and the schizophrenic subject of our organization society today: a collective subject, decentered but not schizophrenic. It emerges in certain kinds of storytelling that can be found in Third World literature, in testimonial literature, in gossip and rumors and things of this kind . . . It is decentered since the stories you tell there as an individual subject don’t belong to you; you don’t control them in the way the master subject of modernism would. But you don’t just suffer them in the schizophrenic isolation of the first world subject of today. (Jameson, cited in Stephanson, 1987, p. 45)

When stories you tell do not belong to you, *testimonio* begins to move a reader away from an epistemology of a first world narrative to an other world narrative, where the “I” of the speaker is not configured as a “hero.” Instead, the speaker is configured as one of a community of people who have suffered great trauma. The “I” of autobiography, of nation-building narratives, is not the intent of the testimonialist. The purpose of testifying is to talk back to these larger and often subsuming histories, to carefully craft truth-telling that is polyphonous in its voice and political in its intent. It is asking for a “faithful witnessing”¹ (Lugones, 2003, p. 7) from an audience or a listener, a positioning that may or may not be achievable.

One of the controversies surrounding the *testimonio*, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984), derives from what Sommer (1991) argues is the rejection of the reader’s “imperialist substitution” of herself with the narrator of the story. Unlike fiction’s process of “*ser ella*” [being the speaker], *testimonio* lends itself toward solidarity with the subject—“*estar con la hablante*” [being with the narrator] (Sommer, 1991, p. 129). Fiction and literature ask for a suspension of beliefs, while *testimonio* asks a reader to position herself as a listener and witness. When Stoll (1999) critiques Rigoberta Menchu’s *testimonio* as unreliable, he is critiquing Menchu’s thesis that without the indigenous guerrilla soldier there would have been no war in Guatemala. Stoll hails from a logic of neutrality

that is dangerous in its revision of histories and in its erasure of the impact of colonization on subjugated bodies. Like Rosaldo's (1989) criticism of anthropology as an instrument of empire, Stoll's positioning as the academic authority to discount or even dismiss Menchu's testimony becomes very problematic. Stoll writes:

For scholars insecure about their moral right to depict "the Other," *testimonio* and related appeals to the native voice have been a godsend. By incorporating native voice into the syllabus and deferring to it on occasion, we validate our authority by claiming to abdicate it. This is not necessarily a bad thing—anthropology and Latin American studies are hard to imagine without it. But in an era of truth commissions, when there is a public demand to establish facts, privileging one version of a history of land conflict and homicide will not do. What if, on comparing the most hallowed *testimonio* with others, we find that it is not reliable in certain important ways? Then we would have to acknowledge that there is no substitute for our capacity to judge competing versions of events, to exercise our authority as scholars. That would unravel a generation of efforts to revalidate ourselves through idealized re-imaginings of the Other. (1999, p. 277)

In Stoll's quest for objective truth, Menchu's lies, her supposed unreliability, become the lies of all Guatemalans. Accordingly, our solidarity with the Other in the academy is nothing more than our left-leaning, romanticization of the Che-ghost of revolutionary fervor. Stoll exercises his authority as the credentialed scholar to effectively distance himself from solidarity with the victims of violence and war, where only an unbiased and neutral researcher can judge these competing versions of events. Here is where Stoll's standpoint comes into play, where *testimonio*'s collective identity and story cannot compare to an anthropologist whose belief in science and rationality cloaks his own myopic truths and subjectivities. Perhaps Stoll has developed a new syllabus that eliminates those romanticized Others from his reading lists, only able to see himself and his unbiased research as both innocent and omniscient. In his rejection of "the most hallowed" *testimonio*, Stoll reclaims the nostalgic imperialism of the neutral, distant researcher as *ser ella*, unwilling, or maybe unable, to connect to *testimonio* as "*estar con la hablante*."

What Stoll overlooks is that Menchu's *testimonio* is directed at particular audiences for political purposes, and the reader's identification with the subject is not resolute. Maybe a listener can be positioned for reflection or even with a faithful witnessing in the movement toward knowing what Lugones (1987) states as a "non-imperialistic understanding between people" (p. 11). Traveling with playfulness and loving perception is about knowing other people's worlds "to understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have traveled to each other's worlds are we fully subjects to each other" (p. 17).

What *testimonio* does best is offer an opportunity to "travel," positioning a listener or an audience for self-reflection. Under certain open circumstances, a listener or an audience member is given the opportunity to become complicit as an observer and as a witness. Rejection of this positioning might come from a reader's or an audience's inability to feel solidarity with the subject, an inability to travel. Perhaps Stoll and other readers of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* who reject *testimonio* cannot move outside their own Eurocentricism—it is a refusal or an inability to travel. Within this methodology of travel, it is important to contextualize *testimonio* in a critical multiculturalism that is concerned with the praxis of anti-racist and anti-oppressive pedagogies. Part of this intense criticism of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is also the criticism of Third World storytelling displacing a western hegemonic canon and away from the "I" of individualism or the "I" of autobiography. There are no Supermen in these stories, but the stories are truth-tellings and are survivor-rich.

“Radical listening,”² in this sense, helps guide a listener toward an in-depth understanding of what Langout (personal communication, November 15, 2011) argues is the structural critique necessary to contextualize many of these stories as local responses to globalization, how laissez faire policies in the U.S. impact the social safety net, and the effects of austerity cuts in the everyday lives of community. The testimonialist theorizes from the body, the word made flesh. This embodied evocation is made even from the streets, where *testimonio* offers LGBTQ youth a space to talk back to the larger discourses of poverty and criminalization. In one narrative I compiled from a participant in my ethnography with queer street youth, the praxis of *testimonio* is made explicit as this narrator claims a representative voice:

I’m writing a novel, a story of all of us who live on the streets. I’m writing it for all of those kids who can’t or won’t write, because someone has to know what it’s like being a kid and homeless. Someone has to listen to what we have to say, because something is wrong in this country—terribly wrong when so many of us are on the streets, when so many of us are abused or thrown away, or just told to get the fuck out because our parents can’t afford us anymore. Something is terribly wrong when there isn’t even enough beds for those of us who want them, or that we have to wait months before we can get a home, or that we have to whore our bodies just to get something to eat. I have a story to tell to whoever wants to listen to it—and I’m writing it all down. (19-year-old street youth, cited in Cruz, 2006, p. 115)

Like the testimonialists of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), this youth subject evokes a similar collective voice and identity to craft a narrative that is inherently a political project. As a “story of all of us who live on the street” (Cruz, 2006, p. 114), this narrator demands his right to be heard, to testify, to hone a collective story deliberately, and to claim experience and authority as part of a community of youth whose struggle for very basic rights to live without fear of reprisal or arrest, to receive consistent, appropriate, and non-judgmental medical attention, and to access clean and decent shelter. Much like the testimonies of *Bridge*, whose writers offer a critique of the feminist movement that is urgent, collaborative, and radical in their testimonies of their experiences of racism in the Women’s Movement and their centering of the concepts of intersectionality and interdependence, this youth writes for his very life. This is not only a narrative of one young man’s experience of homelessness and survival but also a call for social justice. The role of education researcher as a compiler of stories becomes one of listener/ethnographer, and like *Bridge*, this young speaker positions himself not only in the crafting of his story but in just a very few sentences, names an experience that reverberate through each of the queer street youth *testimonios* that I have collected. In what I argue is a critique of the neo-liberal policies that cut funding for youth and their families and programs that offer transitional housing for foster youth and people living with HIV, this story becomes the vehicle through which a radical project can be engaged and enacted.

Although not all participants in the study have developed a language and a political consciousness to begin to make sense of their world, *testimonio*, in this sense, becomes one of the few means by which LGBTQ youth can connect with and assess the conditions around which they survive. *Testimonio* demands rapt listening and its inherent intersubjectivity when we have learned to do the kind of radical listening demanded by a testimonialist, turning all of us who are willing to participate as listener, storyteller, or researcher into witnesses whether we come from a place of political solidarity or even from places of conflict.

CURRICULUM IS POWER

Curriculum, how we shape it, whose communities are represented, and how histories are depicted is power. As an English teacher, I understood that the American canon of literature was demarcated in ways that subsumed the experiences of the young people in my classrooms. The canon, with its center and margins and peripheries, created a territoriality that dictated whose stories were to be validated in the classroom, in textbooks, and in the university, and whose stories would be ignored and overlooked—Ethnic and Women’s Studies, LGBTQ histories, and the erasure of working people’s stories, among others. Much of the work of being an effective teacher has been about finding ways to place students’ experiences central in curricula and to find ways of knowing that gives meaning to students’ and their family’s histories of migration, work, and community building. Multiculturalism’s translation into food, festivals, and the ethnic favor-of-the-month (Banks, 1995) means that its impact would require little in the standard curriculums of U.S. public schools. The struggle for re-imagined multicultural and multi-ethnic curriculums and pedagogies in the public schools reflect the much larger social and political struggles in the U.S., a war of positionality in the academy, where *testimonios* such as *I, Rigoberta Menchu* are depicted as threats to the very foundations of Western knowledge (D’Souza, 1998).

Yet telling a story of forced migration or of surviving drastic fiscal changes in the community and in the families of students, offers a way to respond to the political, cultural, and economic struggles that young people bring with them into the classroom. With an increasingly fragmented civil society, demographic transformations, and wars on multiple fronts, public schools have been embattled for decades. Under mandatory testing regimes, community-based curricula are more difficult to fund and maintain. With politicians consistently blaming the public education system for the country’s loss of economic and political prestige—a nation at risk all over again—it becomes the refrain heard repeatedly from conservative pundits to teachers, parents, and students. In what ways, then, do young people and their families have the opportunity to “talk back” to these larger discourses, to tell or teach a counterstory? When do we create space in the public schools for students to critique these larger narratives of labor, masculinity, and compulsory heterosexuality?

Sometimes I think there’s more for me out there, you know? I see my friends hooking up with girls, making families, having babies, working. I don’t want that shit. I mean, it’s what’s in place for someone like me, a man, to work and take care of his family. My family doesn’t expect anything else. I don’t think anything else exists for any of my family, my brothers and sisters. What I see out there is that Latinos like me are meant to work for someone else. We work hard, and we have our families and our children work hard too. Maybe that’s good. But I don’t want to work until my body can’t work no more like my mom and my dad. I want something more, you know what I mean? What if I don’t want what my dad wants me to do? What if I want a body that I’m not supposed to want? (17-year-old, Latino youth)

In this *testimonio*, the speaker questions his inheritance of a racialized, working-class masculinity and wonders what his father would say if he knew that his son desired a male lover? The speaker rejects the social and cultural norms of his family, questions the positioning of Latino immigrants as exploitable and ultimately expendable laborers, and in his “want[ing] something more,” speaks of desire. The truth-telling in this testimony is of how a young person assesses the options that have been already put in place for him as a young Latino and how his decision to

pursue his desires may move him in unexpected directions. The speaker demands a different life for himself and of life-loving practices. Pérez (1999) states, “If the subaltern could speak, would not desire be the subject of that discourse?” (p. 157). The story of this young, gay Latino becomes more than a life-story but also a narrative that moves past survivance³ and into a space of hope and yearning. If a teacher or a researcher listens carefully, she will hear stories of love and desire, notions that both trouble and extend not only knowledge production in education research but further nuance our understandings of the lived experiences of LGBTQ youth.

CREATING A CURRICULUM FROM SCRATCH

The Aztec informants of Bernardino de Sahagun, who recited *náhuatl* poetry that had been conserved by oral tradition and who thus gave him the story of the terrible experiences of the Conquest—weren't these informants actually testimonialists? (Bueno, 1978, p. 13)

I began teaching in Los Angeles one week after the civil unrest of the Rodney King trial exploded on the city streets. I remember riding past shattered storefront windows and still-smoldering businesses to the schools I was partnered with, and I saw people armed with brooms and shovels working together to rebuild their neighborhoods near Crenshaw and 52nd, Santa Monica and Sycamore, Vermont and 82nd, and Avalon and 79th—all places where I met and worked with young people and their teachers in community schools. In these parts of the city that were deeply affected by civic neglect and now fire, I was convinced that we needed to tell our stories of the violence and the burnings, to make spaces where young people could reflect and interrogate what they had witnessed. This was not to be business as usual in the classroom, where the histories and narratives of young people and their families were marginalized. *Testimonio* became central in teaching and reflecting on the everyday experiences of post-Rodney King Los Angeles.

In her work as an adult educator and poet in Nicaragua, Randall (1984) writes, “It is no accident, because recognition of, knowledge of, and understanding of one's personal and collective identity is essential to people's revolution” (p. 10), where *testimonio* was seen as an integral part of a Sandinista literacy program. Like Randall's project where teaching reading and writing was taught along with compiling the oral histories of the Nicaraguan people, storytelling in this project is configured as part of a community-based curriculum. Video poems and short truth-telling narratives serve as vehicles for documenting the present and also as a tool for the recovery of a collective identity wrought out of histories of migration and struggle.

In the experiential education program I taught for in Los Angeles schools, approximately 32 high school students participated in the community-based learning program from two continuation schools.⁴ I also met and worked with students from other continuation schools that were working with the community-based learning program in other capacities. Students interned in paid local community-based organizations in their neighborhoods, such as the Red Cross, local libraries and archives, legal aid services, health clinics, and immigration service centers, for approximately 8 to 12 hours a week. Working closely with teachers, curriculum coordinators would research and develop learning activities and help students create curricula based on the experiences and observations of students at their community sites. A record of daily events and curriculum goals and objectives was collected in teaching journals to help assess whether an activity or learning

environment or pedagogy worked effectively with students. The teaching journals also captured the daily activities and the stories I heard from students and teachers and my observations of the school community. Unstructured interviews of students and teachers continued weekly throughout the program's tenure to assess the efficacy of the schools with which I worked.

My role at the schools was primarily as teacher-researcher and, as part of the teaching team, I was to assist in moving community-based learning forward in an effort to help foster a critical, interdisciplinary curriculum within continuation schools. I met often with students and their teachers while debriefing the week's events from their field sites, where issues of migration, language, and translation; access to basic resources; and police brutality were common. Thinking about the demographic and economic changes in our communities was foundational for the curriculum. In 1992, Los Angeles already reflected a massive reduction of core services for inner city residents, and tensions ran high between communities. There was a sense of urgency in teaching during this time; building a community of critical thinkers in these schools began with sharing their life stories.

I often begin curricula with sharing life-stories, through which students begin to learn about each other. But this was the first day after a week of chaos and violence, and I remember distinctly the nervous energy both students and teachers brought with them into the classroom. Students formed a circle and we began to talk about our fears, our bodies, and what we saw in these last few days. I asked them to tell me a story about a scar:

This scar on my arm, I love this scar. My mom accidentally burned me with an iron and now that she's gone, it's the thing that reminds me of her everyday.

[Pulling up shirt to show a quarter-sized indentation on his back] This scar is where they cut me when I was walking home from school last year. And I try all the time to forget about it, but it's still there. I remember who did this. It's a reminder written on my skin!

This scar I made myself when I was too scared to tell my dad I was pregnant.

One student told us that she was washing clothes for her mother in a laundromat on the first night (April 29, 1992) of the uprisings. She said she saw men pushing open the doors and smashing the machines for the quarters inside. She scratched herself on the edge of a corner backing away from it all. That was her scar. She said she was so scared that she could not move from where she was. "My mouth opened but nothing came out," the student told us.

Felman (1999) writes that testimony is composed of "bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding" (p. 5), and that this snapshot of memory is simply a discursive practice, a "speech act." Surely these memories overwhelm both emotionally and psychologically. Yet I would not have these stories stay in the realm of language, as a "speech act," no matter what the impact. Is it enough to tell you my story in an era of ever-widening disparities between rich and poor? Because it seems to me that in 1992 L.A., we were always already mired in an economic downturn. These neighborhoods of Los Angeles never recovered. In 1992 Angelenos burned what had been smoldering decades earlier. Now these communities bear witness to the aftermath of rage and destruction in these continuation school classrooms where short pieces of truth-tellings are offered by students to anyone who cares to listen to them.

Scarry (1987) suggests that under extreme circumstances, language becomes unintelligible or inadequate to describe certain kinds of traumatic experiences. In this instance, the student in the laundromat describes how, in the immediacy of witnessing the chaos of the first nights, she

was unable to respond. *Testimonios*, in this case, are not only the fragments of information that students offer, but also are fragments of memory of an experience that cannot be assimilated. Language fails some students, and words cannot describe what so many students have witnessed. I am no counselor, yet we all required this space of healing and trust in these classrooms, where on that first day teaching after the five days of civil unrest, we all laughed and cried so hard that it was difficult to distinguish among any of our emotions. To tell our stories in our own words and to name ourselves in those classrooms was about reconnecting and affirming our refusal of an uncomplicated response to civil unrest.

TESTIMONIO AS SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICE

Bishop (1998), in his work with Maori communities, makes explicit a teaching and research agenda committed to social justice, suggesting that pedagogy and methodology must be:

Positioned in such a way as to no longer need to seek to give voice to others, to empower others, to emancipate others, to refer to others as subjugated voices, but rather to listen and participate in a process that facilitates the development in people as a sense of themselves as agentic and of having an authoritarian voice [that] challenges colonial and neo-colonial discourses that inscribe “otherness.” (pp. 207–208)

In the schools in which I worked, developing *testimonio* as a social justice practice meant centering youth stories and experiences in the classroom. These stories of the body became the cultural artifacts that allowed students to interrogate their experiences, to mediate how these personal narratives needed to be theorized as political maneuvers. Combining perspectives of Freire (1970) and Vygotsky (1978) allowed me to help scaffold students into other levels of consciousness. The queer body became a mediating tool. “We all have them—scars—and they all have stories beneath the skin.” I would ask of them: “Tell me a story about a scar.” and one by one, students would begin to tell stories about their lives, suturing together narratives of their families, their bodies, and their desires. Students and teachers learned to listen to each other’s bodies and learned to share the stories of a community surviving in this post-Rodney King Los Angeles. Teaching near the intersections of Manchester and Vermont, or Santa Monica and Highland Boulevards, students told stories of violence and abuse, migration, loneliness, and sometimes resistance. As part of pushing back against school policies that created often brutal environments for queer and questioning youth, students wrote and narrated the stories they always wanted to read. They wrote and created stories that “talked back.”

I’ve known I’ve been gay since I was 5 years old. I had crushes on my friends, and I was aware that I had feelings for other boys. But it was a little easier in my family for me because my uncle is gay, even though my father was very upset that he had a “queer” son. My mom is okay with it. She said she knew it was coming, but my dad has a harder time with it. I don’t know what my sexuality has to do with his manhood, but I’ve learned to walk a wide circle around him. I’m at [local LGBT educational center] because my school either refused or ignored all the abuse and harassment I was getting every day at my old high school. Every day I was called “faggot” or “punk” in the hallways, in the classrooms, even teachers didn’t stop it when students called me names right in front of them. When I complained, teachers would say things like, “Well, if he didn’t flaunt it all over the place,”

or “He just wants attention.” And these were black teachers! So I’m here to finish my senior year without all the shit. ‘Course that don’t mean there ain’t shit here too, you know? (17-year-old student)

The work of *testimonio* demands that listeners acknowledge these experiences. This scenario tells the truth—the truth of a student critical of the rampant homophobia and impunity in the public schools—and his story of the inaction of teachers and administrators to create a safe learning environment for LGBTQ students explains what led him to drop out of his comprehensive high school and into a drop-out recovery program. Beverley (1993) and Ferman (2001) suggest that *testimonio* tells much larger “truths” as “the question of whether our self-description ought to be constructed around a relation to a particular collection of human beings” (Rorty, 1991, p. 24). Truth, in these ways, is multiple—or *toda la realidad de un pueblo*—the truth of a whole people rather than the singular “reality of a whole people” (Menchu, cited in Beverley 1993, p. 89). These youth narratives, mediated by a compromised social body⁵, privilege the voices and histories of poverty and displacement, tell much different truths, stories that often talk back to nation-building ideologies. What does it mean when a student says that he “walk[s] a wide circle around [his] father”?

For this gay, black student’s narrative, the story becomes a stand-in for hundreds of LGBTQ youth who have been pushed out of schools because of harassment and violence unchecked. Sharing these truths among students becomes a valuable mediating tool (or “codification,” (Freire, 1970, p. 106) as youth begin to examine closely their own communities, homes, and schools. *Testimonio* becomes central in the efforts to build curriculum that helps students think critically about their experiences in and outside of the schoolyard. To bear witness as part of a community of young people thinking together is about transgressing a stance of isolation, to speak for other at-risk and LGBTQ students (the two are not mutually exclusive) and to other students, is to move beyond oneself. A pedagogy of social justice depends on this movement beyond the student and knowledge or reflexive understanding of the experience cannot be separate from the *testimonio*. A listener is not what Laub (1999) asserts as “a blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time” (p. 57). Listeners bring their own histories and experiences to this “hearing.” But maybe *testimonio* is asking a listener to travel:

We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated, we are lacking. So travelling to each other’s worlds would enable us to *be* through *loving* each other. (Lugones, 1987, p. 8)

A speaker, especially a witness to a social upheaval, violence, poverty, or impunity, requests a tremendous libidinal response, one of *loving*. It is something that we teachers and researchers have yet to talk about, to involve the body present and the recognition that to be a faithful witness to a story of trauma or oppression, there is a responsibility we owe to the speaker. The openness required to listen with love necessitates that our bodies be present, not exhausted, not distracted, but wholly focused and vulnerable in a way that allows travel. Lugones (1987) states that for many, “our travelling is done unwillfully to hostile White/Anglo worlds, and makes it difficult for us to appreciate the value of this part of how we live our lives and its connection to loving” (p. 3). It is not only a profound empathy with the testimonialist but a skill necessary to move forward social justice work.

CONCLUSION

The stories that came out of these Los Angeles classrooms serve to emphasize the urgency of the work with at-risk and LGBTQ youth. What did it mean to teach these stories of the body, to make this brown and queer body the center of radical politics? Students located their stories in the classrooms, students wrote their own books, re-invented themselves in video work and poetry, talked about their bodies and what becomes inscribed upon them and how, and together students and teachers looked at our communities and tried to understand the trauma and anger and sometimes even the hope that comes out in these streets. We also learned how hard it was to be present and to listen; without these skills of radical listening and decolonizing pedagogies it becomes that much more difficult to lay a foundation for a social justice curriculum. I am reminded again of Lugones' wisdom when she writes about learning to "world"-travel with an attitude of playfulness and loving perception: "I could practice" (Lugones, 1987, p. 13). Schools should be the place where "practice" happens everyday.

Now teaching at the university, I bring these tools I used in the streets and communities—the decolonizing pedagogies, radical literacies, new readings of the body, *testimonios*—into courses and into educational research, using the *testimonio* practices that are familiar to me and to other activist researchers. In this way, *testimonio* is configured not only as the oral histories of members of the community but also as a means of honing new subjectivities for emerging social and political youth movements. *Testimonio* is political narrative, oral history, traumatic memory, pedagogical, radical methodology, and is part of the cognitive requirements for new radical literacies and subjectivities with youth.

For academics who are seeking new methodologies of solidarity with the communities they are working with, *testimonio* sets in motion a process that recognizes the manner in which "truth" is constructed in education and social science research. *Testimonio*, as a storytelling genre for the dispossessed and the displaced, offers a way of collecting and compiling narrative that makes complicit both the roles of a researcher and the subject. It is an acknowledgement of the constructiveness of personal narrative and life history and of how science, as defined by Stoll (1999) as "hypothesis, evidence, and generalization," (p. 247) implicitly positions itself in studies of the "subaltern" as a colonial project. It is the recognition that the production of knowledge in anthropology and education is an ideological project and despite the objections of Stoll, the choice of *testimonio* as a methodology forces reinvention and radical repositioning of power for both researcher and subject. In essence, *testimonio* begins the process of unpacking truths and "truth-tellings" from its Western epistemological speculations. LGBTQ street youth who offer *testimonios* construct if not the real as such, then certainly as Jara and Vidal (1986) suggest, "a trace of the real, of that history which, as such, is inexpressible" (p. 3). Often these fragmented narratives are all we have of youth experiences, inexpressible, a little bit of their time compiled, but a short testimony of the daily conditions of their lives. We must ask ourselves as researchers, is it enough just to tell you my story? If research or "truth-telling" is intersubjective (and thus pedagogical), maybe this renders positivism obsolete—and from here we recoup these new truths.

NOTES

1. Lugones (2003) defines "faithful witnessing" as "providing ways of witnessing faithfully and of conveying meaning against the oppressive grain. To witness faithfully is difficult, given the manyness of worlds of

sense related through power so that oppressive and fragmenting meanings saturate many worlds of sense in hard to detect ways. A collaborator witnesses on the side of power, while a faithful witness witnesses against the grain of power, on the side of resistance” (p. 7).

2. Langout explains radical listening this way: “Angela Davis defines “radical” as “grasping things at the root.” Radical listening, therefore, is listening for root ideas that are connected to a structural analysis. This means listening for what is being said and what is left unsaid. It means co-creating a space where what has been rendered invisible can be seen, spoken, and heard. To practice radical listening is to take seriously what is being said and to be in dialogue with the speaker in ways that facilitate a structural, radical analysis” (Personal communication, November 15, 2011).

3. Survivance is a term used by Native scholar Gerald Vizenor (2008) to describe the Native American active sense of presence over historical absence, deracination, and oblivion, an acknowledgement of endurance and creative persistence of life-loving practices under colonialism.

4. Continuations schools are often small schools designed by school districts to help recover credits for students who have left or dropped out of a comprehensive high school.

5. By “compromised social body” I intend to describe the unhealthiness or toxicity of the environment and those who live/work in it, but in particular the body made ill or frail because of environmental and poverty-based issues.

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