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Los Angeles

From the Classroom to the Screen:

Experiences of Women and Femmes of Color MFA Film Students

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Education

by

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

2024

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2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

# From the Classroom to the Screen:
# Experiences of Women and Femmes of Color MFA Film Students

by

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Chair

This dissertation discusses the methodological and empirical findings that emerged from a filmmaking-based study with Women and Femmes of Color in MFA film programs. This work opens with an autobiographical testimonio, in an act of reciprocity for my research collaborators and my community. Weaving together Critical Race Theory in Education, Film theory and production, and well as Chicana and Endarkened Feminist theories and praxis, this dissertation is designed to honor and protect the stories of recruited research collaborators. Together we explore the methodological, theoretical, epistemic, and pedagogical contributions born from this study. This dissertation also incorporates screenplays as representative of Cinematic Critical Race Composite Counterstories that illustrate key findings and contributions, including a reimagining of film school pedagogy through the reclamation of narrative agency.

The dissertation of Brenda Yvonne Lopez is approved.

Ananda M. Marin

Tara J. Yosso

David G. García

Daniel G. Solórzano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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## Prologue

## *No Somos Famosos:* A Chicana Feminist Testimonio

I carried bags and cases of film equipment into my parent's home – a place I called home from the time I was born—a place I still call home. I was careful not to bump anything lest a porcelain baby angel fall off of a table somewhere, surely a bad omen for starting a film shoot. No, I was very careful. My husband and I knew the space well and after years of working together on film shoots, we were attuned to each other's movements and the process of setting up for a shoot was familiar and automatic. My parents watched attentively as we converted their dining and living rooms into film sets—they watched their home become something new, and I watched their eyes grow wider and wider as the lights and cameras came up. I couldn't contain the joy it brought me to create this space for my parents. I had asked them to sit down with me for a series of on-camera life history interviews. My father let out a belly laugh and blushed, "Y yo porque, si yo no soy famoso?" (*Why me? I'm not famous.)* I responded with, "Para mi, si lo eres, Papi" (*To me you are, Dad*). He giggled nervously, pushed past his shyness, and agreed.

My mom's reaction was different. You see, my mom is the keeper of our stories. She is the bridge that connects our past and future. When I asked her to help me document our family history by letting me interview her, she agreed without a second thought—because this is what she has always done for us. Now, the time came and as the film set took over familiar spaces, my mom got nervous. Something about this was different for her, and the recording of her memories, the lights in her face, and the cameras pointed at her were making her uneasy. All of that subsided and fell from her mind the moment I sat down across the table from her. This wasn't all that different after all, she was having a conversation with her daughter at the same table she had had hundreds of these conversations before.

This project was about including my parents in a journey towards reclaiming narratives about familial values and education. I wanted to explore how we, as a family, define success and what that meant for us in terms of academic pursuits.

My parents did not have the opportunity to go to school the way my brothers and I did—my mother stopped going to school after the sixth grade and my father did not complete the fourth grade. The forces that kept my parents from going to school—poverty, migration, survival—were the same forces that fueled their devotion to giving their children the opportunities that had been denied to them. My brothers and I all pursued college educations and were the first generation in our family to attend and graduate with bachelor's degrees. My eldest brother went on to earn a Master's, and I am on my way to earning a Doctorate. While my brothers understood more about my experiences in college, they both decided to go to school locally, while I had my heart set on an NYU film school education. My mother and father had just gotten used to the distance between us my Freshman year of college, while I was at San Francisco State University (SFSU). I was a short one-hour flight away, and at that time, a round-trip flight could be as low as $50 with Southwest Airlines. I told my parents that I would be applying to transfer to NYU, despite having been rejected the first time around. My mom blatantly told me, on a daily basis, today I prayed to God and asked that you not get into that school in New York—she was scared of what that distance would do to our relationship. What I also didn't fully grasp at the time was the way my mother also worried about what the solitude of this journey would put me through. In my headstrong ambition, I responded to my mother and her prayers by sharing my prayers with her. I prayed for the chance to go to NYU to make films, and for the financial means to do so. I explained that the program I was in at SFSU wouldn't give me access to a camera until my senior year. We both succumbed to tears when God answered my

prayers. My mother was the one who called me with the news that I received a big welcome packet from my dream school. She told me she couldn't be prouder, and my heart welled up in fullness. It was a windy road, but I eventually made my way to NYU.

I still remember the day I arrived in New York City. I had flown in on a free flight voucher I had received from taking enough roundtrip flights home from San Francisco to Ontario, CA with Southwest. I had a free one-way ticket and it got me to NYU. The ticket came with two free bags, any size, and my parents helped me find the biggest bags we could at our local swap meet. The act of filling these bags with pieces of home, resonated with the only other experience I could compare it to: when we would fill the biggest bags we could find with essentials for our family in Mexico. This moment lingers for me as one of the most profound ways that I brought my parents with me. As I comically struggled to roll two pieces of luggage that almost matched my height and whose tiny wheels would give out at any moment, across a bustling and angry Third Avenue, after getting out of a cab ride I couldn't afford but charged to my first ever credit card -- I finally managed to get into the elevator for my dorm building and exhale. The long ride up the high rise building nearly gave me vertigo and I felt sick. I found my dorm number in a long hall of many doors and entered a cold and empty suite. I found myself feeling completely alone and immediately regretted every decision I had made that brought me to the empty room that I would now have to call home.

I had no family around, and I found it harder and harder to share what I was learning in school with my family. When I finally finished some film projects, I was able to share my work and open up channels of communication that I had been lacking in my schooling before. My family could see, and even at times take part in the process I was talking about. In fact, one of the first projects I did in film school was a documentary film, a self-portrait. For the project I

interviewed my parents, brothers, cousins, and friends from back home over skype. It made them feel connected to my life in school. This project simultaneously gave them confidence in their interpretation of what I was up to, while introducing a different dimension and purpose to my educational experience. Though I had always set out to make films in hopes of inspiring social change, I had not considered the ways in which the process of making films would bring my family and I closer in the wake of the separation that my schooling had brought.

The three years that followed proved to be challenging. There were times I couldn't afford to go home, times I had to abandon groceries at the checkout counter because my account had reached zero, times I wanted more than anything to fly back home and give up. I would call my mother and try to hide all the hardships from her, but she now tells me that she always knew something was wrong. She told me that our phone calls felt like the ones she had had with her mother when she came to United States, and her mother was back home in Chihuahua. She would tell me the things her mother told her, "Usted es guerrera como su madre. Todo lo que logramos, son logros para toda la familia" (*You are a warrior like your mother. Everything you accomplish is an accomplishment for everyone in our family*).

I didn't tell my mom about the way classmates and friends made comments about how I was likely admitted to NYU because of the scholarship, and not my merit. How they made me feel as though I hadn't earned my place, but rather bought it with an opportunity presented by a diversity initiative. I didn't tell her that when I tried to adapt her migration story in a screenwriting class, I was told that it was not believable that someone would embark on such a journey the way she had, and that I needed to change the story to make it more relatable. I didn't tell her that I let that screenplay collect dust out of shame that I couldn't honor her story, and that my offerings were rejected in class. I didn't tell my mom that white girls had singled me out as

competition and had made it their mission to intimidate me when we were up for similar grants or allotments. I had not told her that professors often commented on how they didn't expect such dark and complex content from a *sweet girl* like me. How when I proposed to my classmates to intentionally center a Woman of Color as the lead for my thesis film, I was advised to "not make it about race" and how my professor, whom I still consider a mentor, agreed with my classmates stating that to make this change to the script, at that point in the semester, might jeopardize my chances of receiving an allotment to make my film. How white kids used our language as punchlines in their screenplays. How I spent hours gently pushing peers to reconsider troubling choices that were dehumanizing, only to wind up feeling alienated by the silence that fell in the classrooms when I did choose to speak up.

I did however tell my mom that I was learning a lot. That I did not regret the choice to go away to film school. She was right, and though she didn't know the details of the challenges I faced, she knew that I was resilient, and that resistance was in our blood. I stayed and graduated from NYU with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Film and Television with a focus in writing and directing. I never finished my senior thesis film, despite having received the prestigious allotment, and an additional grant, because in the end, it was not the story I wanted to tell. It had been bent and shaped into the story that those around me were willing to support.

I always knew, from the moment I left for college, that after four years of living away from my family, I would return home. Not just for them, but for me. My education was my own migration story, and it afforded me the opportunity to explore and seek out what was best for me. I met my significant other, Mohammad, while in film school—we began dating after a mutual friend revealed to him that I had mentioned how "he laughs at all the right times" during our screenwriting class. By this I meant, we had a mutual understanding and way of coping with

ridiculous and hurtful narratives that were perpetuated in that space—we connected through humor. After two and a half years of dating and making films together, Mohammad decided that he too would be coming to California with me. That summer began one of the most difficult time periods for either of us. We had scheduled Mohammad's thesis film shoot for the summer because most of his film would take place on a university campus in Pennsylvania. We were kicked out of the housing we had secured for the summer and had to pack and move twice in a matter of three days. We ended up in Virginia for the summer, staying with Mohammad's aunt and uncle. Mohammad's film shoot fell through, we took the loss and prepared for our life in California. We bought our first car with help from family and took a two-week cross-country trip, stopping along the way at national parks and visiting family. On the last day of our trip, while the sun was setting behind the Grand Canyon, Mohammad asked me to marry him. We ended the trip with a lot of excitement for what was to come.

When we announced our engagement to my family, they were over the moon, and were quick to make plans. However, we struggled to find work, and started our own photography business which cost more money than it brought in. We couldn't get hired on film shoots, and the challenges of living back home brought with it specific obstacles to finding time for my own goals and career. I worked at my mom's childcare from 6am-7pm most days, and when I would get called, I worked as a substitute teacher for a local school district. My father urged me to get my credentials to teach high school, but I wasn't ready to make that shift and kept faith that something would come to me that made sense for my academic and creative aspirations.

As if by some flip of a switch, things started aligning and life got a lot easier. We started to make plans, Mohammad was going to begin working with a comedian friend in Los Angeles, and I had gotten accepted into a Master's in Education program at UCLA. We married in June,

the day after my birthday, and that fall I began graduate school. We were full of excitement for this new chapter, and I battled the thoughts that someone had made a mistake in admitting me. After so many rejections, I felt like this acceptance must have been in error. During convocation (a word I had never heard before), I met so many brilliant students and faculty and that voice in me that told me I would be discovered as an imposter, grew louder. I felt like the next words to come out of my mouth were going to reveal to everyone that I did not belong there with them. The first week of classes I scheduled a time to meet with a professor. She had offered to speak to those of us who were having a difficult time adjusting to grad school, to answer questions about the program, and discuss these things one on one. I was vulnerable and shared my concerns, stating that academic texts felt like a foreign language to me, that I did not know how to write properly, and that I struggled with understanding theory. I was honest about the way this program was a lifeline in many ways, and I was desperate to learn more about how to make sense of my place in this program. I shared with her that I intended to continue onto the PhD program. She responded with words that wounded me for years. She told me that I would do better elsewhere. That I had been "schlepped" onto my advisor's plate when he hadn't wanted to take me on, and that he definitely would not take me on as a doctoral student. I felt like someone had poured a bucket of cold water down my back. My worst fear had come true, she knew and confirmed that I did not belong. She told me to get through the program, that it was an easy one-year program—advising me to essentially keep my head down, do the best I could with the readings, finish the degree, and pursue something else in film. I went home and told Mohammad that our plans to stay through the doctoral program were no longer an option.

I struggled with making bonds in school because I felt like a fraud and the anxiety was overwhelming. I tried to avoid being on campus as much as possible. Tensions got worse with

this professor, and for the final project in her class, which was a video project, she told us to invite our friends and family to the screening of our videos. After screening my project, she humiliated me in front of my peers and my husband. She raised her voice at me in frustration and spoke to me with deep condescension and disappointment for what turned out to be a B letter grade. I hoped I would never have to take a class with her or speak to her again, but I was forced to take a course with her the following quarter in order to fulfill course requirements and graduate on time. She continued to criticize my writing in similar ways. When I received my final paper for her class it was evident in the notes which she wrote in the margins, that her expectations of my writing guided her bias in grading my work. She would make a suggestion stating you should cite an example, only to turn the page, find that I had cited an example and write "never mind" –she did not bother to just erase the comment. She left these notes in the margins, evidence of her assumption of my incompetence. She wrote two pages worth of feedback which mostly conveyed the weaknesses in my writing. She wrote a C- grade, erased it, wrote B+, and then erased it one more time to arrive at an A- grade. The pencil mark indentations of the letters she had written were still on the page, though she had tried to erase them, they were evidenced in the grooves the pencil marks left behind. My mind was riddled with questions about her grading methods, and how this professor just flat out didn't see my potential as a graduate student in the program. During the moments in which she lashed out on me, she stated that her disappointment in my work stemmed from the fact that she had told me "exactly" how to do something, and that I simply refused to do it. This was difficult to make sense of when this same professor lectured about bell hooks' work on engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994). She was frustrated and at times angry with me about the fact that I did not produce "exactly" what she wanted. These experiences solidified my imposter syndrome and I no longer

wondered whether I would be found out as a fraud, because I was told explicitly and repeatedly that I did not know what I was doing.

The second quarter I had to take her class, I also took my first ever course in Critical Race Theory, and this class, the professor, the teaching assistant, and the students—this community seemed to bubble over with energy and love. I found friendship with my groupmates, and we proposed a video project to demonstrate and analyze examples of racial and gendered microaggressions. This project was a hybrid of fictionalized reenactments and documentary-style interviews. We received praise for the project. In fact, I later found out that the same professor who had caused me so much harm academically, was now using our film as an example in her class. This simultaneously infuriated me and brought me a sense of pride. The fact that I was able to collaborate with my peers and produce a piece of work, under the guidance of a professor and TA who sought to validate the assets I carried into their classroom—who invited me to bring my whole self to the learning process, it was what I needed to understand that I was capable of being successful in the program, despite the lack of support I received elsewhere. The film was so well received by a scholar and pedagogue I looked up to, and I took this to mean that the pedagogical differences, the engagement and celebration of our strengths as students, made a world of difference in my academic performance. The knowledge and community shared in this space was transformational for me. My professor for the CRT course approached me after the screening of the film, saying that my peers had indicated that I was the director behind the film and asked me to meet early in the following quarter to discuss the project more. I was excited to meet one on one with *el profe*, but nervous that he too might soon find out I was a fraud.

I walked into that meeting, and I still don't know if this was actually the case, but I felt like I couldn't stop myself from shaking. I sat down and he earnestly asked a simple question,

"How are you?" I wasn't ready for it. I fought back the emotion that was swelling in my throat and said, "Good! And you?" He proceeded to tell me of the impact that the film my peers and I had made and asked questions about the directing and planning involved in the project. I felt seen for the first time since joining the program. Finally, he asked me what my plans were, and if they included continuing onto a PhD program in the department. It was then that the knot in my throat came undone and the tears began to stream down my face. I have always been ashamed of how easily my tears betray me when I wish they would stay hidden—but I am forevermore a *chillona*. I shared with him that I had been discouraged from applying to continue, and that my academic advisor had been on sabbatical for two thirds of my program, during which time I would have had to make the decision to apply. I shared with him that I had been told to go back into film. He asked me if that's what I wanted. I said no and explained that what had brought me to education was a desire to understand my own educational experiences, so that I could properly learn how to bring my community into the spaces I had been granted access to, but in more welcoming ways. He affirmed me and said, "I've been waiting for a student like you." He went on to share the ways he saw my film sensibilities intersecting with Education and Ethnic studies, shared his own fascination with cinema and photography and then as if to say "but we'll get more into that later" –he told me that he would take me on as a doctoral student if this was something that I wanted to pursue. I don't know how I made it home that night, I was in a completely different dimension of reality, in a trance. He had disrupted the voice that had governed my mind. "I've been waiting for a student like you" –did he really say that? About me? The girl who can't read or write like an academic, who was told in no uncertain terms that she did not belong. How could he say that to *me*? And so, I stayed on as a student. I took an additional year to write a master's thesis, a Chicana Feminist testimonio about my educational

trajectory. I got my master's degree in education, and I still battled the feeling of whether it was a milestone worth celebrating. I decided not to attend graduation because I thought that to do so, a year after my cohort had walked, would be making a big deal out of a failed attempt. I filed my thesis in time to begin the doctoral program, and I reintroduced myself to Moore Hall that fall.

The process of writing, editing, and reflecting on this testimonio was painful. It made me face the barriers I never thought I would overcome—but it was work that had to be done. I wanted to engage in the kind of raw, deep reflection I would ask my collaborators to engage in, in order to understand the manner in which I must approach this work with care. Through the discomfort and pain that it brought to tell my testimonio, I was reminded of the words of Derrick Bell (as cited by Luis Urrieta Jr. and Sofia A. Villenas):

> *'I have worked my whole professional life in the struggle against racism. My challenge is now to tell the truth about racism without causing disabling despair. For some of us who bear the burdens of racial subordination, any truth – no matter how dire – is uplifting' (2013).*

*No Somos Famosos.* We are not famous. The same way my father told me that he shouldn't be interviewed because he wasn't famous, I too told myself that my story was not worthy of wins, accomplishments, and celebrations. While making *No Somos Famosos* with my family I found myself constantly encouraging my parents and brothers to celebrate their stories, and somewhere along the way, I plugged back into the pulse of the very thing that makes me strong. I am strong when I am in community. I am strong when I am with my family—and because this strength lingers, I can be strong when I am alone too. It is through this personal journey with them that I was able to engage in my own narrative reclaiming, in an uplifting way. The film we made together began as a class project for a qualitative methods course and what resulted was a culmination of my research interests, my narrative voice, and my commitment to produce work

that my family and community to take hold of, be a part of, and understand. It is through this project that it finally became clear to me that the way forward with this work would have to be in challenging the idea of whose story should be documented, and furthermore, how will these stories be honored and shared. For me the answer is inevitably through film. It is my medium, and my narrative language.

This deeply informs my work with my research collaborators for this study. When I set out to design this study and engage in co-creative collaboration to better understand the experiences of Women and Femmes of Color in film school, I did so with a commitment to produce scholarship and creative works that honored my collaborators. In such, this dissertation perhaps does not follow traditional approaches, as it blends autobiographical, biographical, and fictional representations to engage in narrative reciprocity with my collaborators. Similarly to the story of how I came to understand my own film education and the power of incorporating film methods into qualitative research alongside my family, this dissertation further extended the methodological and empirical scope of my research. I offer this dissertation back to my collaborators who so generously entrusted me with their stories, their critical analysis, and their aspirations for the future of this work.

# Chapter 1

# Introduction

## Positionality: How My Own Search for Wholeness Guides This Work

I am a first gen Chicana, and in many ways my journey to this moment feels as though I have stumbled, tumbled, and somehow landed on my feet to witness one of the most privileged vantage points, I or any of my ancestors have seen. I say this because I have the privilege of understanding my personal history alongside the formalized education of academic institutions, affording me a broader landscape to observe and traverse. As I stand here on bridges built by my parents and the scholars who have carved space for first gen students, I begin what I hope will be a lifelong pursuit of bridge making between education scholarship, film pedagogy, and radical creativity. I stand here in appreciation of the stones that were laid on my path, those that broke my falls and gave me footing to continue. Gloria Anzaldua's words have accounted for many of these stones, and at this moment, the words that echo through my mind and out my fingertips are these: *it is work that the soul performs* (1987, p. 101). I have fought with myself viscously, with imposter syndrome as my constant companion. I can't do this. Who do I think I am? Yet I found responses and a reclaiming of my epistemic grounding, in the collective voices of Women of Color Feminists, through their testimonios, platicas, and radical offerings. I can finally say with conviction that I am enough; I know who I am. I feel as if I have finally come full circle to a radical epistemology of self-love and appreciation for the difficult work that my soul has performed and for the work it has yet to perform. With this, I humbly offer my dissertation, a qualitative study by, about, with, and for Women and Femmes of Color (WFOC) MFA film students. I draw from Chicana feminist traditions of challenging epistemic racism and sexism through narrative reclaiming. Through the act of writing and reflecting on my own testimonio I

have arrived at a path forward with this study which invited other WFOC to engage in the work of narrative reclaiming with me. Through this work, I fully commit to challenge concepts of objectivity, leaning in without apology a celebration of the many lives it will be birthed into. I welcomed with excitement the many personal lessons that emerged from this work as well as the communal bonds formed. This is for us, our people, and our filmmaking.

My positionality has informed my perspective on a critical need for identifying educational barriers for Students of Color and creating our own tools for dismantling those barriers. Additionally, Communities of Color have been studied for academic research often without being included in the process itself, as traditions of research have largely produced studies *on* these populations rather than *with* these populations. With this study, I offer work which aims to build collaborative approaches to filmmaking as qualitative research to bridge gaps that exist for communities who have historically been denied access to taking an active part in the research process. This is particularly important as the filmic medium, the language of film which bridges sight, sound, and narrative form—is a language that is familiar to many communities beyond academia. For Communities of Color, with diverse cultural backgrounds, an informed representation through film can facilitate epistemic connections that challenge deficit majoritarian stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). By positioning the narrative agency of Communities of Color at the helm of filmic production, along with critical theory, there is a transformative possibility not only for the productions that emerge from such perspectives, but also for the process of creation, and process of witnessing the productions. Indeed, this study methodologically engages film with an understanding of the cultural and social pedagogies of medium. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the importance of placing WFOC in narrative positions of power to reclaim storytelling towards transforming the dominant pedagogies of

majoritarian stories which prevail in Hollywood. In this regard, I aim to explore how these methods hold potential for engaging marginalized communities in the process of narrative production, through the medium of film. My proposition for how to disrupt these harmful traditions builds on the traditions of activism and scholarship from critical race and feminist scholars.

I shared, in depth, a testimonio about my own educational journey because it is an entry point from which I began to inquire about the systemic and pervasive nature of racialized and gendered educational barriers for Women and People of Color (POC) in film school. Gloria Anzaldua offers us language with which to name our convergent identities and our search for community. She names us nepantleras: the women who choose to exist and navigate through multiple and simultaneous perspectives (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015). Through a lens of filmmaking, I make sense of what she describes as a "search for wholeness" through a visualized imaginary (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015, p. 93). The search for wholeness in the wake of epistemic erasure is the key driving force of this work, and the medium of film is the vehicle for that storytelling. Throughout this study, at every stage, my collaborators and I engaged in search for wholeness together, with vividly described scenes from film school classrooms and film sets—with their visually rich storytelling, they invited me into their worlds, and together we reimagined the spaces in a reclamation of story. I have made it my craft to push the boundaries and angles that my camera captures. I have used this craft to connect and understand more fully the experiences of those whose stories were distorted, erased, or silenced all together. It is in this way, in my continual search for wholeness, and with a commitment to move between and beyond my way of knowing the world, that I designed a study rooted in the strengths derived from this process. This study is a celebration of the WFOC who swim in a sea against

contradictory currents, who draw strength from each other's stories, who stand tall for themselves and their people. I center their experiences in this work because I recognize their particular, intersectional strength as leaders in an era of narrative reclaiming. I have witnessed this work in WFOC in Academia and WFOC filmmakers, and it is alongside the paths that they illuminated in their work, that I forged a path for this work alongside my collaborators.

In this chapter I provide an overview of the design of my dissertation study. I discuss the erasure of WFOC in the film industry as a problem of narrative oppression to be further analyzed in the context of film schools. By contextualizing the experiences of WFOC within film schools as sites for potentially transforming, not only their educational, artistic, and professional development, but also as potential sites for bringing a cultural shift to the industry, as agents in producing media culture. I will then provide an overview of the literature, discussing how I will draw from literature about the origins of the study of filmmaking, as well as the scholarship, episteme, methods, and the work of WFOC scholars, activists, and filmmakers. I then introduce my theoretical and methodological approaches, which include a Critical Race Theory in Education framework in a conceptualization of storytelling as intervention to narrative oppression towards a framework I have developed through this study, called FilmCrit. Lastly, I conclude with the rationale and potential contributions of this methodological approach to critical race filmmaking as qualitative inquiry.

**Research Questions and Aims:**

***RQ 1***

What are the lived experiences of WFOC in film school? How might these experiences inform inclusive film school practices?

**Rationale.** The aim of this research question is to focus on exploring the experiences of WFOC in order to identify the pedagogical tools granted and denied in a film school setting, as well as tools created by WFOC film students. As is often seen in the educational histories of Students of Color, in the face of oppressive structures, students engage in methods of resistance and engage various forms of cultural capital in order to find paths towards academic success. This question draws from a centering of the experiential knowledge of POC in order to challenge dominant and deficit narratives about them. In this sense I analyze a data corpus with a wealth of knowledge and pedagogical insight from the collective of women and femmes collaborating in this study. Through a community cultural wealth analytical framework, this analysis led me to identifying a form of cultural capital that my collaborators relied on for their success in and beyond film school: creative capital. I detail findings related to creative capital in Article 3.

***RQ 2***

How might collaborative filmmaking-based research methodologies enable narrative reclaiming?

**Rationale.** Engaging in this work with other filmmakers yields a particularly oriented, and rich insight into the purposes of film, as well as the medium's potential for transformational change. Additionally, it is important to note that it is in the nature of this particular collective group of women and femmes, as filmmakers, to *create and reimagine*. In the methods section of this dissertation I detail the methodological consideration in the development of the study design which offered my recruited collaborators opportunities to choose how they participated in film-based methods of research. While I offered a documentary approach, all of my collaborators opted for anonymous participation, which was operationalized through an adapted method of counterstorytelling using fictionalized and composited stories in screenplay format. The agency

this provided allowed me to engage with my collaborators in more meaningful ways, in reciprocal ways, and their contributions helped shape my theorizing toward a methodological, pedagogical, theoretical, and praxis-oriented framework called FilmCrit. I detail the methodological contributions and findings to emerge from this study in Article 1.

**WFOC in Hollywood: A Story of Narrative Oppression**

The film industry has historically been and continues to be a space where WFOC are denied access to key creative positions and roles of authorship—Stacy Smith et al. has aptly named this issue, the "epidemic of invisibility" (2017). While much research has been done around issues of representation of women in popular films and television, I have searched for and struggled to find research which examines film school practices and the impact of these practices on marginalized students. Furthermore, while there is literature documenting the industry ties with the origins of film schools, I have again struggled to find literature about how film schools as educational sites for training industry profession, might reproduce oppressive barriers evident in the industry today. I believe the work of combatting this epidemic of invisibility in the industry would benefit from examining this problem of representation through a film school perspective. This inquiry is situated at the intersection of examining the experiences of WFOC filmmakers in their academic pursuits, with the hope of illuminating and locating these experiences in the larger fabric of film industry practices around racial and gender equity.

While the digital revolution has brought forth more accessible tools for historically marginalized populations to engage in filmmaking practices, WFOC are undoubtedly still facing issues of access to careers in the Film and TV industry, as well as an overwhelming lack of diversity in representation which persists on both sides of the camera (Smith et al., 2017). As examined in the Annenberg School of Journalism at USC's Inclusion Initiative in an ongoing

yearly study, the voices missing from the most popular on-screen narratives are those of women, POC, LGBTQ identifying people, and people with disabilities. This nine-year study closely examines gender disparities, focusing on women and their roles in front of and behind the camera. Each year since 2007, this report has taken the one hundred most popular films in the U.S. and determined that Hollywood has disproportionately privileged white men in all areas of production. When looking at the representation women have attained in popular films, this report finds that there is little to no indication of progress. From 2007 to 2018, the percentage of female speaking roles has fluctuated between approximately 28% and 33%. In the top one hundred films of 2016, only 34 films depicted a female lead or co-lead, of those, *only three female actors* were of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. In 2018, 39 films depicted female leads and co-leads, and we saw a slight rise in the number of WFOC actors to *eleven*. WFOC have been and remain to be virtually absent as speaking and leading characters in Hollywood films to an alarming degree, and their absence is felt behind the camera to an even further degree. This is not simply underrepresentation—this is erasure (Smith et. al., 2017; 2019).

In considering the creative and technical positions behind the camera, women are scarce and WFOC, especially Latinas, are essentially absent. Of the top 900 films from 2007- 2016, which includes 1,006 directors, a mere 41 were female directors accounting for only 4.1% of the total directors. Out of those 41 female directors, three of those directors were Black or African American women, and two of them were Asian or Asian American women. There was only mention of one Latina director in this study—only one of the 1,006 directors in the last nine years. Her name is Patricia Riggen and she won the award for her work on Under the Same Moon in 2007. In 2018, there was one Black female directed amongst the top 100 films that year, no Latinas, and no Asian female directors. None. This ongoing study asserts that when

Hollywood thinks director, that director is more often than not white and male. A heading over one of the infographics in this study reads: "Directing … Females Need Not Apply" (Smith et al.,2017, p. 4). If this is the message sent to female directors in general (and in general this means white women), what does it mean to be a WFOC filmmaker in an industry that has systematically and intentionally rendered them invisible? How do aspiring WFOC filmmakers combat these practices when the message sent to them is crystal clear: *you're not welcome here*.

Additionally, it is important to note that the rarely seen on-screen representation of WFOC actors has historically gone unrecognized by the Academy of Arts and Motion Pictures. In her book, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism*, film Scholar, Nancy Wang Yuen, points out that the only WFOC actor to —*ever*—win an Oscar for Best Actress is Halle Berry in 2002 for her performance in *Monster's Ball* (2017). The only time an Asian female actor ever won an acting Oscar was when Miyoshi Umeki won Best Supporting Actress in 1957, until Michelle Yeoh's recent win for *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2023).

It is paramount to examine the most popular, dominant narratives that are produced in the media in order to understand the structural and institutional forms of oppression that exist and persist in the film industry. It is evident that the Oscars and Hollywood at large are historically white and male driven institutions, both in the workforce that comprises the industry, and in the representations this industry produces. It is of equal importance to understand the tradition of the field of film studies, not only in terms of how we theorize and understand the relationship between film, culture, and society, but also how film production programs factor into producing a well-trained workforce for this industry.

The USC Annenburg Inclusive Initiative report on Inequality in 1,200 popular films, also proposes that in order to combat this invisibility, the industry must: set target inclusion goals,

uncouple lead and director characteristics, cast inclusively in every location, 'just add five' –add five female speaking roles to every script, focus on lead roles, hire women more than once, and combat implicit and explicit bias (Smith et. al., 2019, p. 4). While implementing these propositions into industry standards begins the work of inclusion of women in lead on-screen and off-screen roles, there is much more work to be done in examining intersectional challenges and solutions to bringing more People and WFOC into popular films. Without a critical intersectional analysis of this epidemic of erasure, we cannot fully understand the persistence of real structural barriers that continue to keep People and WFOC from attaining visibility on-screen and authorship in their work behind the camera. A significant gap exists in proposals for inclusivity from an education standpoint. Film education has not been explored as a means of combatting issues of equity in film and TV. It is important to examine how film schools feed into the film and television industry. How are these educational spaces and practices challenging or reproducing the erasure of People and WFOC?

**The History of the Study of Film in the U.S.**

According to film scholar Eric Smoodin, the field of film studies represents one of the least historicized disciplines, and what we do know about the study of film in higher education has historically been positioned from an Anglo-American perspective (Grieveson & Wasson, 2008). Dana Polan, a film scholar and historian, wrote a book titled *Scenes of Instruction: The Beginning of the U.S. Study of Film*. In his work of mapping the origins of the study of film in the U.S., Polan reflects on a struggle many historians have faced, the question of whether the stories and documents he sought had been lost or never created to begin with (2007). Traditions of a-historization which center white and male lived-experiences, across educational narratives, write marginalized communities out of history. It would therefore not be surprising to find that in

the filmmaking industry and the institutions which train filmmakers; we find little written and documented about the educational experiences of WFOC. I have searched for these educational histories and have only found fragments of these narratives. In this regard, this proposed dissertation study contributes to the field by documenting, through an education lens, the lived experiences of WFOC film students. I purposely position my inquiry from the perspective of WFOC because they are amongst the least represented groups in the film industry, and this lack of representation impacts WFOC in film school as well. Though film school is not a requirement for entering the industry, it is where many people seek out networking connections to build paths into the industry, particularly when they have no personal connections to people already working in the industry. Furthermore, in this study, I frame film schools in relation to the film industry because of its historical ties to the industry, the curricular alignment with industry standards, and the professional pathways into the industry that film school graduates aspire towards. By centering the experiential knowledge of these students, we arrive at an intersectional framework of understanding the landscape of film education. At this junction in film history, when we have seen an erasure of women and POC, I believe it is important to locate the narrative voice of this study with WFOC who have historically been leaders in their communities in the face of oppression, and who have also historically been written out of historical documentation.

In order to contextualize the experiences of WFOC in film school, I turned to autobiographical and biographical accounts of well-known professional WFOC in film and television. This includes interviews done for popular magazines, memoirs, and a few books that center the voices of women filmmakers. None of these texts are specifically aimed at discussing educational experiences, however, some WFOC filmmakers share stories about their time in film school. It is also worth mentioning that these fragments of information are from only the most

well-known WFOC filmmakers. With that said, even these successful filmmakers share crucial information about their film school experiences which in comparison to contemporary experiences such as my own, call for further exploration into the barriers, since much of the oppression they experienced is still seen today. To contextualize the educational narratives of these women, I weave in the cultural climate in cinematic representations, political movements of the time, and examples for how the deficit cinematic representations were challenged in classroom settings. This analysis then informs later chapters which engage in conceptualizing theoretical and methodological approaches which aptly respond to the multifaceted call of reimagining film schools as spaces for transformational resistance through collaborative filmmaking.

# Chapter 2

## Literature Review

In this chapter, I offer a literature review that locates film education narratives over three moments in history. First, the early 1900's with the beginning of the study of film, at which time universities in the United States first began offering film courses in screenwriting. Second, I turn to the 1960s-1970s, an era of civil rights movements during which filmmakers of Color made significant contributions to film history through film activism. Third, I draw from the work and wisdom of WFOC in film and in academia to conceptualize a future for WFOC film school pedagogy. I have chosen to present these particular topics in this order, because this historical timeline illustrates the manner in which the study of film began, how film was used by students and activists to take back narrative voice, and finally, how we might draw across disciplines in order to better inform a pedagogical approach to teaching and learning from WFOC film students. The origins of the study of filmmaking, as a historical orientation, also provide me with a vantage point through which to reimagine what a filmmaking education might be, if we instead centered the voices of historically marginalized filmmakers in pedagogical and institutional practices. By juxtaposing the present historical location, a historical moment which rhymes with the civil rights era, through a present day revolution for racial justice and a global pandemic—I draw connections to how educators, in and beyond formal schooling sites, have been called to engage in the creation of pedagogies rooted in survival, justice, and reimagination.

### The Early 1900s and The Beginnings of the Study of Film

Film scholar, Mark Betz, declares the study of film, in Britain and in the U.S. is understood to have begun in the 1960's (Betz, 2008). However, the work of film historian Dana Polan, maps the beginnings of the study of film much earlier with courses in university extension

programs dating as far back as 1915 (2007). These courses were some of the first ventures into the structuring of the study of film. The first known film course in the U.S. was a screenwriting course in 1915 at Columbia University. This course was first taught by Victor Freeberg, a scholar with a passion for screenwriting and who argued that credit for a film's vision and execution belonged to the screenwriter, and not the director. He argued that with this recognition also came the responsibility to understand the intricacies involved in the process of filmmaking. The way he described screenwriting reminded me of the way one writes a manual. With clear instructions for assembly. His love and deep knowledge of theater informed this perspective, and he stated that stage direction aided the overall delivery of a play, from the performances to the visuals. In this same way, he encouraged his students to include as much information as possible in their scripts. While I enjoy a screenplay that is intentionally clear about camera actions, settings, performance actions and staging, the nature of filmmaking often leads the process down a compartmentalized road. One where locations impact cinematography choices and staging. So many moving parts shape the final film, and for this reason I believe that all the credit and glory should not fall to one person, but to the collective. To think in this way is to think individualistically. Of course, I do acknowledge that the director assumes a responsibility for the overall scope of a film production, but this is not unlike the was a researcher assumes responsibility over their study. In this same way, when it comes to conducting qualitative research and research with other people, one must acknowledge and hone the decisions made by the collective which shaped the final outcomes.

A few years later, the screenwriting course taught by Victor Freeberg, was taken on by Frances Taylor Patterson—making her the first woman to ever teach a film course in the documented history of the U.S. study of film. Though this course was only offered through an

outreach program to non-matriculating students, Patterson's reflections on the importance of both a theoretical understanding and practical understanding of cinema was essential (Polan, 2007). Aware of the cultural influence of cinema, she claimed that students' understanding of the constructions of the stories in films would empower them as viewers despite their career trajectories. This marked the beginning of a question that still drives the discipline of film studies today—is a merging of the theoretical and practical study of film possible, or is the division between the two irreconcilable?

The study of film at a university level began as a means of training filmmaking professionals at the country's top universities with the sponsorship of courses from the Academy of Motion Pictures and Sciences in the 1930s (Polan, 2007,2008). This industry connection was born from the need to supply a growing industry with qualified workers. A divide in film studies became even more distinguished at the time of World War II when film schools were called upon to contribute to the fight by training students to make patriotic films (Polan, 2008). Though this divide heavily influenced the formalized structure of the theoretical and practical study of film when universities and colleges began offering degrees in film, a wide array of approaches to film studies gave way across many disciplines. Early film courses were taught by professors from the social sciences and humanities, in fields such as education, psychology, sociology, and literary studies (Polan, 2007). Film courses have historically served many functions across different disciplines, and films as texts have been used as pedagogical and research sources in interdisciplinary ways as well. In fact, jumping ahead in time briefly to the 1970's, Latin American History professors at the University of California, Riverside, Leon G. Campbell and Carlos E. Cortes, wrote of their experiences in using films as tools for historical analysis (1977). Campbell and Cortes provided students with the necessary background and language with which

to analyze films. In a central course debate over the criteria for a revolutionary film, Campbell and Cortes asked their students to rate films in terms of their effectiveness in demonstrating the qualities of what they believed to be truly revolutionary films. Students were then asked to write papers explaining these qualities and amongst the most salient criteria was the need for films to not only acknowledge societal problems, but also provide clear instructions on how to address these problems. Students also added that the films should be comprehensible and straight forward so that anyone could understand. Campbell and Cortes also spoke of pedagogical approaches which enriched students' engagement with the films as texts, explaining that the act screening films and offering commentary as the film played, provided students with a clearer understanding of the film conventions at play. The professors also introduced the films they screened by providing cultural and political contexts for the subject matter in the films as well as the filmmakers behind the film. Another contribution of these reflections on teaching film, is how students responded to the act of watching a film for the sake of critiquing it, stating that they were not often asked to interpret or generate knowledge in this way, in their other classes, because they saw the textbooks as less accessible and as though the interpretation had already taken placed and had been presented to them as information to be absorbed. This brought to mind what education scholar, Paulo Freire, refers to as the *banking method*, which positions pedagogy as the act of presenting students with information which they are expected to absorb, as though they were empty receptacles waiting to be filled (2000). Campbell and Cortes disrupted this approach by using film analysis as a pedagogical tool for teaching history.

Film pedagogy holds potential for transformational education, both in and beyond the classroom. It is a tool that engages viewers and creators in creative processes of learning and discovery. By weaving together visual, auditory, and imaginative/fictional simulations, film

enacts a pedagogy that is deeply tied to our senses. The pedagogy of film travels through living rooms, movies theaters, classrooms with people of all ages, and even in our very hands with the growing use of mobile smart phones for viewing films, TV, and short media content. However, the pedagogical function of film schools and the courses that comprise their curricula, still largely aim to replicate industry practices in order to produce graduates that are industry ready, rather than shifting pedagogy towards informing more inclusive narrative practices that aim to transform the exclusionary practices of the industry. In my experience, instructors did not spend time offering critical perspectives during screenwriting workshops, or screenings. It was common practice for professors to not even attend screenings. Discussions that followed were usually high-brow critiques, but the connections did not feel familiar to what I was interpreting while watching the same films. I wonder what my experience would have been like if my professors had added commentary as we watched. Or engaged a wider range of topics for discussion. In this way, I think we could learn about pedagogical interventions from other fields, such as history or race and ethnic studies, as these fields often center critical discussion not simply for technique or aesthetic, but for social impact. As a minoritized student, my inclinations towards filmmaking were always rooted in challenging stereotypes by making my own stories. When asked what shows I enjoyed watching, I used to tell my high school TV production teacher, "I don't watch TV, I make it". He used to laugh and say that I was very confident for a teenager, but the truth was, I just didn't see my community well represented in TV, and I think that reality escaped him.

Today, top film schools pride themselves on their annual alumni representation at the Emmys and Oscars. Because of the historically low representation of minoritized filmmakers at award ceremonies like these, many minoritized filmmakers have aimed to disrupt the status quo

and reclaim their narratives outside of Hollywood. However, I believe it is still worth noting how access to the industry and mainstream accolades do bring forth a distinct set of opportunities and exposure and that it is precisely because of these long-standing ties between top film schools and popular cinema and television that I believe film schools are sites of cultural reproduction for the industry. For this reason, film schools also hold potential for becoming spaces of transformational resistance in achieving more equitable representation and support for minoritized filmmakers. Aims of a film education should work in tandem to prepare students for careers in the industry, and for navigating the development of their storytelling and craft. This support could range from introductions to critical race media literacy, affirmational approaches, practicing culturally responsive pedagogy, providing practical career advice and opportunities, and finally, a deep conviction for developing narrative voice.

The emphasis and use of storytelling as intervention is particularly appropriate in the field of filmmaking where, above all else, story drives us forward, and whereby some paradoxical design, the stories of women and POC, have been silenced, distorted, and whitewashed. This is the paradox of a film school education for the Woman of Color who arrives with every intention of developing her voice: she is firstly warned through microaggressions to assimilate to white, male-centered practices and perspectives, while she is simultaneously pressured to stand out with originality against a sea of individualistic competition. This is the burden of the Woman of Color film student. Furthermore, as is chronicled in the work of feminists of Color, for many WFOC our epistemological strengths are fed from collective and communal practices. Film school practices often contextualize opportunities to make films and advance in course work with competition. The rationale I and other students have received from our educators is that this prepares us for the industry, which is also highly competitive.

However, the manner in which these competitive practices perform the function of sorting and tracking students and as a consequence reproduce racist and sexist environments seen elsewhere in academia, as well as in the film industry, is a factor which I believe is overlooked in film education. I base these observations on reflection of my own testimonio, and on conversations I have had with other WFOC who have attended film production programs. In these conversations, I have heard the way this competition fueled rivalries and a scarcity mentality, how it bolstered notions of meritocracy, and gave way to excuses for overlapping forms of oppression and exclusion, or in some cases co-optation of these women's ideas and work. We spoke of resisting a constant push to be pigeonholed into roles we did not want to be in, positions difficult to move away from once we agreed to hold them. Similar experiences echo in the narratives of WFOC in this chapter.

**1960s-1970s: A Time of Political Resistance Through Filmmaking and the Study of Film**

***The LA Rebellion, Julie Dash, and Yvonne Welbon***

In 1969, UCLA began an affirmative action program in ethno-communications program in partnership with the department of film and television, to begin an initiative that would respond to a call for more inclusivity of Communities of Color in film. Despite only operating for four years, closing in 1973, this program marks a significant historical shift for film school pedagogical intervention towards inclusivity[1]. As a result, the formation of a group of young Black UCLA graduate student filmmakers, began to challenge white normative film culture in academia and in the industry by making narrative and documentary films that spoke to the experiences of the Black community—they were called the LA Rebellion. Of the twenty-seven

[1] I also want to note that an Ethno-Communications program emerged from a different department, the Department of Asian American Studies, in 1996 and is still going strong. There is a multi-racial and multiethnic history to this program that craters to students interested in bridging Ethnic Studies and communications research/media production.

filmmakers in this group, fourteen of these filmmakers were Black Women, comprising a majority of the group's members. Amongst these filmmakers was Julie Dash, the first Black woman to write and direct a feature length narrative film with theatrical distribution in the U.S.—proving that educational practices that intentionally recruit and support marginalized students, have the potential to impact and shift popular film culture at large.

In the accompanying book for her film, *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash discusses how she never dreamt of becoming a filmmaker. Dash writes, "My ambitions […] were stifled by what I thought possible for me as a Black child. My dreams were also molded by the cinema and television stories, where the likes of me didn't even exist" (Dash, 1992, pp.1-2). Dash then writes of how she was first introduced to filmmaking at the Studio Museum in Harlem where she and a group of Black artists "[discovered] the power of making and redefining [their] images on the screen" (Dash, 1992, pp.1-2). She went on to receive a degree in filmmaking from City College in New York and moved to Los Angeles, because she had heard that Black filmmakers were making narrative films in Los Angeles, and she along with many other Black filmmakers in New York, were primarily making documentary films. Dash had clear plans to attend UCLA's film school and also had all of the qualifications which proved her to be a strong candidate. However, she was denied admission on a technicality—one of her three letters of recommendation was never submitted.

Dash was encouraged by a young Black man at the American Film Institute (AFI) to apply for a fellowship, and she became the youngest fellow admitted to AFI where she continued her film education. Dash has made animation, documentary, and narrative films throughout her career, choosing her genres for practical and aesthetic reasons (Dash, 1992). She is a prominent figure for WFOC filmmakers. Her openness about the sacrifices, hardships, and they ways she

navigated her pursuit of a film education in order to realize her work as a filmmaker, is a history which resonates with all WFOC filmmakers.

***Yvonne Welbon: Sisters in Cinema***

In 2001, Yvonne Welbon completed her dissertation, *Sisters in Cinema: Case Studies of Three First-Time Achievements Made by African American Women Directors in the 1990s,* and made a documentary (also titled *Sisters in Cinema*); these works contain interviews with prominent Black women filmmakers, and are a testament to Welbon's efforts to historicize the achievements of Black women in film. In an interview, Welbon describes the driving force behind her work in the following way:

> *When I started graduate school, I knew the name of one Black woman filmmaker, and her name was Julie Dash. And I did not know any other Black filmmakers, there weren't any at the school. It was really odd; it didn't feel right. I knew I wasn't the only Black woman who was interested in studying or making film. It's not good for people to work in isolation. It's not healthy (Juhasz, 2001, p. 267).*

Amongst Welbon's many contributions to the historicizing[2] of the achievements of Black women in film is her recognition of the educational achievements of Black women filmmakers such as Kathleen Collins Prettyman's completion of a graduate film studies program in France in 1971 and the subsequent lack of support she received in Hollywood for her script *Women, Sisters, and Friends.* Welbon also commemorates Jessie Maple's graduation from WNET-TV and the Third-World Newsreel training programs in 1972 and 1973 respectively. Constantly shifting positions between historian, maker, scholar, and producer, "an entrepreneur by constitution, Welbon moves from field to field, medium to medium, situating herself wherever to best accomplish her immediate goals" (Juhasz, 2001, p. 263). Her ability to move between mediums, disciplines,

[2] Information in this paragraph is gathered from Welbon's historical timeline of significant events for Black women film directors found on the website: http://sistersincinema.com/african-american-women-filmmakers/

genres, and projects is a characteristic she shares with other WFOC in film[3]. In the companion book for her documentary titled *Women of Vision: Eighteen Histories in Feminist Film and Video,* film scholar, Alexandra Juhasz writes about how Welbon's career,

> *…marks a correction to some of [her] earlier observations. Where [Juhasz] had suggested that fields of art, academia, business, and the 'industry' were distinct and isolated, Welbon points to a generation that may change independent media by attempting to destroy these artificial and limiting boundaries (Juhasz, 2001, p. 264).*

In these ways, Yvonne Welbon is a significant influence for the work I hope to do in dismantling the boundaries imposed upon WFOC in art, academia, and the film industry. Her sensibility to navigate the arena of film and academia with such authority reminds me of the power that comes with *La Mestiza* consciousness as presented by Gloria Anzaldúa:

> *La Mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals, and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101)*

Welbon sought out missing pieces of history, creating spaces for sisterhood where none existed and proved that borders between these disciplines did not meet the needs of Black women in film in their quest to reclaim and make whole the histories ignored, forgotten, or lost. She is an exemplary figure to follow in the work that must be done to study the experiences of WFOC in film school, how these experiences might be informed by systemic racism and sexism in the film industry, and most importantly, how to pursue wholeness for these emerging filmmakers within the context of their education.

Welbon discusses how she struggled in film school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where the film program was ill equipped to meet her needs as they had never had a

[3] Here I am referring to the work of Chicana filmmakers such as Lourdes Portillo and Sylvia Morales; as well as the experiences of WFOC filmmakers captured in the following works: (Dash, 1992; Fregoso, 2001; Diawara, 1993; Juhasz, 2001)

Black female student before. Her own experiences in film school informed her work as a filmmaker, and as an academic and vice versa. Welbon and Dash both carried their identities and their wealth of experiences into their studies and into their filmmaking. Both of these women speak to the challenges they faced as Black women filmmakers, in academia and in the industry. Their autobiographical accounts of these experiences create maps for future generations of WFOC filmmakers to gain critical understandings of oppressive systems that await them in film studies and the industry. Their stories also speak to trails blazed—trails we may learn from in a creating pedagogies and programs that recognize and cultivate the wealth of knowledge found in WFOC filmmakers.

***A Cinema of Her Own: Lourdes Portillo Reclaims Her Narrative Identities***

During a visual life history interview with Lourdes Portillo, the iconic filmmaker shared her experiences as a daughter, mother, wife, and filmmaker (POV, 2010). Portillo was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, spent time growing up in Mexicali and the U.S. bordering town, Calexico, California, and when she was thirteen years old, her parents immigrated the entire family to La Puente in Los Angeles, California. The home the Portillo family bought during this time remains with the family today. Portillo recounts the story of how at the young age of thirteen, she would be the one to lead in the process of buying the house because she was the only person in her family who spoke English well enough. When asked what that was like, she responded, "It was normal, that's what had to be done." She has carried that same sense of conviction and tenacity into her commitment to her filmmaking throughout her career. Her love for cinema began as a young girl in Mexico, growing up with a movie theater nearby, and she fondly remembers her frequent trips to watch movies and being mesmerized by the different points of view the cinematography would explore. Ironically, as she migrated to the geographic heart of American

cinema, Portillo’s access to the cineplex would be limited in more ways than one as she continued to grow up in the U.S.

Portillo recounts how the move to Los Angeles was a painful tragedy for her young self—how she felt as though she was moving from a place that cherished her and welcomed her culturally, to one that would want to see her destroyed. The Portillo family moved to a Los Angeles suburb in the 1950’s where they were the only Mexican American family in a white neighborhood. Portillo’s early life is marked by this move into racist spaces. Her resiliency further developed as she came into her Mexican American identity. It birthed a drive to see more representations of her community in movies—movies that would represent with dignity and truth.

During the time when Portillo was growing up and going to the *cine*, cinematic and televised representations of Mexican Americans in the U.S. were largely dehumanizing, one-dimensional, and stereotypical. Historian, Arthur G. Pettit, writes about the common stereotypes of Mexican characters exhibited in American cinema between 1946 and 1976, stating that three prevalent characters reappear in popular films of the time: “the dark lady, the bandido, and the clown” (Pettit & Showalter, 1980, p. 203). The dark lady character is rarely developed beyond the trope of a temporary “bed mate” to the white protagonist only to eventually be abandoned for a white woman who could provide white children (Pettit & Showalter, 1980, p. 203). The bandido trope represents the one-dimensional villain and criminal that Mexican men portrayed on screen. In the 1950’s Western cinema would expand this trope to include what Pettit refers to as the “bad bandido” and the “not-so-bad bandido,” however, despite this push for a slightly more interesting rival for the anglo hero, there was a clear refusal to develop a single Mexican character with complexity enough to embody good and bad, albeit human, qualities. The third

trope, the clown, refers to the characters written as sympathetic sidekicks, where the primary and only narrative function is comedic relief. None of the characters that fall into these tropes represent fully developed and complex humans. Such was the cinematic culture of the times when Lourdes Portillo would be forming her identity as a Mexican American woman and aspiring filmmaker.

Entering and acclimating to new challenges that would come with her identity in this cultural context proved to be a challenge that Portillo would reclaim in order to fuel her own cinematic ventures. She talks with admiration about the cultural significance of going to the movies as a great form of entertainment in the Mexican community and how she had grown up with a *Cine* (movie theater) near home. However, in Los Angeles, she had a harder time getting to the movies because she needed to go by car. [4]

Upon graduating high school, Portillo began to meet young people who lived and worked in Hollywood. One of her friends, whose father was a screenwriter, asked her to help with a documentary film he was making for Britannica Films. Portillo claimed she did not know a thing about making movies, but her friend insisted, and Portillo agreed to come along and help where she could. She recalls meeting a crew made up of all UCLA film students and being the odd one out. However, the experience proved to be a positive one for her.

> *'It was wonderful to finally see how the mechanical actions make a film and I took to it immediately. [...] The producer, told me, you're the only one who knows what they're doing— I thought, really?! Alright. This is for me. This is something that I really love. And I understood film— intuitively' (POV, 2010).*

She was moved by this validation that she was attuned to the profession of making movies in an *intuitive* way. This reflection stood out to me in particular because of the way Portillo recalls

[4] Latinx folks in the U.S. were named the most frequent moviegoers per capita in 2018 by Variety magazine. Watching movies is still a significant part of Latinx culture.

being compared to UCLA film students, who undoubtedly had more clout on a film set. This moment illustrates the ways in which WFOC draw from various forms of knowledge to inform their practices, often yielding more effective results, because as she names it, the work becomes *intuitive*.

After this experience, Portillo would go on to take a break from filmmaking while she began her studies at Mount Sac College, worked as a dental assistant to pay for her schooling, and got married. Quite soon after, Portillo and her husband, moved to San Francisco where she would go on to have children. To this day, San Francisco is the city Portillo refers to as home, a city for which she has deep love and gratitude because of how diverse and welcoming it is to her, her artistry and her community. She says that living in San Francisco allowed her to build bridges to the many communities around the world in which she had found home as well.

### *1979 and The State of Chicana/o/x Cinema*

In 1979, Portillo met Latina poet and filmmaker Nina Serrano, and the two of them went on to make a fictional film together—co-writing, co-directing, and co-editing throughout the process. During the time of making their film *After the Earthquake*, Portillo was pregnant with her third child (POV, 2010). This same year, Chicana filmmaker, Sylvia Morales, made her film, *Chicana*—disrupting the sexism that permeated the Chicano Film Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Film scholars Rosa Linda Fregoso and Chon Noriega write extensively of the political power and significance of the Chicano Film Movement. In her book *The Bronze Screen*, Fregoso synthesizes a definition of Chicano cinema in the following way: "The project of Chicano Cinema may succinctly be summed up as the documentation of social reality through oppositional forms of knowledge about Chicanos" that are not simply reactionary to oppressive and racist narratives, but progressive in their reclaiming of narrative and political power amidst

the context of contemporary political conditions (1993, pp. xiv-xv). This is indeed significant because while some Chicanx films might demonstrate progress in antiracist representation of the Chicanx community, films might be reproducing structures of sexism and other forms of oppression. Fregoso also writes of the aims of a Chicano Cinema which centers on: the demystification of film, the decolonization of minds, the reflective and open-ended, the altering of consciousness, effecting social change, and using a Chicano film language and is created "by, for, and about" the Chicanx community (1993, p. xvii). I believe these qualities serve as a good model for defining criteria for culturally responsive approaches to film analysis and pedagogy.

Around this same time, in a college classroom in East Los Angeles during the academic year of 1978-1979, education scholar Daniel G. Solórzano and his students engaged in a Freirean problem-posing approach which led them to identify problematic media representations of Chicanos, analyze the causes that led to the problems they observed and used their analysis to inform their stance against deficit representations that would emerge from gang films set to release later that year (Solórzano, 1989). The students posed the following questions: "Why are Chicanos portrayed negatively in the mass media?" and "Whose interests are served by these negative portrayals?" (Solórzano, 1989, p. 220). This inquiry empowered Professor Solórzano's students not only to conduct thorough research around the production of the films, but also to inform their political acts of resistance in strategically boycotting the release of gang film *Boulevard Nights*. Though multiple factors likely contributed to the delay and halt of the release of further gang films during this time, the students and community members who came together certainly caused disruption for the release of these damaging images and portrayals. This example is poignant in identifying the value of building connections between media portrayals, self and community identities, and the right to demand portrayals of one's community born from

dignity. Perhaps the most impressive contribution of this work, is the fact that Professor Solórzano found a way to begin this work in the classroom and create the space needed for this project to be led and carried out by students into their communities beyond the classroom.

**Looking Forward: Conceptualizing a WFOC Film School**

***Lourdes Portillo's Self-Education***

Lourdes Portillo claims that while her younger brothers were actively involved in the Chicano movement, she was having a Chicana movement of her own, within herself. It is precisely because WFOC filmmakers such as Julie Dash, Yvonne Welbon, Sylvia Morales, Lourdes Portillo and many more, have chosen to interrogate, disrupt and reclaim narratives about their communities, that we now have roadmaps to redefining inclusivity in cinema from an intersectional vantage point. Where WFOC filmmakers have had to teach themselves, and forge their own paths towards becoming filmmakers, we as educational researchers, filmmakers, and teachers, can tap into the wealth of knowledge that these pedagogical practices can offer current and future filmmakers of Color in film school.

Though Portillo credits her film education to the act of making films herself, she did eventually graduate with an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1985 (POV, 2010). Two years later she went on to receive an Oscar nomination for her documentary film *Las Madres de Mayo,* which she co-directed with Susana Muñoz. She discusses how the Oscar nomination opened many doors for her career, and while recognition in Hollywood, or the Academy of Motion Pictures and Arts, was never on her agenda, her acclaim in these mainstream spaces would empower her to fund future film projects and continue to do work that she loved. She went on the make many more films, and amongst them was *The Devil Never Sleeps* (1995), a genre bending documentary about the mysterious death of her uncle in Mexico.

Portillo says this is the first film she could fully call her own. She boldly incorporated experimental, melodramatic, comedic, and documentary aesthetics to arrive at a cinema of her own. Today, Portillo welcomes visitors to her website with the following message:

> *This is an exhilarating time to be a documentary filmmaker. In my own work and in the work around me, I see the possibilities of visual storytelling opening up on every front. True, each generation of nonfiction filmmakers devises new ways to observe life and probe its underlying truths. But I believe that, as individuals and as a community, we are on the cusp of inventing new languages that will change the way future documentaries are made and how they engage and enliven viewers. I am glad to be part of the change (Portillo, 2016).*

Portillo made many sacrifices to pursue her passion for filmmaking. Because of her work, and the work of Black Women and other WFOC filmmakers, aspiring WFOC filmmaker have an example of what it looks like to reclaim your story and continue a commitment for social justice by leaning fully into who you are, what you know, and what you love.

***WFOC In Academia: Operationalizing Storytelling as Intervention***

In this section, I turn to the voices of WFOC in academia to examine a growing body of counternarratives that emerge from a feminist and critical race theoretical standpoint. I do this to foreground the manner in which the counter-narratives of WFOC in academia, through feminist and intersectional lenses, engage the simultaneity and complexity of their lived experiences and needs. I specifically draw from the scholarships of Black and Latina scholars, who represent one of the most marginalized populations of enrolled doctoral students in the U.S., in anticipation of find that WFOC are also enrolling in film production programs in low numbers. In part, I also expect to see this because when I requested enrollment and graduation data from UCLA’s film production programs, disaggregated across race and gender, I was told that they could not give me this data because many majors had fewer than ten, non-white, female students, and to release this information would be a potential breach of confidentiality. This demonstrated to me that we

are indeed looking at a minoritized group of students, in regard to designing a qualitative study which aims to center their experiences, it is helpful to learn from Women who have navigated similar isolation in higher education. By applying these counter-narrative traditions to this study, I hope to arrive at a richly informed reimagining of film school spaces as told by WFOC. A reimagination which illuminates, honors, and strives to learn from the lived experiences. The goal is to then collectively offer a proposal, in the form of a film, for pedagogically inclusive practices for film school education, as interventions for the film and television industry's lack of representation, distortion of narratives, and silencing of women and POC. This project conceptualizes and enacts the process of storytelling as intervention.

In her testimonio, "From the Borderlands to the Midland: A Latina's Journey Into Academia," Lisa Y Flores takes readers through the complexity of her lived experience in becoming a tenured professor and a mother (2020). She ends this beautiful piece with suggestions for better practices for fostering more welcoming spaces for WFOC in academia, both as students and as faculty. She describes how femtorship between women is a necessary way to learn navigational skills, emphasizing the need to share stories, specifically those about our struggle. This resonated with me because struggles are often the most difficult parts of our story to share. They represent the ways that we have confirmed self-doubt, the thoughts that led to the manifestation of impostor syndrome. These are the parts we often want to hide because to expose them would be to expose ourselves as outsiders. Yet, Flores is right, keeping these stories to ourselves only disempowers us further. We enter mindsets where we feel as though we don't belong, because of perceived expectations that others have of us, coupled with the dominant, deficit views and assumptions about our identities and positionalities. If left to our own rationalizing of the reasons why we struggle with thoughts of self-doubt, we lose sight of a path

forward in our pursuits. However, in sharing stories of struggles, especially in the company of like-minded people and people who might have experienced similar feelings, these thoughts are interrupted and placed in a new and communal space where they can be addressed, disarmed, and redirected.

Many scholars of Color credit a sense of community for their persistence and success in schooling. In a study about the educational experiences of African Americans in a doctor of education program, researcher scholars, Shametrice Davis, Leslie Reese, and Cecilia Griswold, stated that students attributed how having higher numbers of students and faculty of Color in a given room made students feel comfortable discussing issues of race and white privilege (Davis et. al, 2020). Davis and her colleagues also described how the structure of the program in keeping cohorts together throughout, contributed to a positive correlation with program satisfaction for these doctoral students. A salient contribution of this article was in the disruption of assumed narratives about African American students, stating that these students were third and fourth generation college students, and came from a middle-class background. Assumptions had been made about these students being first generation or from working class backgrounds, and the authors write that it is not that the condition of being first generation or working class is a deficit, but rather how imposing certain narratives on students can be damaging. Davis et. al. discussed the dangers of stereotype threat which encompasses "a fear associated with confirming pervasively held low expectations for certain groups that itself acts to depress performance" (2020). In conceptualizing how these struggles might function in film school settings, I have definitely noticed a trend amongst minoritized students to minimize struggles, perhaps because of the competitive demands of the film school environment. Additionally, I anticipate that the way a WFOC film student might experience stereotype threat will be bi-directional: in her

internalization, as it impacts her performance in the program, and secondly in how these damaging beliefs inform her voice as a filmmaker, running the risk of reproducing the same stereotypes in her work. I would be interested to know whether WFOC film students had experiences such as these and whether they see the potential strength of incorporating these navigational methods of creating cohorts specifically aimed at fostering spaces where Students of Color feel comfortable discussing race and forms of oppression.

Based on what I know so far about film school experiences, I do not expect to find that as institutions, film schools sufficiently and systematically support Students of Color in combating stereotype threat, imposter syndrome, and furthermore in creating pedagogically safe spaces to discuss their lived experiences. I anticipate that I will find how students might arm themselves with their own tools of resistance, but I do not suspect that it is common practice for film programs to intentionally, and institutionally, address these issues. I also anticipate that there will be examples of film school educators who have implemented critical consciousness in this respect, but this work, as we have seen in other disciplines, likely falls to faculty of Color and women faculty in ways that render this labor invisible and taxing because it is not institutionally implemented, valued, or supported.

Upon reviewing literature and narratives across disciplines and genres, I am left reflecting on the following questions: How can we tap into that pedagogical pulse that cultivates and promotes a coming to voice for minority students within film school classrooms? How can we teach film in ways that properly identify historic and contemporary problems of representation, the causes of these problems, and perhaps most importantly, solutions that lead to the reclaiming narrative power?

***A Future for Racial and Social Justice in Film Pedagogy*** After the pandemic of 2020, we find ourselves learning and engaging with one another remotely more often than before. Many teachers, parents, and students are struggled to recreate an educational environment during a pandemic which caused a significant rise in unemployment, and limited resources for space and interaction. Coupled with the power of the Black Lives Matter movement, this moment in our history called upon all of us living here in the U.S. to reimagine a future for social justice and education which aims to empower marginalized people. It is through this lens that I examine issues of epistemological racism and sexism in film schools and conceptualize a responsible reclaiming of narrative through the process of filmmaking.

Feminist scholar and educator, bell hooks has moved between disciplines to engage critical film theory in intersectional ways. Her work in *Reel to Real* illuminates the responsibility of filmmakers to engage in critical interrogations of how they represent race, and she also points out how the only work being done in this regard is seen in the work of filmmakers of Color (2009). Ava Duvurnay, one of the most prominent contemporary filmmakers engaging in this work, and the only Black woman filmmaker to be represented as a director in the top 100 films of 2018, aptly interrogates this issue in the following way:

> *'So often we're trying to climb this ladder that leads nowhere for us...Stay centered, I really think that's key...But the onus is not on the marginalized to educate and remedy the problem, because we didn't build the problem.' 'Time will tell ... whether folks want to point and stare at the Black woman filmmaker who made a certain kind of film, and pat her on the back, or if they want to actually roll up their sleeves and do a little bit of work so that there can be more of me coming through' (Wallace, 2016).*

I can see the potential for a significant part of this work to begin in film school classrooms. Students have a right to feel welcomed and nurtured in their education, because without this space of nurturance, they would be unable to fully access the knowledge and education necessary for artistic expression and an empowered and informed understanding of the society they live in.

Unfortunately, the students we most often fail in this respect, are students from minoritized backgrounds.

In her chapter titled, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” Gloria Anzaluda writes about how she was scolded in school and told to speak English. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it go back to Mexico where you belong” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 75). The work of Gloria Anzaldúa has resonated in and beyond the Latinx community of education scholars in powerful ways. Many have found community in her words and have carried Anzaldúa’s words back into their communities through their own work. Anzaldúa has expressed her intersectional experience as a Chicana feminist queer woman in the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S. This intersecting identity, as Anzaldua writes, demands a way of knowing and seeing the world in multiple ways simultaneously. Anzaldua reframes this navigational knowledge as a strength of Chicanas and names the women who engage this inbetweenness, *neplanteras*.

> *We need neplanteras whose strength lies in our ability to mediate and move between identities and positions. Necesitamos neplanteras to inspire us to cross over racial and other borders. To become neplanteras, we must choose to occupy intermediary spaces between worlds, to build bridges between worlds like the ancient chamanas who choose to see through the holes in reality, choose to perceive something from multiple angles. The act of seeing the whole in our cultural conditioning can help us to separate out from over identifying with personal and cultural identities transmitted by both our own groups and the dominant culture, to shed their toxic values and ways of life. It takes energy and courage to name ourselves and grow beyond cultural and self-imposed boundaries. As agents of awakening, neplanteras remind us of each other’s search for wholeness (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015, p. 93).*

Marginalized students face many battles in and beyond the classroom. As many of these students do not have the privilege of using a single method with which to navigate the world, because in the popular words of Audre Lorde, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single issue lives.” Their existence, survival, and success within an institution that

was designed to oppress, demands constant adaptation and attunement to many ways of being. This search for wholeness can make for a wayward journey lined with confusion. There is a sort of ambiguity brought forth by navigating the world of education through multiple ways of being. In this regard, Anzaldúa calls for a toleration of that ambiguity in order to move forward. I would argue that now we are in an era that calls for the celebration of that ambiguity, so that teachers and students alike might create pedagogies born from these celebrations of who they are and what they know.

In this celebration of ambiguity, as demonstrated in the earlier example for Professor Daniel Solórzano's college classroom in 1978-1979, a crucial component of this work was the way created spaces where students could lead research, form their own aims, and evaluate the outcomes for themselves. Educators must also acknowledge the limitations of their understanding of a students' experiences and attempt to mitigate that gap of understanding through an invitation for the student to take on agency in the sharing of their experiences in spaces of learning. This would in turn give way for the educator to then offer ways for students to connect their lived experiences and embodied knowledge to their academic experiences. As Bernal writes, the pedagogical value of acknowledging students as holders of knowledge is transformational (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Through a critical race and LatCrit theoretical lens, Bernal offers raced-gendered epistemologies as one approach of validating the experiences of Students of Color and argues that these epistemologies must be implemented in conjunction with culturally relevant pedagogies and methodologies, that incorporate the use of counterstories, *testimonios*, oral histories and other ways of sharing stories (Delgado Bernal, 2002). I will discuss some of these approaches in further detail in my methods chapter.

Against traditional approaches to education, it is indeed a radical thought to reverse the direction of the transmission of information from student to teacher. However, this approach could yield transformative experiences for film students who have been encouraged to write and make films about “what they know” only to find, that “what they know” is unrelatable and undesired. If students of marginalized backgrounds have only been partially or conditionally invited into the classroom, it inevitably follows that their academic success is also hindered by that same partiality. “It is work that the soul performs. […] In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 101-2). When students are invited to become whole in spaces of learning, their potential for academic success does not end with them, but in turn holds potential for students made whole to aid their classmates and future generations in their own search for wholeness. In this regard, Lisa Flores’ call (2020) for WFOC to engage in the telling of their struggles and stories with one another, I look to the Latina Feminist tradition of *platicas,* which draw from conversational storytelling and reflection to arrive at deeper revelation about ones experiences in the context of communal and collective knowledge (Espino et. al., 2010). Michelle Espino, Susana Muñoz, and Judy Marquez, Kiyama present a *trenza*, or braid, of the *platicas* in a beautiful weaving of their lived experiences, celebrations, and struggles, in order to highlight the navigational wisdom born from this practice. Through these practices, students and scholars of Color can build community and create space in historically oppressive spaces and thus engage in transformational resistance together—building bridges that allow them to stand between culture, language, race, sexual orientation, ability, disability, and class divisions.

It is imperative to never forget or underestimate the harm that oppressive education can cause. Anzaldúa writes to the internalized effects of living on divided borderlands:

> *Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity--we don't identify with Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness.* ***I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. A veces soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy,*** **lo soy** (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 85).

In order to break the cycle of canceling out or reproducing damaging representation, film students must understand their power and agency, rejecting the systemic practices that position them as objects. As Anzaldúa further explains, "the work of the mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (1987, p. 102). Through this collaborative research study, I will call on my sister *neplanteras*, WFOC filmmakers, to outline the paths their stories tell, so that we might build towards education practices for minoritized students that nurture and welcome them to their transformational work. In the following chapter I draw from theory across disciplines to inform a *directora's* theory of my own, which positions spaces of education and pedagogy as sites with potential to transform oppressive practices in film.

# Chapter 3

## A *Directora's* Theory

In this chapter I will provide an overview of how I am theorizing my approach to this dissertation study as a filmmaker researcher. I will begin by situating film schools as sites with potential to transform narrative oppression in the film industry and beyond. Secondly, I provide an example of how I engaged Chicana Feminist methods and epistemologies through filmmaking-based research with my family. I then describe how this study operationalizes a CRT in education framework along with a community cultural wealth analytical framework. Finally, I end with a reflection of the work of John L. Jackson Jr., who designed a graduate seminar on using filmmaking as a method of presenting research. This reflection situates the questions which informed my methodological design, which will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

### Film Schools as Sites for Transformational Resistance

Historically, the institutions of education have proven to be exclusionary and discriminatory against women and POC through denial of access, the segregation of whites and non-whites, and the ways in which education functioned as a site for the reproduction of social division by limiting the scope of educational experiences that certain minority groups, such as Latinx students, could attain (Gonzalez, 1985, 2001; Donato & Hanson, 2012; Garcia, Yosso,& Barajas 2012). Education scholars, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso name the function of schools as conflicting, stating that, "Educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p.26). With this understanding of schools as sites that hold the potential to inform, maintain, and disrupt oppression, I aim to theorize about a reimagining of film schools as sites which assume a responsibility to combat an industry of

narrative erasure for minoritized communities, by empowering minoritized students in their classrooms. According to Henry Giroux,

> *Radical educators have argued that the main functions of schools are the reproduction of the dominant ideology, its forms of knowledge, and the distribution of skills needed to reproduce the social division of labor… Schools were stripped of their political innocence and connected to the social and cultural matrix of capitalist rationality (1983, p. 257-8).*

It follows then to seek a philosophy of education for its liberatory potential to combat the oppressive functions of schools. In this way I will provide an overview for my theoretical frameworks in how I will approach this work as a filmmaker researcher. I will begin with discussing Paulo Freire's philosophy for transforming educational oppression through the validation and centering of student's inherent knowledge. I then turn to the work of Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal to conceptualize an engagement in critical media production as a form of transformational resistance in film education. Finally, I explore the work of Chicana Feminist scholars to define my own approach to engaging in the work of creating a dissertation film which could also serve as an example of transformational resistance.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire writes with a voice of radical conviction. He employs language that names the violence of oppression and calls educators into the battle against oppressive practices. Freire lays bare the weakness in a traditional banking method of education wherein students are assumed to occupy the position of an object, waiting to be filled with knowledge, and how this practice neglects the embodied knowledge students carry with them (Freire, 2000).

When film students are taught under the assumption that they are void of knowledge, they learn that certain pieces of their knowledge are irrelevant, inappropriate, or not relatable to their creative and academic work. In their aims to succeed in the classroom, film students may

learn to cope with this tension through compartmentalization, and over time learn to repress their own creative voice and develop the skills that translate to the language of film that dominates the industry. It is at these crossroads of negotiating identities that one finds the possibility for resistance and transformative change. Freire identifies the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed by naming the ways in which the oppressed "host" their own oppression:

> *How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be the "hosts" of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which* ***to be*** *is* ***to be like****, and* ***to be like*** *is* ***to be like the oppressor,*** *this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization (Freire, 2000, p.48).*

According to Freire, it is through the process of a student's "conscientização," a coming to consciousness, of their own power to host and dispel oppression, that the oppressed student is able to develop a critique of oppressive structures and practices to move towards liberation (Freire, 2000). He warns that this coming to consciousness must not be limited by pessimism.

***Transformational Resistance Through Critical Media Literacy and Production***

The work of education scholars, Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal, in transformational resistance illuminates a framework that identifies the relationship between critical consciousness and a commitment to social justice and liberation (2001). Through the framework of resistance as presented by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal, I conceptualize an orientation for my study which aims to produce films and research which could be categorized as a form transformational resistance through what I am referring to as critical media production. On the following page I have adapted Solórzano and Delgado Bernal's model to illustrate this potential.[5]

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[5] See Figure 1 Defining the Concept of Resistance in "Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework" by Daniel Solórzano & Dolores Delgado Bernal, 2001.

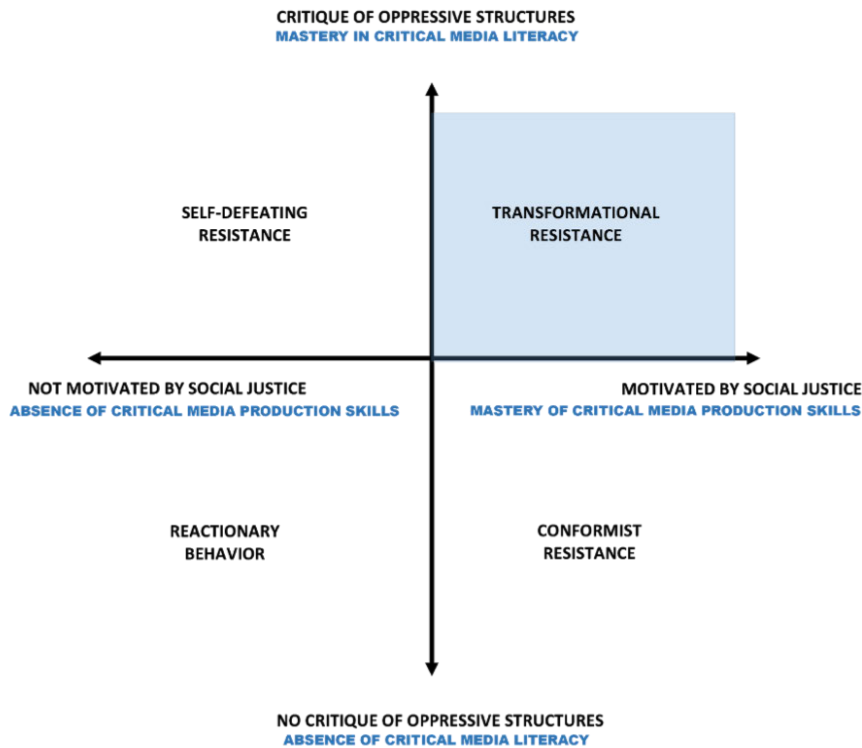



*Figure 3.1, Illustrating Mastery of Critical Media Production*

The above model illustrates two dimensions of how students engage in oppositional behavior by examining the degree to which they demonstrate an informed critique of oppressive structures, and a commitment to social justice. In adapting this model for film students, I draw from the work of Tara J. Yosso in an application of the mastery of critical race media literacy as a necessary component for an informed critique of oppressive structures (2002). In conceptualizing what a media project which is truly committed to social justice encompasses, I reflect on the work of Rosa Fregoso, Chon Noriega, Leon Campbell, Carlos Cortez, Daniel G. Solórzano, Tara J. Yosso, Lourdes Portillo, Sylvia Morales, bell hooks, Yvonne Welbon, Julie Dash, and Ava DuVernay. Through this reflection, and my own sensibility as a filmmaker, I arrive at the following guiding principles of developing a mastery of critical media production which is situated at the intersections of research and filmmaking:

1. *A reflective understanding of one's epistemologies, and how this orients the work (both creative and scholarly works).*
2. *A commitment to locating the sociopolitical context of the work through a thorough practice of research and creative development.*
3. *An ongoing process for reviewing the work in community with people who have either lived through the events portrayed in the media, which is produced, or whose lived experiences are meaningfully relational to those portrayed.*
4. *A commitment to making the media works produced accessible to the populations they aim to represent, both in language and access for screening/reading.*
5. *A demonstrated critique of systems of oppression relevant to the world of the media works.*
6. *A clear proposition for how to transform oppressive conditions portrayed in the world of the film.*

These guiding principles towards critical media production inform a pedagogical shift in research, filmmaking, and dissemination of scholarship (whether in written or visual form) beyond academic communities. As a researcher filmmaker, these principles guide my approach to establishing a paradigm of critical race methodologies that incorporate filmic methods and theories intersectionally. In later sections I discuss my development of FilmCrit, and Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling, however, these principles represent the first iteration of how I informed my methodological, theoretical, and epistemic frameworks for this study.

The film *13th*, by Ava DuVernay (2016), exemplifies these principles. DuVernay presents a historical overview and contemporary context for the ways in which the prison industrial complex has essentially created a system in which Black Americans remain marginalized and stripped of civil liberties. She consults with activists, scholars, and inmates to present a full picture of this social injustice. She works in community to inform paths forward and communicates these paths clearly. She produced this work with the online streaming platform, Netflix. An affordable streaming platform that many Americans have. Occasionally, the film will be available for free on YouTube, for extended periods of time. For example, early on in its release the film was available for free for short windows, and currently, as a direct result

of the Black Lives Matter movement and the need to educational tools, DuVernay and Netflix have put the film up on YouTube for an extended period of time. DuVernay is a filmmaker who exemplifies the way we must move between sensibilities in order to properly serve our marginalized communities through our art.

In conceptualizing what the different forms of oppositional behavior might arise in a film school setting, I will discuss the forms of oppositional behavior as outlined by Solórzano and Delgado Bernal and provide examples. Reactionary behavior is seen in the actions of students who do not demonstrate a commitment to social justice, nor an informed critique of oppressive structures. Students operating in this form of oppositional behavior might refuse to see these pursuits as necessary to their work as filmmakers, or simply lack the awareness as a result of internalizing oppressive ideologies. Self-defeating resistance is the result of falling into the trap of pessimism and it is the most common form of resistance we encounter in schools. It is the resistance to oppressive structures through oppositional behavior by students who may be exercising some critique of oppressive conditions, however, the students lack the motivation to seek social justice, perhaps due to feelings of futility. These students in turn replicate and reinforce the oppressive structures they intend to resist. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal give the example of a student who decides to drop out of school (2001). In this example, the student's rejection of their own internalization of consciousness of the oppressor prompts the student's decision to leave the system all together, but in fact this further marginalizes the student. It is because the student has not come to recognize the possibility for transformation that their actions are motivated by immediate changes to oppressive conditions and expressed in self-defeating ways, without a commitment to transforming these conditions. Evident here, are the ways in which the oppressed might inadvertently contribute to the process of their own dehumanization

by hosting the oppressor and rejecting the oppressor's influence through acts of self-defeat. This might be exemplified by film students dropping out or in changing concentrations out of directing or writing when they had intended on becoming writer directors. It might also be evidenced in the way students take on film projects that are not aligned with their critical perspectives. I anticipate that many students of Color struggle with self-defeating resistance, Conformist resistance is found in the actions of students who possess a desire and motivation towards social justice but lack an informed critique of oppressive structure. This can often be seen in the ways filmmakers of Color focus solely on the numbers of minority representation in media, and not in the quality of representation in terms of providing full, humanized characters and stories. Students enacting this form of oppositional behavior often believe that they are engaging in transformational work, but because they lack an informed critique, the result is a reproduction of oppressive tropes. Freire writes:

> *In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform (Freire, 2000, p. 49).*

Freire establishes that transformation is key to revolutionary progress. Transformational resistance, the final form of resistance, is the practice of students coming into critical consciousness and acting against oppressive conditions that limit their education in order to further opportunities for growth and push for societal changes. Students able to act in transformational resistance, have not only uncovered oppressive systems and the ways in which they have hosted that oppression, they have also, through the process of coming into this consciousness, uncovered the pieces of themselves they had been forced to leave outside the classroom walls. As outlined in my conceptualization of the tenets for critical media production, I believe film students can and should engage in this work in and beyond the classroom.

**Engaging Chicana Feminist Methods and Epistemologies Through Filmmaking**

As I mentioned in the prologue, I piloted a filmmaking approach to qualitative inquiry during a life history project I worked on with my own family. This enabled me to simultaneously assess the position I would be asking my collaborators/participants to take in a communal study such as this, and the choices I would have to face as a researcher/director. In addition to this, I was able to understand the pedagogical value of this method, in how the act of collaborating and co-constructing meaning through filmmaking, made space for teaching and learning with my family. This project aimed to challenge dominant narratives that Mexican Americans and Chicanos do not value education. One of my findings to come from this project, was how my parents' conceptualization of success was deeply rooted in notions of academic opportunity and achievement as well as the continual sharing of familial knowledge. Another finding from this project was the resistance evidenced in the ways in which my parents initially rejected a claim to a narrative position of authority that came with speaking on camera and assuming the role of a subject in a documentary. In fact, as I shared before, my father's words inspired the title of the film, *No Somos Famosos* (We're Not Famous), because when I first sat down with him to talk (without any cameras) about what we might explore in his interview for this project, he told me "Y yo porque? Si yo no soy famoso"— "Why me? I'm not famous." It is precisely because of this finding that I am pushing forward with this method of collaboration—because folks like my parents are not used to being asked about their lived experiences, and moreover, do not expect that their voices and likeness would be captured on film for others to bear witness to. It is important to use tools of storytelling at our disposal to further scholarship in direction that include communities who have historically been silenced. Ultimately, this study revealed some truths I had thought to know intimately, in a new light. Upon sharing drafts of the film with my

elder brothers, sister-in-laws, nieces and nephews, I found that the act of sitting together and watching my parents on a big screen shaped our conservations in new ways. My brothers and I reflected on the new depths we found in the ways my parents told their stories, and the ways the film was edited. My nephew reflected on how important his grandmother's occupation and experiences were, not only to our family, but the families she had spent her life serving as a childcare provider. We all expressed joy in this new artifact that we now shared as a family. My brothers went on to share it with their friends, and they recounted to me that many were moved to tears, stating that this was a work of art that felt like home, and that they could see their own parents in these representations of mine.

This project aimed to understand how our Mexican American/ Chicanx family conceptualizes success. I purposefully kept the research question broad because I wanted the conversations that emerged to shape how success is defined and explored conversationally, and I was worried that if I attempted to define this too closely, my own positionality as a member of the family would keep me from seeing emerging themes. I used in vivo coding and a secondary pass using a codebook based on a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). This enabled me to analyze the concepts that emerged from life history interviews I conducted with my parents and connect them to a framework of empowerment. I also gathered observational footage of family gatherings and significant events, such as family sleepovers, baseball games, and my father's birthday party. Finally, my last pass using creative coding to incorporate these scenes and observational footage in ways that made sense to the narratives that emerged from interviews.

Throughout this process, I engaged a Chicana feminist epistemology, which Dolores Delgado Bernal calls *cultural intuition,* to inform the ways in which my family and I

collaborated in this work (1998). Chicana feminist scholars such as Dolores Delgado Bernal, Gloria Anzaldúa, and many others have inspired Chicana writers and researchers to reject notions of objectivity that place their episteme at the margins of history and scholarship, and instead take up storytelling as intervention to these practices. These scholars emphasize reciprocity in methodological approaches in their commitment to expand epistemologies that are attuned to the experiences of Chicanas and their communities. Chicana feminist scholars embrace epistemologies as a continuity and communal development of *knowing* through the bodymindspirit. This scholarship has informed my identity as a researcher, and as Delgado Bernal writes, "the researcher is a subject in her research and her personal history is part of the analytical process" (1998, p.564). Her exploration of Chicana feminist epistemologies and the development of her concept of cultural intuition, as well as the methodological tools of *testimonios, platicas,* and critical race counterstorytelling as employed by Chicana and Latina feminist education scholars, are at the core of this work. I also put these concepts in conversation with Anzaldúa and Moraga's embodied fusion of bodymindspirit as a constant struggle towards my wholeness as a Chicana filmmaker/researcher.

Cultural intuition serves as a foundation for a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research (1998). Delgado Bernal describes an epistemology as "more than just a 'way of knowing' and can be more accurately defined as a 'system of knowing' that is linked to worldviews based on the conditions under which people live and learn" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 106; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Chicana feminist epistemologies reclaim agency over research practices and resist a tradition of epistemological racism, "which arises out of the social history and culture of the dominant race and is present in the current range of traditional research epistemologies—positivism to postmodernism and poststructuralism" ( Delgado Bernal, 1998, p.

563). Traditions of epistemological racism in educational research have intentionally and systemically erased the ways of knowing of POC and have disproportionately and negatively affected students and scholars of Color, especially in educational practices and policies. Delgado Bernal also discusses the dominance of a eurocentric epistemology, which is described as the knowing and understanding of the world "based on White privilege," which is "an invisible package of unearned assets" or a system of opportunities and benefits that is bestowed on an individual simply for being White" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 111). The problem inherent in this model is a) the belief that this way of knowing is the norm, and b) the practice of ignoring and/or delegitimizing the experiences, aspirations, and views of POC (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Delgado Bernal states that her work in theorizing a Chicana feminist epistemology is born out of a need to establish a paradigm that acknowledges the ways in which Chicanas are uniquely positioned to conduct research at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class. She argues that patriarchal and liberal feminist educational scholarship has failed Chicanas, and other WFOC with methodologies and epistemologies that only partially captured, and therefore misinterpreted or ignored their experiences all together. Delgado Bernal discusses that the divide amongst traditional notions of qualitative and quantitative methods of educational research is a debate that it is irrelevant to Chicana epistemologies, as both have exploited and misrepresented Chicanas, and instead claims that either approach holds potential in Chicana feminist scholarship with the proper epistemological foundations. Delgado Bernal's theorizing is rooted in what she refers to as *endarkened feminisms*[6], which include Black feminist thought, Chicana feminisms, and feminisms of all WFOC. Delgado Bernal's approach to establishing a Chicana feminist

[6] Delgado Bernal refers to *endarkened* feminisms similarly to Cynthia Dillard's (1997) definition, a contribution of Black feminist thought, and extends this definition to also include feminist thought of all WFOC.

epistemology in sisterhood with other WFOC, acknowledges the need for a new paradigm that adds to the collective effort to do educational research in the spirit of intersectionality.

> *Therefore, a Chicana epistemology must be concerned with the knowledge about Chicanas—about who generates an understanding of their experiences, and how this knowledge is legitimized or not legitimized. It questions objectivity, a universal foundation of knowledge, and the Western dichotomies of mind versus body, subject versus object, objective truth versus subjective emotion, male versus female (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 560).*

To come to her conceptualization of cultural intuition, Delgado Bernal draws from the work of Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin on "theoretical sensitivity" which outlines the personal sensitivity a researcher brings to their work through personal experience, existing literature, professional experience, and the analytical process (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Delgado Bernal emphasizes the significance of cultural intuition and how incorporating it into the research process proves to serve the complexities of the multifaceted ways Chicanas come to know what they know. One of the ways Delgado Bernal extends the concept of theoretical sensitivity is to redefine personal experience as possessing "lateral ties to the family and reverse ties to the past" thus including collective and community memory as a source for personal experience (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 564). I find this to be one of the most significant contributions of cultural intuition, as it directly names the process through which the researcher can harness the strengths that her personal standpoint affords her as a researcher.

Through personal experience a researcher is able to intuitively interpret the language and actions of her participants using her own specific sensitivity and awareness. This conceptualization not only challenges the possibility for objectivity, but also points to the strengths of intentionally naming the use of personal and collective memory to inform a research approach—where traditional methods of research, in their demands for objectivity, fail to recognize the influence of personal sensitivities to the work. By inviting personal and collective

memory into her work, the researcher is able to reexamine communal practices, such as storytelling, as informative and relevant to educational research, which again uniquely qualifies her interpretation.

A second component of cultural intuition is the review of existing literature which informs the construction of a theoretical framework and the ways in which that theoretical framework is applied to research and analysis of actual data. A third component of cultural intuition is professional experience. As faculty, WFOC are often met with skepticism over their professional qualifications and competency (Gutiérrez, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012), this component carries a significant importance to assert the professional input of the researcher. Delgado Bernal gives an example of how she is able to “move into the educational environment and gain insight into the lives of Chicana students more quickly than someone who has never worked in a school setting with Chicana students” (Delgado Bernal 1998, p. 566). The final and fourth component of cultural intuition is the analytical process which expands upon the understanding of it in theoretical sensitivity and places an emphasis on collaborating with participants (and in some cases co-researchers) in the analysis of data. This is another significant contribution of Delgado Bernal’s cultural intuition to research practices as it calls into question a researcher’s ability to appropriately interpret data without the contribution of member checking and collaboration with participants. This is also an important contribution to the efforts of fostering reciprocity in research practices, as there is an exchange of knowledge that cultivates community between researchers and participants through the analysis of the data. This process produces scholarship that is made more accessible to participants who otherwise may not have been able to engage with the work, with agency, before its publication.

Chicana feminist methodological approaches have also contributed to cultivating reciprocity in the research process. One such tool is that of the *testimonio*. In discussing the origins of *testimonio* Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodriguez write:

> *Although it is difficult to mark a historical moment of its inception, the testimonio has been inscribed and sanctioned as a literary mode since the 1970s, in large part as a result of the liberation efforts and the geopolitical resistance movements to imperialism in Third World nations. We come to understand this form of writing as part of the struggle of people of color for educational rights and for the recovery of our knowledge production (Reyes & Curry, 2012, p. 526).*

*Testimonio* has since been used across many disciplines as a qualitative method that foregrounds the voice and story of the narrator as a witness, and as an agent of knowledge. Though she does not claim to provide a universal definition for *testimonio*, Lindsey Pérez Huber offers a description of how one might frame a *testimonio* in educational research: *"Testimonios* are usually guided by the will of the narrator to tell events as she sees significant, and is often an expression of a collective experience, rather than the individual" (Huber, 2009, p. 644). As a methodological tool, the *testimonio* affords an opportunity to engage and capture collective and communal experience through storytelling. Giving agency to the narrator of the story, *testimonio* embraces a restructuring of hierarchy in qualitative methods that center the participant as knowledge holders and producers. The Latina Feminist Group compiled a powerful collection of testimonials in their book, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Acevedo, 2001). It is through these works that I located my own narrative drive and understood the nature of the project before me not just as a research study, but as an artistic venture through the bodymindspirit.

Rina Benmayor uses digital *testimonios,* in what she names as a "signature pedagogy" for the conscientização of her Latin@ students—centering the importance of students' agency in narrating their own testimony and lived experience as a way of coming to voice (Delgado Bernal,

Burciaga, & Carmona, 2017). This approach to reclaiming narrative by shifting agency and voice to the participants is one example of how a methodological choice can become a technological choice—in this sense bringing the tradition of *testimonio* into digital spaces enables a pedagogy not only of narrative, but also of authorship and voice.

Gloria Anzaldúa is famously known for her contributions in borderlands theory which expresses a "new mestiza consciousness" formed at the border of oppressive systems and the identity formation of the Self. She names a coming to consciousness in tandem with coming to voice. A part of this consciousness is the condition of living in perpetual transition, an inbetweenness—or she names this: Nepantla (an Aztec word meaning "torn between ways" (Anzaldúa 1987). Nepantla is a word I have clung to from the moment I read it. It is one of those words of which the meaning is known to Chicanas, in lived ways.

> *Because I, a mestiza, continually walk out of one culture into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time. Me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio. Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultañeamente (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 99).*

It is a word so satisfyingly affirming that reading it in scholarly works resonates to the core of a Chicana feminist epistemology. Nepantla speaks to a Chicana's capacity to navigate the multiple worlds they inhabit—it is also a word that fosters sisterhood. There is a power in the naming and application of borderlands theory—it is a power that grows from a coming to consciousness that rejects oppressive forces, which have historically and systematically told Chicanas that they did not measure up to an American standard. It validates the continual struggle to bridge the many ways of knowing that a Chicana possesses. Anzaldúa calls these women, who choose to build these bridges, neplanteras.

> *It takes energy and courage to name ourselves and grow beyond cultural and self-imposed boundaries. As agents of awakening, neplanteras remind us of each other's search for wholeness (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 93).*

In this search for wholeness as students, educators, scholars, and community members, Chicanas must choose to exist in between worlds, celebrate inbetweenness, and push against dominant narratives and structures that oppress and divide the bodymindspirit. Anzaldúa's contributions to Chicana feminist epistemologies are vast, because they are foundational. Her words feed into and guide the rivers of knowledge that flow in the blood of a Chicana.

Delgado Bernal's work and the work of Chicana scholars is foundational to my work with documentary-based research as a Chicana researcher and filmmaker. Cultural intuition equipped me with a guide with which to identify and validate my own contributions to my work, while also seeking out methodologies that would accommodate the intimate exploration of conducting an (auto)biographical study about my family and I—which I present as a critical race counterstory[7] in short documentary film format.

By engaging Chicana feminist methods and epistemologies in this study with my family, I was able to draw from our personal experience and communal memory, existing literature, professional experience, and a collaborative analytical process to inform a research project reclaimed narrative space around defining educational success. In embracing my own personal experience, I was able to design a research study that acknowledged the specific limitations of carrying out this study with my family. I knew them well, and for this reason I was able to anticipate their response to certain methods. I knew a formal interview would not yield rich responses, but rather if my goal was to have them tell me their stories on camera, it would take time to ease into that in a comfortable way. Leading up to their on-camera *testimonios,* I discussed with them at great length, the significance of a project like this, acknowledging the discomforts that came with the camera, but reassuring them that this project would be yet another

[7] In later sections I discuss in more detail how I conceptualize and operationalize Tara J. Yosso's concept of critical race counterstories; see (Yosso, 2006).

family treasure, only this time, it was a treasure that other families like ours might value as well. Before I ever hit record, I knew that my parents needed to take equal ownership of this project and understand its potential, in order for them to participate in the ways necessary to the project. After a few discussions, my parents agreed to three one-hour interviews, and told me their life stories. It is important to note the significance of my role as the person behind the camera, and prompting questions, because its effects produced data which required my personal knowledge for interpretation, as my parents spoke to me directly, about our familial experiences. I navigated my role in this project as a *neplantera*, moving between my position as a daughter, filmmaker, and researcher, cultivating a consciousness capable of navigating academic and professional practices while simultaneously challenging myself to make room for the knowledge of my family. This process was grounded in the multiplicity of my identity shaped by my familial knowledge, race, culture, education, gender, and profession—my cultural intuition is specifically and intentionally informed at the intersection of all of these experiences.

I draw from existing literature that has explored the historic and system oppression of Chicanos, Mexicans, and POC[8]; how theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory (CRT) in education[9] have been used to challenge those pervasive, deficit views of Chicanos and Mexican Americans; and finally identified epistemologies, methodologies and analytical frameworks that would inform my own approach that incorporated the filmmaking process as a methodological and analytical tool. I would also argue that this work can be framed through education scholars Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal's concept of transformational

[8] *See:* (Gonzalez, 1985, 2001; Donato & Hanson, 2012; Garcia, Yosso,& Barajas 2012)
[9] *See:* (Solórzano, 1997, 1998, Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2002, 2006; Huber, 2009)

resistance as an analytical framework, which is applied here as resistance born out of an informed critique of oppressive structures and a commitment to social justice (2001).

It was through my professional experience as a filmmaker and my positionality as an educational researcher that I was able to employ documentary filmmaking techniques as a qualitative research method and analytical tool. The process of filming gave way to a potential for recording interviews, observations, and artifacts in ways that would allow me to review everything I had gathered in a video editing software interface. I used that interface to design my systematic coding technique. The filmmaking and editing process also lent itself to a collaborative analytical process with my family. I was able to screen material as we gathered it, share edits, and receive feedback about pieces I needed to alter or add. In the end, this project indeed belonged to the entire family as a co-production, a critical race counterstory informed by Chicana feminist epistemologies, as a form of transformational resistance.

I believe it was important for me to engage in this introspective excavation because it is a journey I ask others to take with me in my work as an educational researcher. It is a journey I find essential to uncovering the ways we can better serve those who are underrepresented in dominant discourse in education and beyond, because it is also shared in a medium that is more accessible to many communities with limited ties to academia. “The revolution begins at home” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, p. xlvii). Home is where I continue to learn about the world, and it is why I make sure that my work has the potential to come back home and be well received—it is how I learned to build bridges. "We do this because the world we live in is a house on fire and the people we love are burning” (Cisneros, 2015). Sharing mine and my family’s (auto)biographical experiences as educational research is a privilege afforded to me by the scholars who have developed culturally inclusive methods and approaches to research. In this way, I also offer my

family's *testimonio* to stand alongside the many voices of my *Nepantlera* sisters who choose to see through the holes of reality and who fill those gaps with their own stories. In the following section I discuss the manner in which I am framing my collaboration with WFOC film students in my dissertation study.

**Exploring the Experiences of WFOC Using a CRT in Education Framework and Community Cultural Wealth**

A CRT in education framework is central to this study. Born out of legal studies, CRT has served as a tool for scholars to intentionally bring to light the silenced stories of POC and marginalized communities in pursuit of social justice[10]. I propose critical race frameworks in conjunction with culturally inclusive methods specifically for their capacity to identify and center epistemologies present and born from the practices of WFOC filmmakers. Such epistemologies and methods are informed by collective or communal knowledge and can serve future generations of WFOC filmmakers.

The five tenets of CRT in education call for: 1) the **intercentricity** of race and racism with other forms of subordination; 2) the **challenging** of dominant ideologies; 3) the **commitment** to social justice. 4) The **centrality** of experiential knowledge 5) The **transdisciplinary** perspective. In the following sections, I discuss how these five tenets could inform an empirical study on the experiences of WFOC filmmakers in film school.

The first tenet of CRT discusses ***centering race, racism and other forms of subordination***. The current epidemic of invisibility in Hollywood disproportionately affects WFOC (Smith et. al., 2017). Understanding how systemic racism has functioned in the context of the U.S. film industry, and perhaps the ways in which, by mirroring industry practices,

[10] The CRT movement is described by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic as "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power" in the 1970s (2017, p. 3).

institutions of film studies have also upheld various forms of systemic oppression—is key to an informed approach to combatting existing racism through film education practices. It is important to unpack the ways in which dominant practices uphold white supremacy[11], the belief in the superiority of the white race, and how it causes systemic harm. Furthering a discussion of race, racism, and other forms of subordination, in turn informs the filmmakers' understanding of the context in which their films are made from an intersectional approach.

A second tenet of CRT prompts for the ***centering of experiential knowledge***. Individuals from underrepresented communities often struggle with connecting their own experiential knowledge when watching films because these films privilege white male culture and perpetuate damaging stereotypes of Communities of Color (Yosso, 2002). Experiential knowledge is also key when discussing an educational history and the production process, both of which hold the potential to enlighten pedagogical practices. Additionally, sharing in the exploration of this perspective with WFOC filmmakers as collaborators and participants has the potential to not only document the factors that contribute to their academic, personal, and artistic success, but also creates space for sisterhood and the sharing of their navigational knowledge for future WFOC in film. As a researcher uniquely positioned to engage this work from the standpoint of a WFOC who has graduated from film school, I hope to engage this work through informed personal and professional experience. Having earned her undergraduate degree in history, Yvonne Welbon explains why experiential knowledge is so important to the ways WFOC position themselves: "You have to have a sense of who came before you, what they were doing, so you can understand yourself and where you fit in" (Juhasz, 2001, p. 266). In this study I employ testimonios, cultural intuition, and nepantlera theory to invite my collaborators to more

[11] I use white supremacy here as a belief that "justifies the superiority of a dominant group over non-dominant groups" (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2014, p. 1).

fully assume co-collaborative roles in storytelling throughout their participation, but also, to intentionally center their expertise throughout the analytical and creative process.

A third tenet of CRT is the ***challenging of dominant ideologies.*** The film industry undoubtedly privileges the white male filmmaker (Smith et al., 2017). The overrepresentation of the white male in films, film history, and film theory, reinforces these values and packages them up as normative ideologies. In this case, dominant ideologies reinforced in film culture and learned in the study of film, could include notions of meritocracy, white supremacy, belief in gendered difference in ability, capitalism as a means of gaining individual freedom, and many deficit ideologies that rob minorities of narrative agency (Yosso, 2005). The assumption that WFOC are void of knowledge upon entering educational spaces, could be further perpetuated by the lack of representation of their lived experiences. By centering WFOC filmmakers as storytellers, a study such as this can challenge dominant and deficit ideologies perpetuated in the film industry and film school practices.

A fourth tenet of CRT is the ***commitment to social justice***. Here, this tenet speaks to the political nature of centering WFOC filmmakers and their experiences in film school as a reclaiming of space and resources that have historically pushed her out[12]. Through Counterstorytelling, testimonio, and cultural intuition, this study commits to challenging the erasure of the perspectives of those who have witnessed and experiences the harm of systemic oppression in film schools, and in the film industry. The final and fifth tenet of CRT is the ***interdisciplinary approach*** to examining the problem, context, and possible solutions to issues that may be revealed in recounting of the experiences of WFOC in film school. Potential disciplines to inform this work are the fields of education studies, cultural studies, media studies,

[12] Here I am referring to the systemic racism that has impacted the academic retention of Students of Color as seen in these works: (Gonzalez, 1985, 2001; Donato & Hanson, 2012; Garcia, Yosso, & Barajas 2012)

gender studies, and race and ethnic studies. This tenet is important because it addresses the need for an intersectional approach in order to arrive at comprehensive understandings of the needs of WFOC in film school might have.

I am drawing from community cultural wealth as an analytical process for my dissertation study because of its commitment to reciprocity and challenging deficit frameworks through acknowledging and honoring existing forms cultural capital. In her article titled, "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Discussion on Community Cultural Wealth," Tara J. Yosso reframes the concept of cultural capital through the lens of critical race theory and pushes for the acknowledgement of six forms of cultural capital: 1) aspirational capital, 2) linguistic capital, 3) familial capital 4) social capital 5) navigational capital, and 6) resistant capital (2005). In doing so, Yosso challenges deficit assumptions and evaluations of Communities of Color and instead maps the wealth and assets of these communities in culturally inclusive ways. A theoretical framework of community cultural wealth allows researchers to engage in practices that orient their work from a place of validation and methods that intentionally include knowledge rather than exclude it. As an analytical framework, community cultural wealth not only enables the identification of the different forms of knowledge, but also points to the potential applications of these forms of knowledge and their possible interconnectedness. Finally, I detail how I operationalize community cultural wealth in my analytical process.

**Reflecting on the Role of a Filmmaker Researcher**

Studies of this nature, which hold the potential to incorporate film aesthetics, not only as a presentation method, but as a part of the research practice, have the potential to be considered significant contributions to scholarship (Jackson, 2014). Julie Dash and Yvonne Welbon are prime examples of how WFOC filmmakers already possess the ability to move between the

positions of researchers to those of artists and historians. Cultural studies scholar, John L. Jackson Jr. provides a theorizing of "why filmmaking really could count as scholarship," calling attention to this approach as a merging of the theory and practice through action research practices (Jackson, 2014, p. 532). A filmmaker himself, Jackson is well versed in the production process and therefore has a unique understanding of the possible application of filmmaking as scholarship. Jackson provides a thoroughly supported argument for the consideration of filmmaking as scholarship, examining documentary and fictionalized traditions across fields. He shares how in 2001 the American Anthropological Association released a statement regarding visual media and the need to further examine its potential as scholarship (Jackson, 2014). In fact, Jackson along with linguistic anthropology professor, Stanton Wortham, and documentarian Amit Das, designed and taught a year-long graduate seminar titled, "Documentary, Ethnography, and Research: Communicating Scholarship Through Film" (Jackson, 2014, p. 533). Jackson shares the driving questions he and his colleagues posed to their graduate student researchers in enrolled in the seminar in the course syllabus:

> *This course considers filmmaking/videography as a medium for presenting academic research to scholarly and non-scholarly audiences. The two-semester course is driven by a few guiding questions/concerns: What can film/video bring to the qualitatively observational social sciences? What problems arise from the deployment of such technologies as mechanisms for seeing/representing sociocultural data? Where do historically established and prevailing norms and practices of filmmaking and cinematic communication converge and diverge from the needs of academic presentation? What are some of the more and less compelling ways of incorporating film/video work into qualitative research?* ***Can we use film as a medium to represent truly academic research of the sort communicated in the best books and journal articles? Could we produce 'visual archives' in the social sciences that would allow ethnographic/scholarly representations produced in film/video to occupy (without anxiety) a place alongside books and journal articles as valuable vehicles for the demonstration and dissemination of social scientific research?*** *What would/could a film- or video-based academic dissertation look like? The course includes an intensive filmmaking component, and thus it meets twice a week. One weekly session will be devoted to rigorous training in digital filmmaking technique, technology and production. Students will be responsible for completing their own films or video projects (as*

*individuals or small groups) over the course of the academic year (Jackson, 2014, pp. 532-533).*

By engaging a critical race and Chicana Feminist approach to bridging filmic methods of research and scholarship, I argue that it is not only possible for film as a medium to be truly representative of academic research, but a *necessary* and inevitable evolution towards more inclusive scholarship and pedagogy. The language of film is a relatively new compared to the written language, having emerged in 1895. However, in the last 129 years, it has evolved into a shared language across cultures, across borders and in such, represents a medium primed for exploring socio-cultural dynamics more fully and perhaps more importantly, in ways that facilitate inviting people beyond the academy into the social discourse of research and pedagogy. Before I came across this article and the work of John L. Jackson Jr., I was learning the process of qualitative research in reverse, in translating what I knew about filmmaking as a trained and professional filmmaker, into educational research. After completing my coursework, and making a few films, I found John L. Jackson Jr.'s work and was thrilled that someone had done the work in historicizing, conceptualizing, and locating filmmaking's place in scholarship. The questions he posed to his graduate students, are questions I reflected on in my design for a filmmaking-based dissertation. Foundational to my conceptualization and operationalizing of this method is the theoretical and epistemological frameworks of critical race theory in education, and Chicana Feminist scholars. In the following chapter, I draw from this understanding, again, to conceptualize a methodology which centers the experiences, personal and professional, of WFOC in film school, and in doing so claim that their scholarly contributions would be historically and contemporarily significant to the field of education and film.

# Chapter 4

## A Methodological Roadmap

In this chapter I detail how I designed and carried out a filmmaking-based research study, applying the theoretical and epistemological approaches discussed in the previous chapter. I do so by contextualizing phases of production in parallel to phases of traditional approaches to qualitative inquiry, where in pre-production is study design, production is data collection, and post-production is analysis. Drawing on cultural intuition in this study, which calls for a collaboration with participants in analysis, I shift between phases of data collection and analysis in real time, and at various points throughout the research process to accommodate collaboration opportunities which resulted in the co-creation of the final stories to emerge from the study. This is demonstrated in this dissertation document, which contains three articles, and an accompanying screenplay and excerpts. This project was designed to foster collaboration in meaning making, through filmic considerations and storytelling. The three articles to emerge from this work weave together the narratives and lived experiences of seven Women and Femmes of Color (WFOC) MFA[13] film students as Cinematic Critical Race Counterstories (CCRCCs) ( a methodological approach a detail in later sections as well as throughout the three articles in Chapters 4-6).

In designing this study, I wanted to give my collaborators the choice of participating in a documentary styled interviews and observational approaches, or through anonymized interviews that would later be composited. The vision was that I would either end up with a documentary film, a hybrid film with documentary and fictionalized elements, or an entirely fictionalized composite counterstory. All my collaborators opted to participate anonymously for various

[13] I chose to focus on Women and Femmes of Color in MFA film programs specially because it is a terminal degree in the study of film production. Additionally, it is the degree needed to become a film professor.

reasons. However, while this project took a turn towards the fictionalization, I will share how I designed on-camera methodologies based on documentary filmmaking, as well as the design of CCRCs. A documentary approach would be carried out by juxtaposing traditional approaches to documentary filmmaking including interviews and cinema verité[14] observations. Anonymized CCRCs presented in the findings sections of this dissertation are fictionalized adapted/scripted filmic depictions. In this chapter I will first touch on a rationale for grounding my methodological approach in filmmaking. I will then provide an overview of the three phases of production and the manner in which I designed the adaptation of these phases for the purposes of this study. I then outline, step by step, how I conducted this study, detailing methods offered and used, as well as rationales for these methods, and which modes of production are at play at various phases of the study. Finally, I conclude with the significance and anticipated reach of these methodological contributions.

**Why Film?**

Methodological approaches for this dissertation study are rooted in an interdisciplinary approach to conceptualize filmmaking as qualitative inquiry. Though my particular approach to this work is informed by my professional experience as a filmmaker as well as my perspective as an educational researcher, I would like to begin by contextualizing this position amongst the scholars across disciplines who have explored the relationship between filmmaking and scholarship in their fields. Over the last decade, oral historians have begun to reflect on the lives that oral histories take on after interviews are conducted and how, with new technologies, audio

[14] Cinema Verité literally translates to a cinema of truth. It is a documentary approach which positions the filmmaker as a "fly on the wall"—just observing, not enacting upon the scene. It is debated whether a cinema of truth is possible when considering the impact a camera has on people being observed and recorded. However, here I do not mean to equate the stylistic or documentary technique with an assumption of truth—I rely on other methods such as member checking, and collaborative analysis to arrive as such claims—but what I do mean to define is the cinematographic choice of not directing action in an ethnographic observation which is recorded on film.

and video recordings may provide windows into oral histories in new and accessible ways. However, as oral historian, Steven High, explains, this exploration does not come without a host of tensions:

> *Talk of open access and the infinite archives, are often disconnected from issues of collaboration and social change. Like oral history itself, everything depends on how we approach digital technologies and how we use them. In other words, what informs our technological choices? (High, 2010)*

Similarly, methodological approaches for this dissertation study will explore the dimensions of collaboration—identifying the process of filmmaking as a co-creative, pedagogical, and communal space. *How* my collaborators and I engage in the work is as important as the work that emerges as an end product. In anthropology, documentary filmmaker and researcher, Nandini Sikand, discusses the similarities between ethnographic methodologies in anthropology and documentary stating,

> *Both methodologies look to document and understand the human experience through careful research and the willing participation of subjects. Both struggle with issues of power and representation of their informants, and thoughtful anthropologists and filmmakers worry about the ethical consequences of the end product (Sikand, 2015).*

The ethics of documentary filmmaking have long been debated amongst film scholars and these debates mostly center on the pursuit of truth and how to guard against or make sense of the manipulation that the process of filmmaking will inevitability bear on the final text to emerge—the documentary film. Issues of power, representation, voice, and meaning making are central components I hope to explore through collaborative processes of filmmaking. However, it is this endless quest for truths, in research and in documentary filmmaking, which drives methods forward. In this respect, I will engage in methods that both challenge notions of objectivity and explore ways to uncover truths which honor the lived experiences of my research collaborators through storytelling in community.

I have chosen to operationalize a method of filmmaking in conjunction with critical race theory, because this approach lends itself to unapologetically reclaiming of narrative with a critical, intersectional, and interdisciplinary grounding, rooted in communal collaboration. Furthermore, this approach yields findings in a manner which is more accessible (Martinez, 2020) to communities the work is meant to speak to, communities who have historically been denied access to academia, and who have been harmed by epistemological racism. This method embraces voice, in filmic form, in ways that can be shared with wider audiences. In this way, this study design exemplifies a pursuit of social justice through a centering of counterstorytelling, in the face of the erasure and distortion of the stories of WFOC and their communities.

**Setting Intentions for a Filmmaking-Based Approach**

While considering these tensions and challenges, I designed a filmmaking-based study that 1) intentionally engages in inclusive collaboration with participants; 2) embraces and defines technological choice as voice; and 3) contributes to the theorizing and praxis of filmmaking as qualitative research in education. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I discuss the theoretical, methodological, and praxis-oriented contributions to emerge from this study as research findings. As a reminder from the previous chapter, the frameworks I drew from in designing this study include critical race theory (CRT) in education[15], cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1999), and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, see Figure 4.1 (below) for a visual contextualization of how I define the phases of a filmmaking-based approach to a qualitative research study, which I will discuss in depth in the sections which follow.

[15] See: (Solórzano, 1997, 1998, Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2002, 2006; Huber, 2009);

*Figure 4.1, Phases of a Filmmaking-Based Qualitative Study*

**Filmmaking as a Qualitative Process**

***Phase 1: Pre-Production / Study Design***

The pre-production phase of a filmmaking-based research project can be thought of as the development stage of a study—the process of designing and planning production logistics for the study. This process includes the review of existing scholarship related to the subject of the study, which may include cultural texts such as media productions, as this review is meant to serve multiple purposes: identifying related contexts and gaps in scholarship, locating a perspective or position for the film, and finally, choosing stylistic and filmic techniques that appropriately suit the perspectives and goals of the film. As the researcher, I take on the role of the film project's director, meaning that I assume responsibility for the process of creating the narrative that grounds the study, and the filmic representations. However, I also take on multiple roles, as many independent filmmakers do, such as the role of producer (ensuring the technical and practical elements of conducting this study go smoothly) and the role of the screenwriter. During this stage, my role includes identifying subject matter, reviewing existing related work, defining how I approach the work, and setting clear criteria for recruitment. As is the case with every

stage of my approach to filmmaking-based research, collaboration is key to finalizing the development and planning of production choices.

**Recruitment.** I used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit seven WFOC currently attending or who have graduated from MFA film programs in the last ten years. I posted recruitment materials on social media groups for women in film and in online communal spaces for film students at local universities in Southern California, and directly contacted potential collaborators via social media and email. Since the demographic of participants I aimed to recruit represents a small minority in film school settings, I also relied on snowball sampling by asking collaborators to recommend other potential participants. This approach added another layer of depth to our collaboration and analysis, providing them with opportunities for further reflection with each other outside of the study. My recruitment materials (found in Appendices A and B) specified that in order to participate in the study, all collaborators must meet the following criteria:

- *Identify as a Woman or Femme of Color with one or more of the following racial/ethnic identities:*
    - *Latinx/Chicana Woman, Black/African American Woman, Asian-American Woman, Pacific Islander Woman, Middle Eastern Woman, and/or Indigenous/Native/American Indian Woman.*
- *Currently attend an MFA film program, or have graduated from one in the last 10 years*
- *Be willing to be interviewed and provide feedback*

For the purposes of this study, I intentionally opened up recruitment criteria around racial and ethnic identities because these identities are often complex and overlapping. Because of the low numbers at which Women of Color with these racial and ethnic backgrounds attend MFA film production programs, I expected that in some cases I might be working with an N of 1, meaning that I might only recruit one woman of a certain racial and ethnic background, such was the case with one of my collaborators. For example, while three of my collaborators identify as Asian

women, two of them identify as South Asian and one as East Asian. The nature of this study is one of deep and rich insight into the experiences of each of the collaborators involved and though I do not claim that an N of 1 will be representative of all experiences of women who share a particular identity, I do believe that through the sharing of an intersectional experience with an in depth approach such as this, an N of 1 can yield powerful insights and inform future directions for more research. Additionally, I defined the window of attendance MFA film programs to the last ten years in order to be able to contextualize the study in contemporary film school practices. I do believe future work would benefit from expanding this time frame in order to document the history of Women of Color in film schools, such as the work Yvonne Welbon did with Black Women in film, through *Sisters in Cinema*. I also believe that this work could be further studied with larger affinity groups across gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, immigration status, and creative roles in film.

During recruitment, I asked my collaborators to choose a method of participation and along with this choice, collaborators completed an ongoing consent form for every piece of data collected.[16] Due to the nature of this study, I have taken considerations for methods that protect the anonymity of collaborators who felt that speaking on camera might jeopardize their career or social connections, or prevent them from being able to share their experiences freely. As I mentioned earlier, my collaborators had the choice to participate in a traditional documentary format which include on-camera interviews and observations, or anonymized participation through interviews and CCRCs. They also had the choice to participate in both capacities, using anonymity to share more sensitive information, while still appearing on camera to share stories they would feel comfortable with sharing publicly. My design was created to collect data across

[16] *See Appendix E: On-Going Consent Form*

each of these methods of participation, however my collaborators preferences resulted in all data needing to be anonymized for this study. My hope is that in sharing the design and considerations made for on-camera participation methods, this study design will open opportunities for future work, in both documentary and fictional forms of filmmaking-based research methods.

**Defining Methods for Data Collection for Pre-Production Planning.** Education scholar and historian, David G. Garcia, created an undergraduate seminar titled, "Social History in Performance Art: Featuring Culture Clash" (2008). In the design of this course, Garcia asked his undergraduate students to practice ethnographic research by conducting oral history interviews, observational research, and finally engaging in a critical analysis of all oral and written materials collected in order to write and perform monologues for the presentation of their research. Garcia engaged his students in a transformative method of research and scholarship by empowering them with tools to find the necessary historical and sociopolitical contexts for their analysis. In the merging of *teatro* traditions of the Chicana/o/x Movement, a centering of minoritized people and their stories, and a creative application of traditional research methods, Garcia illuminated a powerful pedagogy. He was able to give his students transformative tools to not only challenge the oppression Chicana/o/x populations experience in historical teachings and writings, but he also moved beyond this and armed students with the tools to take history making into their own hands, with care and critical awareness, further empowering them and their communities. Teatro was integral to the Chicana/o/x Movement and remains a powerful tool as its creative language and pedagogy foster storytelling in community. In a similar way, I hope to engage in these research methods by 1) collecting the oral histories of my collaborators, identifying these oral histories as platicas; 2) conducting critical analysis; and 3) presenting this

research in the form of a scripted counterstory. Specifically, I merge this approach with Tara J. Yosso's concept of critical race composite counterstories.

Yosso defines critical race counterstories, as counterstories [which] recount experiences of racism and resistance from the perspective of those at society's margins" through a CRT lens (2006, p. 2). Yosso goes on to identify composite counterstories as those rooted in the work of CRT scholars, Derrick Bell, Daniel Solórzano, Richard Delgado, Dolores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando. According to Yosso, composite counterstories draw from at least four forms of data in order to recount the experiences of POC: 1) empirical research data 2) existing literature 3) judicial records and 4) the author's professional and personal experiences (2006, pp. 10-11). For the purpose of this study, I will be translating this approach of counterstorytelling to filmic form, calling them cinematic critical race counterstories—dramatizing and synthesizing: 1) research data collected from interviews; 2) existing and related literature and media texts; and 3) the professional and personal experiences of my collaborators and myself. This method is particularly intuitive to a filmmaking approach because of its strength in operationalizing storytelling as a tool of critical race scholarship. In reading Yosso's work, I felt that the language of her methodology, and the content of her composite counterstories resonated on a deeper epistemological level than other scholarship on similar subject matters. This is perhaps due to my training as a screenwriter and filmmaker, but it is particularly because of the way these methods move readers and audiences into a deeper state of understanding by operationalizing storytelling in accessible ways, that I have incorporated them into my methodological approach. I highlight the aesthetic contribution of a cinematic approach to Counterstorytelling in the naming of this method to illustrate the intentional creative agency and relational dimension of the medium. Cinema is culturally influential across many communities globally, it is not only a medium that

document and represents life, but also a medium that reinvents, rewrites, and reimagines life for the purpose of doing so in conversation with others—through the process of filmmaking itself, or in the viewing/reading of the cinematic stories to emerge. Cinematic Critical Race Counterstories layer new dimensions to the evidentiary power of critical race Counterstorytelling, by employing multifaceted mediums to further illustrate narrative voice, and open more space for collaborative interpretation and discourse. In such, CCRCs extend the pedagogical scope and possibility of counterstorytelling, by engaging new modes of communications.

Below in Table 4.1 I have detailed step across the phases of production, outlining methods in two manners: 1) traditional documentary methods by which describes methods that would have been carried out on-camera; and 2) cinematic critical race composite counterstories which include anonymized forms of participation. All methods of participation were offered to my collaborators.

## METHODS OF PARTICIPATION

| | GENERAL OVERVIEW OF STUDY PHASES | TRADITIONAL DOCUMENTARY METHODS *ON CAMERA* | CINEMATIC CRITICAL RACE COMPOSITE COUNTERSTORIES (CCRCC) *ANONYMIZED* |
|---|---|---|---|
| PRE-PRODUCTION STUDY DESIGN | - THEORY<br>-METHODS<br>-LITERATURE & MEDIA REVIEW<br>-SCREENWRITING<br>-RECRUITMENT<br>-LOGISTICAL PLANNING | -LOCATION SELECTION<br>-AESTHETIC SELECTION<br>-EQUIPMENT SELECTION<br>-WRITE PROTOCOL FOR ORAL HISTORY/ TESTIMONIO INTERVIEWS<br>-WRITE GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR PLATICAS | -WRITE PROTOCOL FOR ORAL HISTORY/ TESTIMONIO INTERVIEWS<br>-WRITE SCRIPTS FOR CCRCC<br>-WRITE GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR WRITER'S ROOM PLATICAS<br>-LOGISTICAL PREPERATION FOR CCRCC SHOOTS |
| PRODUCTION DATA COLLECTION | -INTERVIEWS/ PLATICAS<br>-SHARED ARTIFACTS FOR -REVIEW OF REFERENCES FROM COLLABORATORS | -SELF-PORTAIT (OPTIONAL)<br>-ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW AS TESTIMONIO<br>-"WALKING" PLATICA<br>-CINEMA VERITE OBSERVATIONS<br>-GATHER & SHOOT SUPPLEMENTAL FOOTAGE (B-ROLL) | -ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS AS TESTIMONIO (AUDIO & FIELD NOTES ONLY)<br>-WRITER'S ROOM PLATICA (AUDIO & FIELD NOTES ONLY)<br>-PRODUCTION OR ANIMATION FOR CCRCCs |
| POST-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS | -TRANSCRIBING<br>-CODING<br>-NARRATIVE ANALYSIS<br>-COLLABORATIVE ANALYSIS | -ORANIZE & IMPORT FOOTAGE INTO PREMEIRE<br>-AUTOMATE TRANSCRIPTIONS & SYNC SCENES (STRINGOUTS)<br>- INVIVO & COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH THEORETICAL CODING | -AUTOMATE TRANSCRIPTIONS<br>- INVIVO & COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH THEORETICAL CODING<br>-"WRITER'S ROOM" PLATICA COLLABORATIVE ANALYSIS & FEEDBACK FOR CCRCCs (OPTIONAL) |
| FINAL SCRIPTS | SHARE FINAL SCRIPTS WITH COLLABORATORS | -SEND FINAL SCRIPTS<br>-DEBRIEF<br>-MAKE EDITS | -SEND FINAL SCRIPTS<br>-DEBRIEF<br>-MAKE EDITS |

*Table 4.1 Methods of Participation*

In the left most column of Table 4.1, I provide a general overview, and some examples of what might be included in the various phases of a filmmaking-based approach, in this case a documentary approach, to qualitative research. This is only a broad contextualization to demonstrate the general concepts so that this approach can be adapted to other types of qualitative projects. In the middle and right most column, I detail the methods of participation I offered my collaborators to accommodate on camera and anonymized participation in my study. Since all of my collaborators chose to participate anonymously, none of them opted for creating a self-portrait. I shared the prompt with each of them in case they found the exercise helpful for them in the future. The prompt for the self-portrait asked collaborators to specify how they

would like the content of their self-portrait shared, and with whom. [17] This call for self-portraits is inspired by my film school experiences in an introduction to documentary filmmaking course, where the very first film I made was a self-portrait. This assignment, as I briefly mentioned in my prologue, gave me the opportunity to tell my story and include my family, friends, and community in the process. In the prompt I created for my collaborators I purposely left the decision of how they would like to create their self-portraits in their hands. I also asked them to consider the ways they would like to share their self-portraits, and to be mindful of the sensitive content.

***Life History Interviews as Testimonios.*** All collaborators partook in a three-hour long-life history interview/platica. These interviews were structured chronologically and thematically in the following way: exploring experiences before and leading up to film school, experiences in and during the time of attending film school, and finally professional experience after or during film school. For collaborators still in film school with little to no professional experiences, I tailored the questions to explore aspirations, and plans for professional careers. All collaborators chose to do these interviews over zoom and remain anonymous.

Interview data, including audio recordings and field notes, were stored in an encrypted external hard drive, in a locked cabinet to which only I have the key. In a later section I describe the process of coding life history interviews/platicas.

If my collaborators had chosen to participate in the methods seen in the "traditional documentary methods" column of Table 4.1, I would have asked for their input during pre-production when discussing logistics for locations, events we should include, artifacts they

[17] *For more details, see Self-Portrait Prompt in the recruitment materials, prompts and consent forms section at the end of this proposal*

would highlight and how each element should be presented in the documentary film. For example, when choosing a setting for an interview, or observation, considerations must be made about the significance of the location. Does the location add something for the viewer, the participant, and or the text that the film will become? A filmmaker and collaborator might choose to conduct an interview against a plain backdrop which would eliminate all space beyond the participant and leave only what is referred to as "a talking head;" talking heads can be thought of as the visual and auditory equivalent of interview transcripts—they are the baseline of reference. In limiting the elements to observe from a talking head interview, the words of a participant are centered and the environment around them is often considered fairly neutral because it is either indistinguishable or purposefully plain. This might be the desired approach when another location is not available or appropriate to feature in the film. However, a researcher and collaborator must consider the participants' experience and decide whether the interview should be situated in a space familiar to them, whether that space should be fixed, or whether to put the interview into motion by walking. All of these considerations not only shape the final film, but during production, these choices influence the experiences of the participants, as their perceptions of the film are in constant negotiation between a position of authorship and subject. For this reason, choices about setting should will be openly discussed with collaborators and be purposively selected to invoke the desired experience for collaborators and potential viewers. In this way the process of pre-production can open up many opportunities for collaboration—creating experiences that position participants as our guides and hosts into spaces that are significant to their lived experiences. In addition to on-camera life history interviews, I also offered my collaborators the option of participating in *walking platicas*.

***Walking Platicas.*** In their article "Look it! This is How You Know": Family Forest Walks as a Context for Knowledge-Building About the Natural World, Ananda Marin and Megan Bang examine the manner in which Native American families walk, read, and story the land around them (2018). Through interaction analysis, semiotic analysis and the foregrounding of how this process generates epistemic knowledge, Marin and Bang push us to examine mobility and movement in relation to the process of learning. Rooted in Indigenous traditions of research, this research approach centers the way Native American families learn together from walking their environments. This approach to incorporating movement and centering the episteme of these families by recording video data of these walks, inspired the way I am conceptualizing an approach to documentary filmmaking, cinema verité, or a "fly on the wall" approach. Observational in nature, the cinema verité style attempts to capture a cinema of truth by not interacting with a scene and simply following the natural action. However, it is important to note that the presence of the camera impacts any particular space it occupies, as an actor, and it is not a neutral record of the truth. A case can be made that there will never truly be a cinema of "truth," as the presence of the camera and the filmmakers will always have a bearing on the authenticity of the environment. However, such is the case with any ethnographic approach which calls for a researcher to observe and document. *How* we choose to observe, and document will inevitably shape the inquiry, but by continuously and systematically including participants as collaborators, I hope to define a "true" cinema as one that feels true to their lived experiences. In this way, a filmmaker can set intentions for how the camera moves in the space and assumes responsibility over the way the camera impacts the scene.

I offered walking platicas to my collaborators, not only to provide a window into a space they would like to include in their narrative, but also because I believe that the act of walking,

filming, and guiding me and the camera through different spaces would illuminate a different epistemological dimension. Both in how these walks are documented (on camera) and how they are facilitated (as platicas). I drew from traditions of Latina Sister Scholars, such as Muñoz, Marquez, and Kiyama in using platicas (dialogue) as a method of research because of its potential to build meaning together and give collaborators more input on the subject matter they want to discuss (2010). In this way, I hoped to enrich data collection by giving more agency to my collaborators during our *walking platicas*.

In planning for a walking platica, a collaborator may suggest an event as a meaningful setting or scene for their story. These scenes can be approached in a wide variety of ways. A cinema verité style might lend itself well, but because of logistical considerations, these walking platicas are a potential challenge for filming depending on locations, sound, and lighting.

***Writer's Room Platicas.*** Collaborators who chose to participate anonymized methods during this study, as demonstrated in the right most column or the cinematic critical race composite counterstorytelling section of Table 4.1, were invited to collaborate in the synthesizing of composite counterstories in writing screenplays for the cinematic representation of these counterstories. I wrote preliminary screenplays based on my coding process and reached out to my collaborators to set up zoom meetings to review drafts of the screenplays and the findings articles, during what I call writer's room platicas. These were one on one discussions where we engaged in table reads of scripts, which are written as cinematic critical race composite counterstories. Together we discussed reflections, edits, revisions, or rewrites. A table read is when a group of people read a screenplay out loud together. I also told my collaborators that they may later choose the degree to which they want to be involved in the actual production of these cinematic critical race counterstories, however for the purpose of this dissertation, which now

seeks to demonstrate findings in a three article format, I have finalized the counterstories for this dissertation in screenplay format. In future work, I hope to continue developing these screenplays in community.

As an interdisciplinary Chicana researcher, I feel it is imperative to position my research approach with tools that aptly provide historical context in a reclaiming of narrative. I am grateful to the critical scholars who consistently push methods of research beyond traditional approaches (methods which have been historically used to marginalize and erase the stories of Communities of Color, women, and queer folks) and instead moved us towards methods which not only transform education research and praxis, but also have the potential to reach back into communities beyond schooling. I hope to follow in this tradition of scholars, to bring together interdisciplinary tools and inform an approach to filmmaking as qualitative research rooted in critical race theory. As mentioned in my introduction, the history of representation of Women and People of Color in Hollywood has been rooted in oppressive erasure and distortion. In order to transform this reality, I believe this approach to centering the voices of one of the most marginalized populations in cinema, WFOC, my collaborators and I can reclaim narrative voice. The simple act of doing so is resistance, however, I hope this work moves into our communities where little girls and adolescents can imagine themselves in a director's chair, in a writer's room, on a movie set—because they would have heard the stories of women and femmes who have endured and moved beyond oppression to make room for themselves and future filmmakers. I full heartedly believe in the power of students to bring forth political and social change, because history tells us so. For this reason, I believe an important component of the movement to transform Hollywood should begin in the classroom, where future filmmakers are trained. I also want to reiterate that I am specifically centering WFOC students because they are often in

leadership roles for sociopolitical movements, and yet erased from the retelling of these histories. This time this study design turns the spotlight onto them— framing them front and center. Where this section mainly focused on the planning for collaboration of data collection, I will transition into discussing the phase of production during which the actual collection of data happens.

### *Phase 2: Production | Data Collection*

The process of beginning production on a filmmaking-based research project can be thought of in parallel to the process of data collection. Similar considerations must be made for methodological approaches including the structure of interviews, observations, and what and when to document. However, the production process requires a deeper consideration for logistics, and creative choices that will shape the aesthetic of the final product to emerge from the research project: the film. While in an ideal world, these plans would have been made in pre-production, and they are, plans are often adapted when actual data collection takes place. This is perhaps the stage with the most active collaboration as participants and researchers are sharing space and working through filmmaking logistics. Whenever possible, throughout the process of data collection, a filmmaker/researcher should make conscious and purposive choices with collaborators for elements such as the setting; sound, camera, and lighting equipment; cinematography; and timing. At times, these choices might be limited by access to certain locations, equipment, or mobility. Regardless of such limitations, researcher/filmmakers are faced with choices that will impact the final framing and visual aesthetic viewers will receive— this can manifest itself in ways as small as choosing which direction to point the camera in any given room. An important consideration to note in using filmmaking approach is the importance of understanding the level to which the process of production frames the study. The approaches

taken at this stage will be audible and visible in the final film, as one is creating a window into the world of the participant's story.

**Window as Frame: A Theoretical Consideration.** Film theorists, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, explore the relationship between perception and cinema itself through metaphors that represent the ontological dimensions of cinema and spectatorship through the body (2009). Amongst these metaphors is the window as frame— which explores the construction and influence on perception that is created throughout the process of making and watching cinema, where many frames exist and many more are continuously constructed. To name a few of the ways that cinematic experiences are framed: the projector, the film print (and these days, video file), the theater or room where cinema is seen, the screen, and finally, the spectator's eye—each of these frames shape the way cinema is shown and received. A filmmaker's responsibility is to be considerate of the many dimensions within which their film exists and make choices that aim at presenting a window and a framing that is appropriate for the subject matter and the desired reception of the film by the collaborators and potential spectators. There are three central characteristics in the framing of a film to be mindful of: 1) the ocular-specular which speaks to the conditioning of ocular access; 2) the transitive nature of seeing; and 3) the disembodied state of viewing from a safe distance, away from the action which is presented through the frame of cinema (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2009, p. 14). In addition to immediate, physical elements that contribute to the framing in watching cinema, the social and historical frames that emerge for the filmmaker and the spectator, should be considered as well. Elsahesser and Hagener discuss the historicity of cinema as histories that are continuously rewritten in the present and situated in many perceptions. In this this study, as composited characters and co-creators of the screenplays, my collaborators and I are in constant negotiation of this historical contextualization.

**Production Choices.** I contend that grounding production choices in critical theoretical and methodological frameworks strengthens the narrative scope of creative work towards social justice and transformation. Practical considerations in production are methodologically significant because of the way the filmic conventions employed during production will inevitability shape a spectator's ability to understand the narratives. Furthermore, these approaches should be rooted in a commitment to recount the experiences of the collaborators in ways that they approve of and perhaps challenge dominant representations. As a writer, director and researcher, I arrive at creative clarity through the intentional considerations for the relationship between cinema, the spectator, the participants and the physical body. I propose that some of these considerations for clarity can be thought of as syntax. Just as we compose the written word using conventions that have been established for literacy, the same can be said for the way films are written or constructed. In production, these choices have to do with the setting, the positioning of the camera, the movement, and the sound. However, these all become more unified in the final rendering of the combined elements of filmmaking through the editing/analytical process: post-production.

***Phase 3: Post-Production | Analysis and Write Up***

With an on-camera approach the final phase of the study would have concluded with the process of committing footage to video editing software and assembling the narrative visually and auditorily, the way we commit to words when a pen hits paper. This process begins with data organization, transcription, and coding, and ends with the final edit of the film.

However, the final stage of this particular study ends with the written screenplays. I hope to someday produce the screenplays as a part of an episodic series, but for the purpose of this dissertation and the three article format, the written form of the filmic representations lends itself

to the dissertation process and the further development of these stories. To write these scripted CCRC's I first coded all of the collected interviews/platicas.

**Coding.** Once collected, life history interviews were automatically transcribed using transcription software, Sonix. I then conducted two rounds of coding for all life history interviews. For the first round I used the written transcript to conduct in vivo coding, identifying salient themes using direct language and quotes from participants (Saldana, 2016). For the second round of coding, I operationalized a community cultural wealth framework to group in vivo codes and corresponding stories into collections or groupings related to concepts of cultural capital (Saldana, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Once these codes were established, I created collections of stories that spoke to the shared experiences across my collaborators. I selected three collections to explore as findings for this dissertation: the epistemic connections to storytelling and pedagogy, pedagogical relationships, and stories of resistance, both based on real experiences, and aspirational resistance shared after the fact. By this I mean some of my collaborators shared stories about how resistance showed up in their work, in their interactions—but others shared how they would have liked to respond/react given what they now knew about the interactions they had. The final process of analysis, the creation of the cinematic critical race counterstories was done by compositing the characters that represented my collaborators, and composited details about their stories. This looked like including details about the cities they studied in or grew up in, but as a part of another character's backstory. In other words, fragments of the truth were shared across characters and across scenes, to ultimately create fictionalized scenes of true lived experiences, but these truths are shared collectively. This process was a fundamental step towards ensuring the anonymity of my collaborators, who demonstrated an apprehension to naming their experiences with racism, sexism, and xenophobia, because they feared

compromising the professional relationships they had established in film school. Perhaps it may be seen as overly cautious, but it was important to me that my collaborators be able to engage in open dialogue with me, with an understanding that their stories would be honored and protected. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that the creative elements of this approach cannot be understated, however, I would argue that all research in inherently creative. In such, I aim to make clear the ways in which my collaborators and I engage in co-creative modes of analysis and storytelling to present our contributions.

For on camera interviews, in vivo coding especially lends itself to a film medium, because the presentation of the selected codes will also be featured as originally captured, in video. For anonymized interviews, in vivo coding provided me with direct language that at times I was able to directly work into the scripted narratives for the cinematic critical race composite counterstories, either through actions, or dialogue. Though not all of my collaborators offered feedback or rewrites, I credit their contributions to the writing of the narratives to also include the way they told me the stories during our platicas, and how we interpreted them together. I believe this is a particular strength born from doing this work as someone who is also trained as a filmmaker. For the second round of coding, I chose to engage in theoretically driven coding, using community cultural wealth. I originally piloted the application of this framework in designing a prompt for high school students I taught during a ten-week short-form documentary workshop. While community cultural wealth was used in this example from my work with high school students, to frame the planning and selection of stories my students would go out and document, we also used it as an analytical framework in discussing the impact of the films during the screening of their raw footage. In film, we call this raw footage dailies, which refers to early days in Hollywood when directors and producers would view the film footage shot that

day, and plan for reshoots or decided to move forward. In days of shooting on film, this also ensured that before all of the sets were changed, the filmmakers could be sure that the footage they needed was actually "in the can" –meaning properly exposed and reliably captured. Today in classrooms, dailies are screened to ensure that what the filmmaker wanted to capture was captured. Additionally, in documentary film, this gives opportunities for students, peers, and instructors to identify salient narrative threads they think should be further explored. In this way, I encouraged my students to use a community cultural wealth framework to identify the salient themes in their dailies and be guided by these themes to further explore visual, and interview-based content, particularly in editing. My students began this project with complaints that nothing interesting happens in Fontana, where we are all from. However, with a few probing questions, I helped them identify the stories in their hometown that were in fact worthy of being documented. To name a few, students filmed their folklorico dance groups, their barbershops, their family members who made crafts, and the chefs in their community. It was a joy to engage in this work at the high school I graduated from, and to work with students who were so passionate about filmmaking, they were willing to spend a couple of hours after school with me. I share this example to illustrate how I have seen the implementation of community cultural wealth as a framework for filmmaking, yield transformative and communal approaches to co-constructing knowledge through narrative empowerment of historically marginalized communities. Indeed, this framework enabled my collaborators and I to identify various forms of capital possessed and used by WFOC film students, and theorize towards an eight form of cultural capital, which is further discussed in Chapter 7, Article 3.

**Fictionalizing the Findings** For audio recorded interviews for the cinematic critical race composite counterstories, I fictionalized and composited narratives based on the collective

experiences of all participants. I offered to review these narratives with my collaborators, as mentioned in the section on writer's room platicas. In an effort commitment to reciprocity and collaboration in the analysis phase. However, I do want to emphasize that due to the nature of our platicas, and the linguistic and creative capital of my collaborators, we were able to engage in visual and critical forms of storytelling in real time and offer analytical insights during our platicas. This resulted in three key thematic findings which I discuss in Chapters 4-6: the methodological, pedagogical, and epistemic contributions of this study.

While finishing the CCRC scripts, some of my collaborators met with me over zoom for writer's room platicas, some emailed me their thoughts after our interviews, some forwarded their films for me to reference for aesthetic choices, some forwarded me email correspondence to draw inspiration from in writing dialogue between film students and faculty, and finally, some offered the lists of demand they presented to their programs in their call for meaningful inclusivity in their pedagogy. In their own collaborative approaches, all of my collaborators contributed to the creation of the CCRCs presented in this dissertation. Table 4.2 below, you will see a step-by-step breakdown of how I approached the completion of my dissertation.

**STEP BY STEP BREAKDOWN**

**KEY**
- PRE-PRODUCTION
- PRODUCTION
- POST-PRODUCTION
- FINAL DELIVERABLES

| Step | Description |
|---|---|
| STEP 1: | P.I. ESTABLISHES THEORY & METHOD FRAMEWORKS |
| STEP 2: | P.I. REVIEWS LITERATURE & MEDIA |
| STEP 3: | P.I. DESIGNS STUDY & DEFENDS PROPOSAL |
| STEP 4: | P.I. GETS IRB APPROVAL |
| STEP 5: | P.I. RECRUITS COLLABORATORS (PURPOSIVE + SNOWBALL) |
| STEP 6: | P.I. CONDUCTS ALL ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS/ PLATICAS |
| STEP 7: | COLLABORATORS PROVIDE ANALYTICAL INPUT DURING PLATICA |
| STEP 8: | P.I. BEGINS ANALYSIS (2 ROUNDS OF CODING) |
| STEP 9: | P.I. WRITES CCRCC SCRIPTS |
| STEP 10: | P.I SHARES DRAFTS WITH COLLABORATORS DURING "WRITER'S ROOM" PLATICAS |
| STEP 11: | P.I. FINALIZES SCREENPLAY AND THREE FINDINGS ARTICLES |
| STEP 12: | P.I. SHARES FINAL DELIVERABLES WITH COLLABORATORS |
| STEP 13: | P.I. DEBRIEFS WITH COLLABORATORS |
| STEP 14: | P.I. DEFENDS DISSERTATION |
| STEP 15: | P.I. FILES DISSERTATION |

*Table 4.2 Step by Step Breakdown*

**Significance of This Methodological Contribution**

As I detail in the following chapter, this methodological approach to my dissertation opened opportunities to further develop a filmmaking-based framework for research, and I would argue for creative practice as well. In my first findings chapter (Chapter 5, Article 1), I at times repeat some concepts outlined in my methods chapter in order to detail the development and applications of a framework I developed as a result of this study: FilmCrit. Also, I want to specify that the following three chapters are written as stand-alone articles to be published from this dissertation. The first article, Chapter 5, was published in the International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, in a special issue on Critical Race Feminista Methodologies. It

was further shaped by the scholars I was in community with for that special issue, as well as the input from my collaborators. My hope is that this work continues to grow and contributes to interdisciplinary work across various fields.

# Chapter 5:
# Article One

## FilmCrit: Using Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling as Critical Race Feminista Methodology

### Introduction

This paper provides an overview of a Critical Race Feminista praxis-oriented methodological framework in development called FilmCrit, and a critical race method expanded into filmic form called Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling. This work is informed by Critical Race Feminisita Praxis by drawing on a Critical Race Theory in Education framework, as well as Chicana Feminist theories and epistemologies. In discussing two FilmCrit studies, a qualitative documentary study, No Somos Famosos (We Are Not Famous), and my dissertation study, From the Classroom to the Screen: Experiences of Women of Color MFA Film Students, I detail the theoretical, methodological, and analytical development, as well as the scholarly significance, of FilmCrit and Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling.

I came to find my voice as a researcher by embracing the pieces of me that understood research as an embodied and collaborative process—a perspective I developed in my training as a filmmaker and Chicana feminist researcher. I stepped into the world of educational research the way one approaches a new language. Noticing parallels between the qualitative research process and the filmmaking process prompted me to learn through a lens of translation and in this way, I was able to ground my work in the knowledge and practices at my disposal and expand on this knowledge in purposeful ways.

Perhaps most importantly, this approach enabled me to make intentional connections with my communities, including my family. Sharing my schooling experiences had proven to be a challenge given the intergenerational differences in schooling opportunities in my immediate family. My parents did not have the opportunity to go to school the way my brothers and I did—my mother was forced to stop going to school after the sixth grade and my father was pushed out of school in the fourth grade. The forces that

kept my parents from going to school—extreme poverty, migration, a continual need to focus on methods of survival in accessing basic needs—were the same forces that fueled their devotion to giving their children the opportunities they had lacked. My eldest brother was the first in our family to be exposed to college going culture. He ran into our house after school one day and proclaimed to my parents in no uncertain terms that all three us were going to have to go to college to secure the futures my parents had envisioned for us. My brothers and I all pursued college educations and were the first generation in our family to attend and graduate with bachelor's degrees. While my brothers understood more about my experiences in college, they both attended college locally, while I had my heart set on an NYU film school education, clear across the country. It was a windy road, but I eventually made my way there with the help of a full ride scholarship and found myself feeling what many first-generation college students feel, complete isolation. It was not until I started making films and sharing them with my family that I was able to feel seen for the whole of who I was becoming. Though I had always set out to make films in hopes of inspiring social change, I had not considered the ways in which the process of making films would bring my family and I closer in the wake of the separation that my schooling had brought.

**No Somos Famosos**

As an educational researcher, I am drawn to filmmaking as a way of opening pathways into academia for historically excluded communities through culturally responsive research and praxis. The driving force behind my ventures into academic research continues to be a commitment to giving back to the communities that lifted me up and enabled me to access a diversity of learning opportunities in and beyond a formal education. While on this journey, I chose to explore qualitative methods through filmmaking and began at home. In a graduate seminar on Chicanas/os and Schooling, I was encouraged to interview someone in my family to better understand their schooling experience and my own. I chose to invite my father to engage in a *platica*[18] with me and when I asked him if he would participate in this

[18] A platica is a Chicana/Latina feminist, collaborative research methodology that engages storytelling, building community, reciprocity, and reflexivity by positioning research collaborators as co-constructors of knowledge, honoring everyday lived experiences as important to research, and opening opportunities for healing (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

project he smiled and laughed asking me, "¿Y yo porque? No soy Famoso."— "Why me? I'm not famous." I told him he was famous to me. He laughed and agreed to the interview. I set a tape recorder down in front of us, next to my *platica* protocol and we just talked and talked for what seemed like a few minutes but turned out to be an hour and half. I transcribed our *platica* and finished my final for the class but was left with a curiosity to know more about my father's story and invite my mother to share hers too.

I carried this curiosity into a qualitative course series where I asked my professor if she would allow me to explore the idea of incorporating filmic approaches to my assignments, she agreed. I began working on a documentary styled qualitative study with and about my family and we called it, *No Somos Famosos* (*We're Not Famous)*. I conducted three on-camera life history interviews with both of my parents and filmed four separate days of observational footage—my father's birthday party, a family sleep over, a day of baseball games, and a family carne asada. I had accumulated a lot of data with my family and decided to approach analysis by focusing on the creation of an (auto)biographical counterstory (Yosso, 2006). I had learned about the low expectations and false majoritarian stories that influenced policies and practices that created oppressive conditions for Mexican and Chicanx students in California[19]. Namely, the myths that we do not value education and that we are incapable of succeeding in rigorous schooling environments.

I coded my parents' interviews using a community cultural wealth model (Yosso, 2005), drawing on the six forms of capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capital) to identify the forms of knowledge that aided us in our educational journeys and guided our conceptualization of the value of education to create collections of short clips that I then assembled into a sequence. I then coded for how we as a family, defined success and how this definition extended into and beyond schooling. Once these selected clips were assembled into a rough cut, I screened the project for my entire immediate family, parents, brothers, sister-in-laws, nieces, nephews, and my husband. Everyone had an active role in the making of the film and gave crucial feedback. My nephew was

[19] See (Gonzalez, 1985, 2001); (Donato & Hanson, 2012); (Garcia, Yosso,& Barajas 2012)

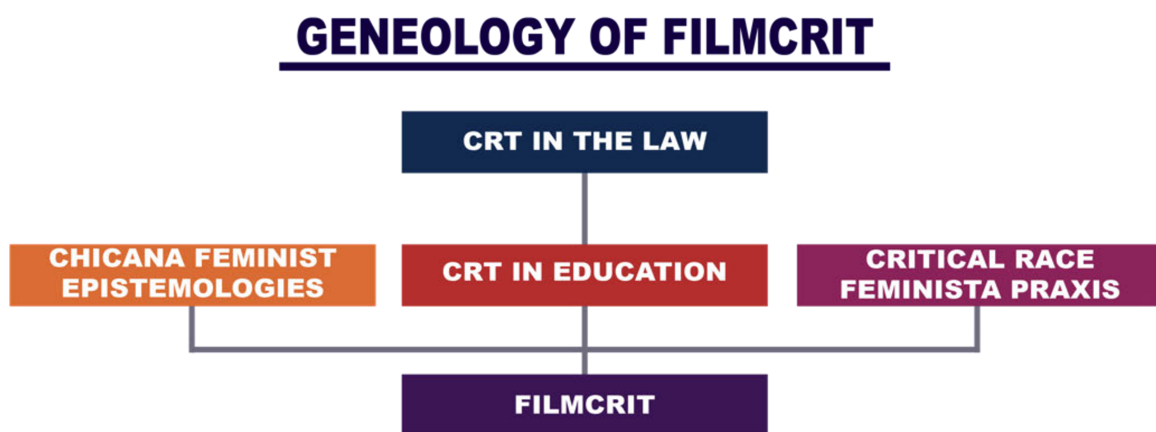
especially excited to learn about his grandmother's immigration story and how important her work in taking care of children has always been to her. Before screening the rough cut for my family, I called my second oldest brother who is a talented musician and sound engineer and asked him if he would consider writing and composing a song for the film. We talked on the phone for nearly two hours, and I relayed some of the most interesting parts of my parents' stories. I offered him contextualized analysis based on the Chicana Feminist text I was engaging, Anzaldua's Borderlands. I bought him a copy and he finished it in a matter of two days. He made a powerful song with the same title as the film and dedicated a verse to each of my parents. My parents were surprised to hear this song during the screening. Once completed, the short documentary was shared with our communities. We all received an overwhelmingly positive response from people who watched the film including comments such as: "I felt like I was hearing my own parents' story;" "It's true, we do care a lot about schooling and want the best for our families;" "How did you do it? How did you make this feel so true and real?" We enjoyed the communal conversations born from sharing this project, we made a music video for my brother's song using family archival footage, and we made stickers to commemorate the project. We celebrated the production, and the discoveries made along the way. As a TA, I showed this project to my students as an example of a critical race counterstory and would later come to reflect on the fact that it was my first time making a cinematic critical race (auto)biographical counterstory.

As a Chicana filmmaker, daughter of working-class immigrants, first generation college student and now doctoral candidate—my positionality and research experience has informed my perspective on the role that critical approaches to filmmaking as academic research can play as a possibility to bridge a gap that exists for communities who have historically been denied access to academia.  Such communities have also contributed in significant ways to the progress of research often without having access to the process itself, as traditions of ethnographic research often produce studies *on* populations rather than *with* these populations. My approach in bridging this gap is informed by the perspective my positionality affords me as well as the merging of filmmaking techniques and qualitative research processes which I believe have the capacity to speak to one another in parallel. I found that the process of translating and

bridging these two modes of critical creativity and inquiry yielded results that both expanded the accessibility of my research, and pushed for a deeper interrogation of how video research tools are used in qualitative research. I also found that my filmmaking praxis was strengthened by the ethics and praxis of Critical Race Feminista work.

**FilmCrit**

Through this approach, I arrive at a praxis-oriented methodological framework which I call FilmCrit. FilmCrit stems from critical race theory in education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Lawrence, Matsuda, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solórzano, 1997; 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) Chicana Feminist Epistemologies (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Anzaldúa, 1987) and Critical Race Feminista Praxis (Delgado Bernal, Pérez Huber, & Malagón, 2019). The FilmCrit model unapologetically embraces creative processes in research while engaging in transformational, critical inquiry that challenges systemic racism, patriarchal frameworks, and reclaims scholarship for historically marginalized stakeholders. FilmCrit is rooted in a commitment to accessibility to the research process for participants, and the populations the work is meant to serve. This commitment is woven into the fabric and design of FilmCrit approach, through every phase.




FilmCrit takes up filmmaking-based methods of research with consideration for the ways in which these methods function in producing, reproducing, resisting, and/or reimagining the social and cultural

pedagogy of filmmaking and research, challenging notions of objectivity and examining the construction/production of filmic media and research through critical theories. FilmCrit asks researchers to move beyond an understanding of film-based/video research methods for the sake of producing representational tools in research and scholarship to critically consider how we subjectively and collaboratively frame research throughout the process of engaging in filmmaking-based/ video methods. FilmCrit operationalizes filmic methods to explore the sight and sound dimensions of research at every phase of the research process, opening and deepening opportunities for collaborators to engage in the process, and inviting audiences/readers/stakeholders who have historically been left out of the discourse, to participate in meaning-making at each stage of the study.

**A CRT in Education framework** theoretically grounds my methodology and analysis **w**ith both research studies discuss in this article. Both studies took a problem-posing approach to identify and transform oppressive conditions by centering the lived experiences of People of Color. These inquiries began from the perspective that intersecting forms of oppression (i.e. racism, misogyny, classism etc.) were central factors in the creation and persistence of problems experienced by my research collaborators. For example, with *No Somos Famosos*, I was able to name and examine schooling experiences with a critical understanding of how xenophobia, racism, and misogyny shaped these experiences. Furthermore, we engaged transformative creative inquiry where we reclaimed narrative control and created counterstories that challenged concepts of racist nativism (Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagón, Vélez, & Solórzano, 2008), the myth of meritocracy (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012), and deficit stereotypes and majoritarian stories about Mexican and Chicanx students (Solórzano, 1997; Gonzalez, 2001). To do this we engaged the five tenets of a CRT in education framework: 1) the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination; 2) the challenging of dominant ideologies; 3) the commitment to social justice. 4) The centrality of experiential knowledge 5) The transdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano, 1997;1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This informed not only our theoretical grounding, but the development of our filmic methodologies. With No Somos Famosos, I

began to develop FilmCrit while engaging in non-fictional filmmaking and continued this work with my dissertation study where I engaged in fictional forms.

**Chicana Feminist Epistemologies (CFEs)** are at the core of how I approached this work. CFEs center systems of knowing that are particularly situated in Chicana perspectives and lived experiences (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Embracing a Chicana feminist perspective empowers me as a researcher to engage critical inquiry in ways rooted in a challenge to objectivity, an embracing of the bodymindspirit, and a praxis of reciprocity (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2015). A FilmCrit framework, which bridges filmmaking praxis with critical theory, is inherently collaborative and draws from a cultural intuition framework which emphasizes collaboration in analytical processes (Delgado Bernal, 1998). In film, where auteur theory (Staples, 1966) continues to push narratives of individualism and celebrate singular authorship of movies — I instead intentionally center the co-construction of knowledge, co-authorship in creative praxis, and reciprocal collaboration in defining a FilmCrit framework.

**Critical Race Feminista Praxis** as operationalized in a FilmCrit framework is also informed by the active theoretical and methodological grounding of Critical Race Theories and Chicana Feminist Epistemologies. In "Bridging Theories to Name and Claim a Critical Race Feminista Methodology" education scholars, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Lindsay Pérez Huber, and Maria Malagón provide a grounding for Critical Race Feminista Methodology in Critical Race Theories and Chicana Feminist Epistemologies. These Critical Race Theories include racial realism (Bell, 1995), racist nativism (Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagón, Vélez, & Solórzano, 2008), and resistance theory (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The Chicana Feminist Epistemologies they engage include bodymindspirit (Anzaldua, 2002; Lara, 2002; Cruz, 2001), conocimiento (Anzaldua, 2002), convivencia (Galván, 2015), methodological nepantla (Anzaldua, 2002; 2005) (Aleman, Delgado Bernal, & Mendoza, 2013), Sitios y Lenguas (Perez, 1998) and Nepantleras (Anzaldua & Keating, 2015). The bridging of these theories were instrumental in how I came to conceptualize my filmmaking praxis in a FilmCrit framework. In particular, embracing methodological nepantla and choosing to engage in research as a nepantlera, empowered me to step into my dual role as a filmmaker researcher and embrace the inbetweeness of

multiple ways of seeing the work in front of me when bridging theory and praxis. Traditional approaches to research rely on the creation of silos of knowledge where researchers are in privileged positions of power. Nepantleras challenge this by embracing the multiplicity of truths, which creates opportunities for inviting collaborative meaning-making and occupying multiple roles at once. As an inherently creative and collaborative framework, a FilmCrit approach may bring forth methodological and theoretical tensions. Critical Race Feminista Praxis equips researchers with the theories and tools to sit in the uncomfortable tensions and move through them with critical insight informed by nuanced systems of knowing. Informed by Critical Race Feminista theories and praxis, as well as Chicana Feminist Epistemologies, FilmCrit expands on the tenets of CRT in education (Solórzano, 1997; 1998) to define and explore a critical praxis of filmmaking-based research with the following eight tenets.

**Tenets of FilmCrit**

1. **The intercentricity of societal and institutional structures such as race, racism, gender, sexism, and other forms of oppression** A FilmCrit approach, much like a CRT in Education approach, unapologetically centers a critical understanding of systems of oppression as a valid and important place from which to begin critical inquiry.

2. **An intersectional approach** that engages in a critical understanding of overlapping and simultaneous perspectives and experiences across race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other social factors. An intersectional perspective could be engaged in theoretical, methodological, and/or analytical stages of a FilmCrit framework.

3. **A challenge to dominant ideologies** including deficit ideologies such as meritocracy and colorblindness that perpetuate race-neutral narratives which contribute to the marginalization and erasure of People of Color[20].

4. **A commitment to the pursuit of transformational social justice** throughout the FilmCrit research process (i.e. pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution of scholarship and film work) by first, identifying the ways in which systems of oppression are at play (see first two tenets) and building on this informed critique to ultimately produce transformational scholarship and tools that are directly committed to transforming oppressive conditions.

5. **The centrality of experiential knowledge** in the inquiry, design, and execution of research with an emphasis on using and possibly expanding tools for research design and research methods that are responsive to participants' contributions. This includes a commitment to engaging in research practices that protect participants/collaborators, honor their stories, and ensure their access to the scholarship that emerges from their contributions.

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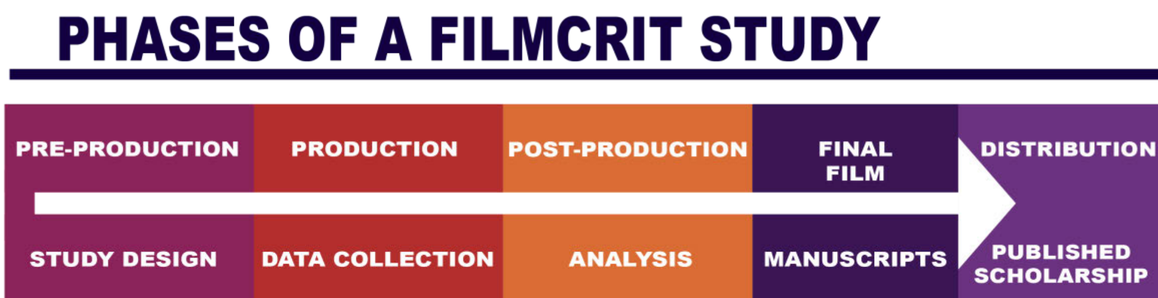
6. **An interdisciplinary perspective** that purposefully bridges theory and praxis through every phase of production/research. A FilmCrit approach will often lead a researcher to interdisciplinary work—this work should demonstrate a commitment to the bridging of theory and praxis in ways that best serve the study and stakeholders involved.

7. **A commitment to reciprocity** with research participants/collaborators wherein participants/collaborators are given options for participation that are protective of their stories, likeness, and well-being. For example, it is important to note that filmic methods often require on-camera participation, or audio recorded data, and other identifiable modes of participation for data that may be shared in the final distribution of the scholarship to emerge from the study. In this respect, a FilmCrit commitment to reciprocity asks researchers to engage in ongoing informed consent and ensure that participants retain options for how/if their likeness and experiences are presented in identifiable ways. Providing alternative modes of filmic participation that provide opportunities to exercise anonymity is key to ensuring that the methodological approach is rooted in reciprocity. Additionally, this commitment to reciprocity extends to larger communities that the work is meant to represent and speak to. This commitment materializes in the creation of scholarship that is accessible to these communities, both in content and medium.

8. **An critical understanding of film and media as constructed works**[21] wherein the context for pre-production, production, post-production, and methods/channels of distribution are motivated by various key decisions that ultimately shape findings and pedagogical outcomes (Share, . This is further underscored by a Chicana Feminist challenge to the myth of objectivity, in interrogating and leaning into the ways subjectivity shows up in research/film. In this way, a FilmCrit approach embraces non-fiction and fictional representations produced and analyzed in the context of a study, with a critical and meticulous understanding of *how* the non-fiction and fictional works were produced. This process should be made explicit and transparent in discussion of rationales for methodological decisions.

These tenets are engaged in multiple phases of a FilmCrit approach can be thought of as phases of production in alignment with the phases of qualitative research design as seen in the figure below.




The first phase of a FilmCrit study is Pre-Production/Study Design. This phase might include traditional approaches to qualitative research design including writing literature reviews, identifying

[21] *See Critical Media Literacy* (Kellner & Share, 2019).

theoretical and methodological frameworks, formulating research questions, identifying potential participants and methods of recruitment, creating interview protocols, creating recruitment materials, recruiting participants, identifying sites for observational research, and securing access to those locations and establishing relationships at those sites. Considerations typically involved in the planning stages of a study is further shaped and impacted through a FilmCrit approach when engaging in filmic methods—both theoretically and practically. Such additional considerations would expand literature reviews to include a review of filmic representations that closely align with the approach the researcher plans to employ. For example, if a researcher is setting out to create a documentary project, that researcher will conduct a review of films to identify existing content, what is known, and the known methods of conveying that information. This extends from content to aesthetic, and in the review of films for the purpose of study design, a researcher should identify what the films convey, how they convey that information, and why these approaches are or are not appropriately suited for their own study. This is dual exercise in critical creativity and inquiry.

The second phase of a FilmCrit Study is Production/Data Collection. During production, a researcher executes the study design plan and collects data using methods established in the first phase. This can include a wide array of methods such as interviews, observations, archival research, document analysis etc. It should be noted that this process of data collection in a FilmCrit approach is further informed by filmmaking approaches which are often fluid and changing depending on how the planned approaches align with real time conditions. I am referring to the nature of a production that often requires flexibility and adjustments. As this process is inherently participatory and collaborative, a FilmCrit approach requires that researchers embrace the fluidity of adjusting production/data collection plans in ways that are appropriate and responsive to the needs of those involved in the study, in real time. In film, Murphy's law is often cited when faced with unexpected changes to production plans— "Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong." Filmmakers embrace the expectation that best laid plans will inevitably change when those plans are put into action and more people are invited to the process of collaboration. I argue that rather than labeling these changes as plans "gone wrong"—we should come to expect changes

and lean into the collaborative nature of filmmaking-based approaches. In observing these changes and reflecting on the significance of co-designing the study in real time during data collection, we can discover a rich and generative understanding of emerging methodological frameworks alongside collaborators. This fluidity is essential to the process of filmmaking and in a FilmCrit study, it requires researchers to be keenly aware of how and why these changes evolve and develop.

The third phase of a FilmCrit study is Post-Production/Analysis. During this phase of a FilmCrit study a researcher begins with data analysis and proceeds to finalize findings through written and/or filmic scholarship. This process might involve video and audio data that will be edited in non-linear film editing software. Depending on the nature of the film works to emerge, a researcher may be drawing on screenplays to guide the editing process if engaging in fictional approaches or may be creating assemblies of films based on findings from the coding process to analyze interviews when doing non-fictional documentary work.

Each of these processes yield opportunities for engaging in different modes of analysis. During analysis it is essential that the various elements collected (written transcripts, audio recordings, video recordings etc.), be broken down so that the researcher can isolate and analyze different components of data. The written word found in reading transcripts, the changes in intonation found in auditory recordings, the added visual elements of video data—breaking down media during analysis can be instrumental in creating a systematic approach to making meaning and identifying important findings, especially in working with a medium such as video which can often give the impression of completeness and make the process of constructing media invisible. The onus thus lies with the researcher to make the familiar strange, to deconstruct the data during the process of analysis, and to be critically conscious of this construction in finalizing findings.

The fourth phase of a FilmCrit study is the creation of the final versions of the filmic and written scholarship**.** This may require further adjustments depending on where the film(s) and manuscripts to emerge from the work will be seen and accessed. This stage might include further deliverables such as translating the works into different languages, adding subtitles, providing further materials for audiences

to engage such as workbooks or guides etc. During this phase, the researcher is working actively with the communities that will be engaging with the materials and preparing the materials to be as accessible and responsive as possible for those specific communities.

Finally, the fifth phase of a FilmCrit study is the Distribution/Dissemination or Publishing of Scholarship. This phase is where the scholarship to emerge from a FilmCrit study establishes engagement with audiences in public and accessible ways. Whether this is through physical screenings, streaming platforms, being added to archive collections, publishing books, peer-reviewed articles, public blogs, editorial work etc., at this stage, a researcher continues to engage with stakeholders and reflect on the significance, impact, and future possibilities for the works created. This phase is all about the audiences witnessing of the work to emerge, and expanding on what can be learned through the study, alongside the reception of the final works.

**Braiding Testimonio, Platicas, and Counterstorytelling to Fictionalize the Research**

My dissertation study, *From the Classroom to the Screen: Experiences of Women of Color MFA Students in Film School* is a FilmCrit study designed to explore the pedagogical significance of narrative reclaiming of film school experiences by Women of Color who have graduated from film school programs. For this study, I recruited seven participants, who I refer to as collaborators for their active participatory roles in the study. I conducted three hour-long interviews with each of my collaborators for a total of 21 interviews. Each of the three interviews focused on a specific time in my collaborators' journeys to and through film school: the cultivation of aspirations that led them to film school, their experiences in film school, and their professional experiences beyond film school. Each collaborator was given the choice of participating in an on-camera, in-person, documentary-style interviews, or participating in Zoom interviews that would be anonymized. The Zoom interviews would be transcribed, analyzed, and composited with other stories to arrive at fictional but true representations of collective experiences across all recruited participants. All of my collaborators opted to participate anonymously and asked for their stories to be composited in their final representations.

My interview protocol was written as a semi-structured life history interview (Seidman, 2013), however, while in the process of data collection, these interviews unfolded more as *platicas* than as traditionally structured life histories. I attribute this methodological shift to the fact that my collaborators and I had enough shared understanding, that we were consistently inviting one another to build on or add to each other's questions and responses in a practice of co-constructing knowledge. For example, I intentionally left room in how I posed my questions to my collaborators, inviting them to correct the question if false assumptions were made, or if they felt that more context was required. Conversely, they often asked me to validate their responses to check if their recollection of certain procedures or expectations aligned with my own experiences as a film student and filmmaker. This changed the dynamic of our interview to a conversational format that enabled us to engage in meaningful *convivencia*, and opened opportunities for deeper reflection and mapping of possibilities for future film school pedagogies. By consistently inviting one another to contribute to the design of the interview, we arrived at a rich and in-depth understanding of one another's ways of knowing.

Occasionally, in the telling of specific stories, my collaborators would also embed *testimonios*[22] (Pérez Huber, 2009) into their responses. For example, one prompt I posed to all of my collaborators was to walk me through their first day of film school—what they remembered about their expectations and how this experience played out for them. This prompted my collaborators to contextualize their stories against the expectations film students typically have of prestigious film programs (i.e., that people in the program were already very experienced in filmmaking, that everyone would get opportunities to take on leadership roles on film projects, that they would be able to build meaningful connections with people in their cohort etc.). They would then go on to share how their experiences differed from these expectations, why they believed this was the case, and how they envisioned changing those conditions pedagogically. One collaborator stated that she was disappointed to find herself isolated from her cohort, most of whom

[22] Testimonio, as defined by Lindsay Pérez Huber and her research participants, is "a verbal journey of a witness who speaks to reveal the racial, classed, gendered, and nativist injustices they have suffered as a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future" (p. 644, 2009).

were white men. She detailed how this impacted her ability to collaborate, crew on filmsets, and take on leadership roles. She described how she struggled to form creative partnerships that were sustainable, as a perceived outsider. Shifting into testimonios happened organically as my collaborators were experienced narrative storytellers and were actively engaged in shaping the platicas in real time, in ways that felt appropriate to their experiences, and charged with an energy to retell their stories in pedagogically purposeful ways. When inviting my collaborators to this study, I was transparent about the fact that I hoped the stories they shared in this study would speak to film students, past, present, and future, and film school stakeholders, to contribute to the reimagining of film school pedagogy. I entrusted them and invited them to co-construct knowledge with me in real time, and I believe this opened space for my collaborators to narratively engage in testimonio as means of reimagining film school pedagogy. These testimonios and platicas were then composited and fictionalized to co-create Critical Race Counterstories in screenplay form.

Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling (CCRC expands on critical race counterstorytelling to adapt the method to filmic form. Critical race counterstories can be biographical, autobiographical, or composite stories. The implications of expanding this method into filmic form affect the methodological design of using Critical Race Counterstorytelling at every phase of a study, from the design, through to the dissemination of final manuscripts and scholarship. I developed CCRC as a means of providing my participants with options to participate in ways that 1) foregrounded their narrative agency; 2) protected their choices for modes of participation including anonymized options; and 3) produced final works that were accessible to them and their communities in filmic form.

**Fictionalizing the Research**

Standing in the duality of being a filmmaker and researcher, I am often challenged by people in film who feel tensions with the notion that films can be research scholarship, citing that it is a betrayal to art to overintellectualize the form. Similarly, I have met critiques from qualitative researchers that raise questions about the subjective nature of filmmaking, and the impossibility of being systematically rigorous in conducting critical research while also being creative. I struggled to accept either criticism, as

I had come to recognize that the form of filmmaking is a medium, like any other, like the medium of writing, that can be wielded in any number of ways. Both criticisms failed to acknowledge that a filmmaking-based approach research requires particular attention for how filmic scholarship is constructed. Assumptions that these considerations are not made reinforce the notion that the construction of films and media is made invisible. In my development of the FilmCrit framework I am intentional about foregrounding the theoretical foundations and tenets that guide these practices. Its participatory model requires that all stakeholders involved be made aware of and have engagement with the research process.

Additionally, I would like to turn to the significant contributions of critical scholars who have demonstrated that fictionalized research can produce powerful pedagogical tools and present findings in ways that deepen understanding. In education, critical race scholars Daniel G. Solórzano and Lindsay Pérez Huber expanded on Derrick Bell's concept of "racism hypos" (1999) to create "critical race hypos" which are composited hypothetical scenarios written based on research findings to create pedagogical tools for identifying and responding to everyday forms of racism (2020). Stephanie Renee Toliver's conceptualization of Endarkened Storywork emerges from endarkened epistemologies (Dillard, 2000), Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), and Afrofuturism (Womack, 2013), to recover Black storytelling and offer an important paradigm shift for future of qualitative research (2021). In naming the critical need for fictionalizing Toliver writes, "To dream otherwise in qualitative research means to consider how alternative sites of research require alternative methods of thinking about the divisions created in traditional research documents" (p. 173). In other words, to move beyond relying on research methods and tools that were used to marginalize communities historical written out of qualitative research, or whose perspective and contributions were distorted by deficit frameworks, we must seek and develop alternative ways of engaging in qualitative research. She goes on to say,

> *Fiction allows for a connection that traditional research writing does not. If the researcher interprets everything for the reader, it presents the argument that there is nothing more to learn from the stories. Instead, Endarkened storywork ensures that readers have much to ponder long after the story ends (p. 187, 2021).*

Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that fictionalizing research offers protective measures for vulnerable research participants and provides accessible scholarship to wider audiences, often allowing researchers to engage I culturally relevant methods of communication (such as storytelling, visuals, music etc.). These approaches to fictionalizing research equipped me with examples from which to base my creative approach to screenwriting as a means of creating critical race composite counterstories with my collaborators.

**Cinematic Critical Race Counterstory Examples**

Here I provide drafted scenes I prepared to show my collaborators in the process of developing CCRCs. I drafted these scenes after completing two rounds of coding, In Vivo coding (Saldana, 2016), and theoretical coding using a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). However, these excerpts are not finalized as they are taken from longer scripts that will continue to change and evolve with the contributions of my collaborators. These excerpts illustrate two of the five key findings that I have identified. In presenting these findings, I employ the use of genre and stylistically typical film conventions associated those genres.

**Write What You Know: An Epistemological Paradox**

The screenplay excerpt below is from a drama-styled short film that illustrates racial and gendered microaggressions[23] experienced by my collaborators in classrooms and on film sets. These examples of microaggressions illustrate the pedagogical and epistemological harm caused to Students of Color. The formatting is styled in traditional screenplay format with scene headings and character names in bold, action lines that describe what happens visually, and indented dialogue sections that describe what is spoken and by whom.

**INT. SCREENWRITING CLASSROOM**
PROFESSOR BURKE motions for ABEENA to take a seat at the front of the classroom which is set up for a workshop style feedback session. Abeena takes her seat, adjust her notebook on her lap, and readies her pen to take notes.

[23] Racial microaggressions are verbal and/or nonverbal, cumulative attacks directed at People of Color, often layered and intersecting across gender, class, and phenotype etc., and take a psychological and physiological toll on People of Color (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020).

Professor Burke does not make eye contact or preface his comments, he jumps right in.

**Professor Burke**
This is too specific. Recently a study out of Hollywood found that films with such cultural specificity actually alienate audiences. You should consider broadening the reach of your story by pulling back on some of the hyper specific cultural references.

**Abeena**
You told us to write what we know. This is what I know.

**Professor Burke**
Yes, write what you know-- but not like this.

**Abeena**
I'm sorry, I'm confused. How am I supposed to write what I know, based on my own experiences, and not be culturally specific?

Professor Burke looks up to make eye contact with Abeena and lets out a disappointed sigh.

**Professor Burke**
Abeena, there is no need to be combative. These workshops are meant to provide constructive feedback. I'll remind you that you are not supposed to respond to this feedback, simply note it and use it as you wish. Getting upset will not fix the problems with your script and the best way to defend your script is on the page.

Professor Burke raises his index finger over his mouth signaling for Abeena to be silent and looks around to her classmates.

**Professor Burke**
Does anyone else have notes for Abeena?

This script will be further developed with my collaborators as I ask them how characters like Abeena, or her classmates, might respond to these microaggressions. In developing this scene, I drew from a collection of stories shared by my collaborators regarding their experiences in film school settings that shaped their approaches to their craft. Though none of my collaborators were asked to specifically name

experiences with microaggressions, all of them shared stories of microaggressions and directly named these experiences as microaggressions. Some collaborators provided positive examples of experiences they had in film school settings that shaped their craft and in my choice of words, I have coded these experiences as racial microaffirmations[24]. In compositing these narratives, depending on the input provided by my collaborators, the final scripts may come to include stories of microaffirmations as a response to seemingly unrelated experienced microaggressions. In other words, one composited scene may draw from several experiences with microaggressions to present problems and draw from microaffirmations my collaborators experienced in other spaces to respond to those problems. Some of these microaffirmations are storied in the following excerpt of another script example from my study.

**Meet Cutes: Sisterhood and Collaborative Partnerships**

In the following excerpt, I composite cumulative microaffirmations to illustrate how collaborative partnerships are formed and sustained over time. This script is montage sequence styled in a romantic comedy genre but is a platonic story of love and friendship.

**MONTAGE SEQUENCE**

**INT. FILM SCHOOL HALLWAY**
JADE walks the hallways of her new film school; everything is a hue of rose. She scans the halls hoping to catch a glimpse of someone who could be her film school bestie.

**INT. SCREENWRITING CLASSROOM**
Jade spots her, the only other Woman of Color in class, ALEJANDRA-- and she laughs at all the right times.

**INT. COFFEE SHOP**
Jade and Alejandra meet up for a writing session, they exchange pages with the familiarity of routine, as if they have done this a hundred times, and they have.

[24] Racial Microaffirmations are “everyday strategies of validation & acknowledgement People of Color utilize with and among each other” (Solórzano & Perez Huber, 2020, p. 86).

**EXT. CAMERA RENTAL HOUSE**
Jade struggles to carry a large pelican case, Alejandra rushes over with an equipment cart. They carefully load a parked rental truck with their equipment, moving in tandem with precision and focus.

**INT. FILMSET**
We push in to see Alejandra from behind, she sits in a chair labeled Director, and Jade sits next to her in a chair labeled Writer. We end on a close up two-shot of them as Alejandra shouts ACTION and pull back out to reveal their chairs once again, but the chair labels are reversed. We end on a wide two-shot as Jade shouts CUT!

In this story we witness how Alejandra and Jade seek each other out and support one another in the development of their craft, on and off set. They also challenge notions of competition and sit alongside one other in claiming key leadership roles on set.

**Final Thoughts**

The FilmCrit model and Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling enabled me to intentionally center the needs of my research collaborators in the development of pedagogical tools for current and future film students. This work will serve in reimagining film school pedagogy from the perspective of Women of Color film students who have historically been marginalized in film and provide epistemological lifelines to future film students who struggle to see themselves represented in film school stories. Furthermore, I will continue to share FilmCrit scholarship in classrooms, including the film *No Somos Famosos*, which has already led my former students to engage in the making of their own film projects. I am truly excited to see how these frameworks develop in the scholarship of researchers of Color and to witness how communities beyond academic spaces engage in the research process as a result.

**Chapter 6:**
**Article 2**

## The *Coyolxauhqui Imperative:* Reimagining Film School Pedagogy Through Epistemic Alignment

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

**Abstract**
*This article theorizes towards a pedagogical shift in film school that centers Women and Femmes of Color*[25] *in MFA film programs, who have witnessed their identities marginalized, erased, or distorted in film and tv representation, and at times in the film school classroom. Drawing from an empirical, qualitative study, I argue that the epistemologies of my research collaborators offer transformative insights for a reparative pedagogy that seeks to heal the epistemic wounds Women and People of Color undergo in film and in film school. Together we highlight pedagogical pathways towards professional and creative relationship building through epistemic alignment with dialogical partners in and beyond film school. This work answers the call for theorizing decolonial pedagogies in the study of film*[26]*, and for educators across disciplines to consider the epistemological impacts of using film and media as pedagogical tools.*

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**INT. SCREENING CLASSROOM, LOS ANGELES, CA — NIGHT**[27]

ROSE, 26, sits in a lecture hall classroom with theater-styled seating surrounded by seated classmates. They all look ahead, the light from the silver screen dances on their faces. We push in to a closeup of ROSE.[28]

**Gloria Anzaldúa**[29]
(O.S.)[30]

[25] I intentionally capitalize Women and Femmes of Color, People of Color, Communities of Color, Students of Color, and Filmmakers of Color throughout this article and across my scholarship to explicitly denote the centrality of their perspectives and lived experiences. Additionally, a do not capitalize "white" to explicitly denote the decentralizing of whiteness.

[26] See Usha Iyur's "A Pedagogy of Reparations"

[27] This line is the scene heading where the screenwriting specifies whether a scene is an interior scene or an exterior scene, the location of the scene, sometimes the year if it is set in the past or the future, and finally the time of day.
[28] This section is referred to as action lines, where the visual and ambient elements are described, including screen direction and physical actions.

[29] This line specifics the character speaking.

[30] Parentheticals are used under character names to offer specific directional notes, sometimes referring to performance for examples (whispers) or in this case specifying how the dialogue is heard. O.S. is an abbreviation for "Off Screen"—in this case the sound is coming from the film they are watching, and what we hear Gloria Anzaldúa say, takes place off screen. Instead, we see Rose listening to Anzaldúa's words.

[31]My job as an artist is to bear witness to what haunts us, to step back and attempt to see the pattern in these events (personal and societal), and how we can repair el daño (the damage) by using the imagination and its visions. I believe in the transformative power and medicine of art. […] As an artist I feel compelled to expose this shadow side that the mainstream media and government denies. To understand our complicity and responsibility we must look at the shadow[32]

In a wide shot, the lights in the room slowly dim, until the rest of the room is nearly black, and a soft blue spotlight keeps ROSE illuminated as she looks around.

**ROSE**

(V.O)[33]

I remember there were so many moments in film school where I looked around and I thought…

ROSE breaks the fourth wall, looking directly into the camera.

**ROSE**

Am I the only one processing and seeing this?[34]

I open this paper with a cinematic critical race composite counterstory in the form of a screenplay imbedded into this research paper. Rose, and other characters later introduced in this paper, are composite characters based on my researcher collaborators and Women of Color filmmakers in the industry. Their stories will be interwoven throughout to offer the collective

[31] This section is the dialogue, the characters lines.

[32] See Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 10, this is a direct quote in screenplay format.

[33] (V.O) is an abbreviation for "Voice Over," meaning a character is narrating the scene. In this case we see Rose sitting still, not speaking, but hear her internal thoughts through a voice over. In the following section of this scene she breaks the fourth wall, speaking her internal thoughts directly to the camera, to the viewer—or in this case, reader.

[34] I disrupt the standard formatting of an APA research paper intentionally, to include composite cinematic critical race counterstories (Lopez, 2024) in screenplay format. These scripted narratives draw on the collective identities and stories of my research collaborators, as well as Women of Color filmmakers in the industry who have shared their film school experiences publicly. I do this to story their true experiences while protecting their anonymity. In such, these characters do not represent any particular person in isolation, they each represent collectives of Women of Color.

experiences that illustrate pedagogical insights about epistemic harm and epistemic healing (through epistemic alignment) in film school.

The scene above is based on what Rose, an MFA film student, shared about how she often felt like "the only one" in film school environments. The only one who noticed microaggressions, the only Black woman, the only person speaking out and voicing her demands for change. This paper will explore how despite her often being *the only one* in the room, she is in fact not alone in seeing and processing the epistemic challenges of film school as well as in the study film—nor is she alone in her commitment to transform the pedagogy of both. As this study illustrates, other Women and Femmes of Color, in film programs sometimes clear across the country, and across many disciplines, shared in her experience of feeling like *the only one* and navigating the effects of having their ways of knowing the world cast to the margins.

**Collaborators**

To recruit my research collaborators, I put out a call on social media, shared my recruitment flyer with former professors, and reached out directly to current MFA students, and recent graduates through purposive sampling (Saldana, 2016). I then asked my collaborators to invite others to join the study, in a second round of recruitment using snowball sampling (Saldana, 2016). My seven recruited collaborators hold intersecting identities. *Table 1* provides a visual for how they self-identify. Please keep in mind that these identities at times overlap.

| Gender | | Sexuality | | Race/Ethnicity | | MFA Program | | Creative Roles | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | Women | 4 | Heterosexual | 2 | Latina/x | 4 | Screenwriting | 7 | Producer |
| | | | | 2 | Black | 2 | Directing | 7 | Writer |
| 1 | Non-Binary Femme | 3 | Queer | 2 | South Asian | 1 | Producing | 6 | Director |
| | | | | 1 | East Asian | | | | |

***Table 1, Collaborators***

## A Theoretical and Methodological Grounding in FilmCrit

In this article I contextualize film school pedagogy as experienced by my seven research collaborators and Women of Color filmmakers in the industry. I also offer my own experiences in a commitment to reciprocity, taking on a cultural intuition approach to qualitative research (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Born from Chicana Feminist Epistemologies (CFE), a cultural intuition approach engages: 1) the personal lived experiences of research collaborators; 2) the professional experiences of research collaborators; 3) connections found in a review of literature, which in this case includes publicly published interviews and stories shared by Women of Color filmmakers, as well as an aesthetic review of selected films and TV shows; and 4) a commitment to reciprocity throughout the research process. Furthermore, I engage in cultural intuition through a FilmCrit (Lopez, 2024) framework, a Critical Race Feminista methodological and theoretical approach, by 1) exploring the intercentricity of Women of Color epistemologies and theories to understand their experiences with racism, sexism, homophobia, and class-based discrimination; 2) challenging dominant ideologies perpetuated in film school pedagogical practices and a critical interrogation of film and media as pedagogical texts; 3) exercising a commitment to transformational justice by first unpacking film school pedagogy and then reimagining it through Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling, a medium that can be shared as a pedagogical tool beyond academic publications; 4) unapologetically centering experiential knowledge as valid and crucial pedagogy; 5) drawing from multiple disciplines including cultural studies, gender studies, ethic studies, education, film studies and history; 6) committing to reciprocity by making this work accessible, linguistically and narratively, and protecting the stories of my collaborators; and 7) beginning from an understanding that films and media are constructed, as is their pedagogy, on a sociocultural level, but also in the particular ways we use

them as tools to teach film theory, and the ways we use them as exemplars in film production and screenwriting classrooms.

**INT. HIGHSCHOOL TV PRODUCTION CLASSROOM, FONTANA, CA—DAY**

In opening, I offer a *testimonio* of how I come to this work of theorizing and analyzing film school pedagogy, by first sharing the high school experiences that led me to film school. As an alum of an undergraduate film program, from one of the best film schools in the country[35] I experienced pedagogical practices that pulled me away from myself, and later fought to find the ones that would piece me back together. My experiences in film school led me to want to research how education is shaped for students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education and in film and TV more broadly. This part of the story begins with a girl who loved cinema and the way it brought her family together.

I come from a working-class background, and I am the proud daughter of Mexican immigrants, hard working parents who deeply valued their children's access to education. As a first-generation college student, there was so much I did not know about higher education, and many blanks I filled with assumptions around what getting a college degree would give me access to—the dominant narratives I heard that reinforced the promise of the American Dream through the "great equalizer" that education was meant to be. When it came to grades, I had excelled in my K-12 experience, save for math and science courses where I struggled to get Cs, where teachers did not miss opportunities to tell my classmates and I about how frustrating our deficiencies were. This led me to instead spend time in the classrooms I felt more myself in, in English, Choir, TV Production, and History. Midway through my sophomore year of high school my English teacher, Mr. Lee asked me to join his broadcast journalism course, and there I began

[35] NYU listed as a top 3 film school by The Hollywood Reporter annual film school rankings

making short form documentaries on serious topics. This experience then led me to apply for a summer internship at NBCU in New York, where twelve high school students were selected from around the country to learn about broadcast journalism from industry professionals and make short documentaries. I was one of the twelve selected. The following year, Mr. Lee expanded the TV production program into three levels and invited me into the advanced level course. As a junior I began learning screenwriting and directing narrative[36] fictional short films. My junior year is when I decided that I would be majoring in film in college. Mr. Lee was the most influential mentor for my educational trajectory in my adolescence. He consistently demonstrated how much he believed in my capacity for visual storytelling, directing, editing, cinematography, and documentary-style interviewing by holding me to high expectations and giving me the support I need to succeed. As a result, I felt affirmed and challenged to learn and grow my identity as a filmmaker.

When I told him I wanted to major in film, he pulled two books from his bookshelf next to his computer, one called *Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen* (Katz, 1991), which was a practical and theoretical guide to filmmaking, and another called *Film School Confidential* (Edgar & Kelly, 2007) which featured twenty of the best film school programs in the U.S. and how to successfully navigate them. He handed me the books and told me, "You'll need to make a portfolio for your college applications. Choose the programs you are interested in and let's get to work on your portfolio." There was zero hesitation from him. I told him I wanted to go to film school, and he handed me the tools and proposed practical next steps signaling at 1) I was capable, and 2) I was not alone. It sounds simple enough, but this

[36] "Narrative" films are fictional, scripted films as opposed to documentary films which are non-fiction. Documentary filmmakers have pushed back on this naming because of the implication that documentary films are not also constructed narratives, when in fact they are also carefully constructed narratives. I will be referring to narrative films as scripted or fictional films in this article.

pedagogical practice of his boosted my confidence in allowing myself to be hopeful, and the commitment to prepare myself. My skills developed quickly as I started spending early mornings and late afternoons in his classroom.

My father dropped me off around six in the morning on his way to work, and I waited outside of Mr. Lee's classroom. He always seemed shocked to see that I arrived before he did. Sometimes, I would help organize the equipment before the day started and as we coiled cables and checked to make sure camera bags were complete with their gear, he asked me about the schools I was considering. I told him I was most interested in USC because it was close to home, and seemed to have a great program, but that I felt I identified more with the films coming from graduates of NYU. I explained how I would like to be trained as an independent filmmaker because I did not see myself in the stories coming out of Hollywood. He nodded and said he felt that I could do well in either, but that I should shoot for NYU if I saw myself there. He mentioned that I also should not overlook state schools like San Francisco State University and Florida State University. I was very much against moving to Florida—but San Francisco sounded nice. He showed me how to look up informational events for the film programs I was interested in and I attended one for USC and one for NYU. NYU would have seemed impossible if I had not gone to New York the previous summer. While I did not feel at home in New York City, seeing it, experiencing it at least made me feel like I could manage living there for school.

During my senior year, I applied early decision to NYU, and ultimately decided not to apply to USC (I will share more about that in a later section). The next hurtle I faced: *How was I going to pay for it?* I brought this question to Mr. Lee and he told me I would need to apply for financial aid. I filled out the FAFSA and I searched through databases for possible scholarships. One early morning, he casually told me, "I nominated you for the Gates Millennium

Scholarship—if you get it, it's a full ride anywhere you get accepted to—even NYU." I thanked him. Then I looked up the scholarship and found that most of the recipients were valedictorians. I quickly concluded that I had no chance of getting it. Remember those C's I mentioned earlier? So, weeks passed, and the deadline was approaching. Another early morning conversation started, and he asked "Are you nearly done with the application? Or have you already submitted it?" I told him I was not going to apply. His jaw dropped. He couldn't believe I wasn't going to shoot my shot, saying it wasn't like me. I explained I did not have the grades; he looked confused. "You definitely have a 3.0—that's the requirement." I explained about the valedictorians, the dreaded math courses. He rarely stood still, he was the kind of teacher who was always doing three things at once, and running back and forth around the classroom, but this conversation stopped him in his tracks. He sat at his computer, looked up the deadline, and said, "Brenda, it is due TODAY. Call your mom to pick you up and get it done. I'll call your English teacher to make sure you get a second recommendation."

Just then my best friend, Sarah, walked in. She was an excellent writer and the former editor for the school newspaper. Mr. Lee finished his call to secure my recommendation and looked to Sarah, "Brenda needs an editor today. Can you help her?" She did not hesitate either. The plan was set. My mom would pick me up, I would write the ten essays required for the application and email them to Sarah as I finished them, she would then proofread them and send them back to me. By the miracle of community, it came together, and I got the application done. I received a rejection from NYU that year, but to my surprise, I was selected for the Gates Millenium Scholarship. I went on to attend SFSU my freshman year of college where I was told I would likely not be able to take production courses until my fourth or fifth year, due to the fact that it was a heavily impacted major. The year I spent in San Francisco was the longest I went

without making films since I started making them. I decided to reapply to NYU, having secured the funding I needed, knowing that the undergraduate program there would be production heavy. I was accepted as a transfer student and arrived at NYU during the summer leading into my sophomore year. After getting accepted to NYU, I thought the hardest parts were behind me, but I was wrong. I was entering entirely new territory, without my amazingly supportive community there, and I had no idea where to look to find one at NYU. Reflecting on my film school experiences alongside the memories I have of home, in Fontana, where I learned to make films for the first time, is my own journey to recover what, in the words of Stephanie R. Toliver, I was taught to forget (2021). It is a journey I have invited seven collaborators to join me in towards understanding narrative voice in film school, and in the industry, through epistemic alignment in collaboration and the study film in ways that challenge deficit pedagogies.

**A Brief History of the U.S. Film School Model**

U.S. films schools were designed in a Fordist, assembly line model and were organized with the intention of producing trained film professionals for the growing demand in Hollywood during the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s (Hawkins, 2023). In such, schools like USC's school of cinematic arts, modeled after the Moscow Film School, was established in 1929 with assistance from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In this era, film schools were successful in feeding directly into the industry, where this model left all control in the hands of the five big studios in Hollywood. In the U.S. however, this pipeline broke down as the studio system lost popularity in the late 1940s, and as a result film schools also experienced a shift without an assembly line to feed. This shift came with auteurs such as Alfred Hitchcock, who were celebrated for their ability to break free from the formulaic studio films. The popularity of film schools erupted with the fame of auteurs, film school graduates, like Martin

Scorsese, Spike Lee, and George Lucas. Despite the disconnect between film schools and Hollywood's cinematic pipeline, film school pedagogy remained focused on industry preparedness, but rather than only focusing on fulfilling the demands of a profession in the industry, film schools have since emphasized their role in facilitating the development of students' voice and vision—moving towards a pedagogy of individualism and competition.

Film school pedagogy is also further shaped by the hiring of faculty who are practitioners in the industry, who provide practical pedagogy based on experience, but are not necessarily trained to teach. Many course instructors are accomplished filmmakers, but few teach with direct examples of their own work, and even fewer are equipped with culturally relevant pedagogies to educate their students from backgrounds dissimilar to their own. This is reflected in their syllabi and curriculum as well. Top U.S. films school curriculums (AFI, USC, NYU, UCLA etc.), include course offerings and requirements in history and criticism/media studies courses, workshop courses, and special topics courses where students take specialized craft in writing, directing, editing, producing, cinematography, acting, production design, and documentary. Such courses might include Producing for TV, Producing the Independent Feature, Acting for Directors etc. The film schools my collaborators attended either take one of two approaches: the first is a track system, such as AFI, where students enter their MFA program knowing their concentration (e.g. screenwriting, directing, cinematography, producing, editing, and production design) and are grouped for productions in ways that every student is doing the job they came into film school to master[37]; the second is a writer/director model, like NYU[38]. USC begins similarly to NYU, giving all students introductory courses in film composition and production, but USC MFA students have the option to declare a concentration in year two or three,

[37] AFI website https://conservatory.afi.com/
[38] NYU Grad Film Website https://tisch.nyu.edu/grad-film/courses

ultimately having to master at least one of the following subjects to graduate with their MFA: writing, producing, directing, cinematography, editing, or sound[39]. Some of my collaborators were discouraged from applying to USC film school, because they heard that very few people get to direct, and most of the students who get opportunities to direct are white men. I was also given this warning in 2008, when applying to film schools.

This brings me to how prospective students come to understand what film school is, what it offers, and what they need to do to prepare to be successful. So much of what prospective students know about film schools is based on assumptions built on the narratives film schools provide in advertisement, or the many books that offer something along the lines of "101 Things You Won't Learn in Film School (BUT SHOULD!)". However, my collaborators shared that in their preparation for their MFAs, often the most helpful glimpses into the hidden curriculum of a program were given by current or past alumni. They had to "cold call" or I should say, direct message and email, people they found on social media, LinkedIn, and program websites. For first generation college students with no connections to filmmakers, or film school graduates—it is very difficult to establish trusting relationships that would provide more in-depth descriptions of what it is actually like to go to film school, especially students from underrepresented backgrounds. I received the warning about not being able to direct if I went to USC with no other context, from a high school classmate who knew someone that went to USC. It was said to me in passing, but it was enough of a push for me to sign up for an event for prospective students. Once there, I asked the USC representative what percentage of the students who were able to direct were not white men. How many women, how many People of Color were able to direct their own films? She looked stunned. She responded with, "That's a great question I do not have

[39] See USC cinema dept website: https://catalogue.usc.edu/preview_program.php?catoid=20&poid=28250#

the answer to, but I do know it is very competitive!" I took this as a sign that my friend of a friend was likely right, and I applied to other schools.

After lawsuits were brought to film schools, on the basis of misleading students about alumni connections and access to industry jobs, film schools have given clearer disclaimers that jobs are not promised at the end of film school and focus instead on foregrounding the development of voice and craft, in other words, providing students with pedagogical support in finding themselves as filmmakers. Therefore, I argue that when film schools have long been uncritically structured to replicate industry practices[40], educators must shift to a pedagogical commitment that owns the responsibility they have to combat epistemic subordination and harm perpetuated in film school classrooms, and on film school sets. It takes more than being anti-racist, and anti-sexist, educators must be equipped with pedagogical interventions and tools that empower students and affirm their ways of knowing the world.

**Pedagogical Paradoxes of Film School for Women and Femmes of Color**

> *Forceful student testimonies at academic institutions underscored yet again the epistemic violence of rendering BIPOC and BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) histories and cultures invisible or marginal in our curricula, revealing yet again how the university mirrors settler colonial and imperialist politics of erasure (Iyer, p. 181)*

In "A Pedagogy of Reparations," Usha Iyar calls for a decolonial shift in the pedagogy of film studies that decenters whiteness and breaks away from the false progress of diversity efforts that add single readings or filmmakers from "diverse" perspectives to course syllabi—arguing that this practice continues the marginalization of underrepresented perspectives. She draws a distinction between decolonizing and diversifying curriculum. She uses this powerful article to illustrate the harm of half-measures towards diversity and amplifies the demands of film studies students.

[40] See (Sabal, 2009) "The industrial model of film production is uncritically reproduced at many film schools" (p. 7).

My collaborators shared with me that despite feeling confident in their storytelling and filmmaking abilities when they were accepted to their MFA programs, upon entering creative classrooms where they shared their lived experiences as women, as Black, Latina, Asian, Queer women and non-binary femmes, they were often discouraged from workshopping the stories that aligned with their ways of knowing the world and did not receive reciprocal respect and support from their peers. In situations like this, it falls on marginalized students to resist the forced assimilation to an epistemology that would reinforce their narrative erasure and completely contradicted their pedagogical needs in developing their own voice. This is an example of how in centering popularized canonical works in pedagogical practices and curricular design, film courses mirror the epistemic harm students face in popular representations. This pulls them further from opportunities to access the tools needed to transform the erasure in the industry. This goes beyond the violence of erasure of their epistemologies, their *ways of knowing the world*, it affects the epistemologies they develop as artists, their *ways of making worlds*. Without their bodymindsoul grounding of their epistemes, assimilating to the forced epistemologies of the film school classroom would not only erase, but rewrite their stories from a disembodied voice.

While trying to find themselves as filmmakers through a film school education, film students encounter multiple pedagogical paradoxes when faced with curriculum that mirrors the film industry. One such paradox is the emphasis on individualistic practices and competition when learning a deeply collaborative art form. This art form is indeed learned through the study of and replication of industry culture where filmmaking is inherently collaborative, but champions individualism. One of the greatest strengths of film programs that require every student to make their own film, at least once, is that they learn the process in a very intimate way

which will inevitably teach them about the craft they ultimately concentrate on—whether it is writing, directing, producing, or any other role.

However, students often describe feeling unsupported by their peers and professors in completing these projects, as a lack of respect for their vision and voice, leads to pigeonholing them into supportive roles they might not want to be stuck in. When in a class of twenty students, who all consider themselves writer/directors or auteurs, it is not enough to assign groups of four roles in rotation on each other's films. Put simply, if one does not cultivate meaningfully collaborative environments, and instead emphasizes this individualistic competition, the shared labor across group projects will inevitably be unevenly distributed. Lateral reciprocity is key, by this I mean rejecting hierarchy in the classroom and building respect between students, which is rarely modeled in film school classrooms. It is difficult to challenge hierarchical structures that are prominent in the film industry, because in many ways they keep the production end of filmmaking running smoothly with everyone assigned to a specific job, in a specific department, with department heads to report to. However, the respect needed on set begins in the classroom, where classmates treat one another's project with the same importance and respect as their own, so that on set reciprocity, when hierarchical structures are needed, become an extension of that respect established in the classroom, but resist the pigeonholing that results when students are seen in only supporting roles. Thus, creating a collaborative conundrum where they may want to do a good job on their peers' projects, but because they do not want to be pigeonholed, they also do not want to do it too well, to the point where their potential contributions are limited to that singular job. In this article, I share some composite experiences from my collaborators that touch on the ways they embody multiple sensibilities for filmmaking, doing many jobs well and in collaboration, often developing these skills out of need when facing a lack of support from

others. I put these experiences in conversations with Women of Color epistemologies which highlight the strengths of seeing the world from multiple angles, of embracing insider/outsider sensibilities, and honoring the bodymindspirit.

Another pedagogical paradox is the idea that there are those with natural born talent for the craft of filmmaking and those who must study to acquire it— "you either have it or you don't" –the age-old question of nature vs. nurture we have seen debated across many disciplines. Too often we see this dichotomy is used to escape the responsibility we as educators must contend with, that is, to co-create nurturing learning environments with our students. Unfortunately, this is a paradox many arts students face—having teachers who evaluate their capacity for the craft and whether they are teachable or not, based on the supposed inherent talents they possess. It calls into question—what then is the responsibility of film schools in relation to their students' education? I argue that co-creating learning spaces with film students first requires identifying the systemic epistemic alienation students from marginalized backgrounds must endure to navigate film programs, and actively shifting pedagogy that aligns with multiple epistemologies. Furthermore, it requires opportunities for students' own epistemologies to flourish and further develop in ways that are grounded and affirmed in their creative and critical inquiries. It also requires for the hard work required to develop these skills, to be demystified and honored. In a later section, I draw on asset-based pedagogies to offer a reimagining of film school pedagogy alongside my collaborators, to disrupt hierarchical learning structures and make room for epistemic alignment that celebrates a diversity of perspectives and ways of knowing and exploring the world.

A third pedagogical paradox film students face is one that students in creative writing share, the way students are prompted to bring their stories with them into writing workshops—

asking them, “write what you know”—but professors challenge the authenticity, relatability, or interest it might evoke amongst audiences, ultimately rejecting the lived experiences of students from marginalized experiences. This paradox is perhaps one of the most direct ways that students are pushed to abandon their sense of the world, and where they may face spirit murder (Revilla, 2022). My collaborators detailed screenwriting workshops and admissions interviews where they heard feedback on their scripts that rejected stories based on their family members, on their communities, on their own internal worlds, and were told to shift to writing stories that “more people would relate to.” Professors who gave this feedback cited the supposed commercial failures of “hyper culturally specific films” leading my collaborators to understand that their potential industry success would be equated with how well they could write white. My collaborators are not alone in struggling to see themselves in the pedagogical practices and products of film. In considering the pedagogy of media, film, and television, those of us from underrepresented backgrounds all experience the epistemological impacts of media.

**The Mirrored Epistemic Erasure of Film and TV: Our Cultural “Empathy Machines”**

Film critic, Roger Ebert famously referred to films as “empathy machines” capable of situating an audience in a person’s world, completely different from their own. The influence of film as a social and cultural pedagogy has lasting and profound impacts on audiences[41]—a social impact which is often described in one of two ways: rotting our minds in negative ways or as a form of entertainment we passively consume. However, we know from critical media literacy scholarship how important unpacking the multi-faceted pedagogy of media is for students of all ages and disciplines (Kellner & Share, 2019). Critical race scholars in education further explore how critical pedagogy and media literacy are especially important in the face of popular media

[41] See Howard Suber’s mini-series, *The Power of Film*

that reinforces harmful stereotypes (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000) and marginalizes underrepresented communities.

Walt Hickey's, *You Are What You Watch* (2023) breaks free from the dichotomy of brain-rotting or passive consumption of media as well, by presenting fascinating data on how watching films and television elicits physiological responses from audiences. Hickey contends that the evidence provided by the measuring of these physiological effects, demonstrates that what we watch shapes who we are and how we see the world. While Hickey illustrates the depth of how watching films affects our bodies, influencing our sense of self, and sense of one another, he simultaneously highlights how little we have studied the physiological relationship we have to media. Many times, the technology at our disposal is ahead of our understanding of what it means. For example, one study he highlights discusses the way scientists have been able to measure volatile organic chemicals (VOCs) exhaled by audiences in movie theaters to measure what changes occur as they watch movies of different genres which elicit different emotional responses, finding that watching horror or thrilling films causes audience members' muscles to tense at specific moments, literally demonstrating how audiences brace the edge of their seats as they tense their bodies. Another group of researchers he highlights designed a study meant to test the saying that horror films make your "blood curdle." They found that the body indeed simulates real physical responses to danger, an evolutionary trait we have developed to survive, which prepares the body to bleed in the expectation that we will be hurt and need our blood to clot to avoid bleeding out. For too long we have assumed that understanding that what we watch is not real, is enough to circumvent the effect of consuming media, dismissing its lasting impressions on us. The first motion picture to screen in a public movie theater famously sent audience members running for the doors. The motion picture was a short scene of a train in

motion and viewers believed they needed to get out of the trains' path. We later came to understand our relationship to motion pictures in different ways, with understanding that we did not need to move out of the way, because there was no actual train to dodge. However, as Hickey's work proves, the body has an unconscious way of processing visual and auditory stimuli of media in ways we have only begun to understand.

In putting education scholars and radical Women of Color artists and scholars in conversation with Hickey's theorization of the pedagogical and epistemological effects of consuming and creating media, the hidden curriculum of film school is especially important to examine. If our epistemes are so deeply shaped by what we watch, and in turn influence what and how we create, what does this pedagogy do to underrepresented film students? In his documentary, *If These Cells Could Talk*, Kenjus Watson shares his research on how racial harm physiologically affects young Black men, studying the length of their telomeres, physiological markers that are directly linked to a person's life expectancy, which in other words demonstrate how quickly one ages. Watson's research is a vital contribution to understanding the physiological effects of racism. Therefore, deficit pedagogies which exclude the worlds underrepresented students know, and reject their pedagogical contributions, cause far more harm than we have previously been able to measure, but it is something radical Artists and Scholars of Color have known and felt for a long time.

In film school classrooms that lack truly diverse syllabi for teaching writing and production, Women of Color are continually asked to learn a craft that marginalizes them, and instead are shown paths to success that render their ways of knowing the world, irrelevant, or worse, as obstacles to their success. Women and People of Color continue to be marginalized in industry representation both behind the camera and in front of the camera. To an even further

degree, Women of Color are particularly impacted by intersectional, systemic erasure, especially in roles that influence and drive narrative voice (screenwriting, directing, lead roles as actors etc.) (Smith et. al., 2020; 2024).

**INT. SCREENING CLASSROOM, LOS ANGELES, CA – NIGHT**

ROSE speaks directly to the camera.

**ROSE**

The first semester they have everybody take this class about diversity in film. And so, what they try to do is break down things based on certain diversity topics. So, they'll talk about films that are related to the LBGTQ Community, films related to the Black community etc., like how the history of film has been really messed up for these communities...

OTS[42], we see ROSE and her classmates watching scenes from BIRTH OF A NATION,

**ROSE**

<u>But my problem is... with that class… is that they never give any information about how to help, how to do better, how to avoid this in the future.</u> They just say, 'These are the messed-up things we've done!'

A classmate in front of ROSE turns around to face her and brings her index finger to her lips.

**CLASSMATE**

SHHHHHH!

**ROSE**

(whispers)

And then they just send us to a discussion classroom, and people don't know what to say. They don't want to say the wrong thing. It's really weird. I wish they would focus more on giving us **tools** on how to improve on this history, rather than just being forced to relive it. I can't tell you how many times I've seen Birth of a Nation, but I have yet to see a single film

[42] OTS is an abbreviation for Over the Shoulder, it is a camera note that describes the placement of the camera, in this case, we move from in front of Rose, to behind her, to be able to see the screen in front of her.

made by a Black woman—but a single film is still not enough.

CLASSMATE

SHHHHHHHH!

ROSE smiles at her classmate mockingly as she motions as if she's zipping her mouth shut, then rolls her eyes at the camera.

**RACK FOCUS TO WOMEN AND FEMMES OF COLOR IN FILM SCHOOL [43]**

### INT. SCREENWRITING CLASSROOM, LOS ANGELES, CA—NIGHT

Ten students sit around a square table passing back graded assignments. ROSE holds a script in her hand, she sees an A, her eyes scan the front page and find the name "JAMES." She passes the script to her right.  Another paper is placed in front of Rose, another A, another name, "Brent." A third paper comes, a red B inked on the page, and her eyes trail down the page to find her name.

### INT. SCREENWRITING CLASSROOM, LOS ANGELES, CA—NIGHT, LATER

ROSE approaches PROFESSOR SCOTT. He packs up his belongings in a messenger bag without looking up at her.

**PROFESSOR SCOTT**

Yes?

**ROSE**

Can I speak to you about my grades?

BURKE looks up at ROSE. Annoyed.

**ROSE**

I noticed that I've been getting B's. Consistently. And I was wondering, what changes would you need to see in my writing, for me to get an A?

**SCOTT**

Let me see your script.

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[43] "Rack focus to" is a camera direction note in screenplays that describes the camera shifting focal length to move from focusing on one object/subject, to another. Often this is done by shifting focus from the foreground to the background or vice versa (along the Z axis) but can also include other camera movements if the object/subject is offscreen—in which case the camera may need to tilt (move along the Y axis) or pan (move along the X axis) to focus on the second object/subject.

SCOTT grabs the paper from Rose' hands, takes a red pen out of his bag and scribbles as he briefly skims, turning the pages over quickly.

**SCOTT**
Your spelling is awkward.

**ROSE**
Oh. But that's slang, that's how the character talks--

**SCOTT**
You needed a comma here…

**ROSE**
Okay.

**SCOTT**
Your spacing is off here…

BURKE hands ROSE her paper and continues packing his bag.

**ROSE**
So just to make sure I am clear on this moving forward, if I had spelled these words "correctly," added that comma, and fixed the spacing issue, you would have given me an A?

**SCOTT**
The truth is I don't really give out A's.

**ROSE**
But we pass papers back around the table, I've seen James and Brent get A's… multiple times. I just want to know, is there something you're not seeing in my work?

**SCOTT**
I don't know that you're capable of getting an A. But I wouldn't worry about it too much. You're doing fine and in the grand scheme of things, grades don't matter. Excuse me but I'm running late.

SCOTT leaves the classroom. ROSE stands alone, her eyes fixate on the red pen he left on the table.

**INT. SCREENING CLASSROOM, LOS ANGELES, CA — NIGHT**

ROSE sits spotlit in her theater seat, other students around her sit in the dark.

ROSE
(To the camera)
I really felt like—they let *me* in here? Why am I here? What am I doing here?

In the scenes above, Rose, a straight A student with a background in hard sciences, struggles with the concept that her professor does not think she is "capable" of getting an A. If there's one thing, she knew about herself and school, it is that she would put in the work needed to get an A, because as long as grades were involved, an A was always a possibility. Professor Scotts' words send her into an epistemic spiral, questioning the things she thought she knew about her abilities and her sense of belonging. She questions the things she thought she had earned with her admission into a prestigious film program, things she had been told by her community back home about how powerful her cinematic voice and vision were. In this way, Rose faces the myth of meritocracy and its challenges it internally and externally. Dominant narratives about merit feed pedagogical tensions between professors and students, and amongst students themselves. In this example, Professor Scott does not answer Rose's questions directly, rather he comments on his assessment of her abilities in hope of bringing the conversation to an end, signaling that he does not wish to entertain her concern. He proceeds to provide grammatical critique without any clarity about how she might improve her work or her grade. He does not offer Rose an explicit reason for why he thinks she is incapable of a higher grade, and simultaneously dismisses her concerns by stating grades are arbitrary, thus creating a pedagogical paradox for Rose. Grades do not matter, yet he denies her an A and a pathway to it. "You either have it or you don't."

Rose went on to receive an A on her next script and her professor made a point to single her out in front of her peers as if to continue their previous conversation, "See, now you're writing like you *want* to get an A. Now you have something worthwhile to say." Rose gave him a blank expression then looked down at her paper with the red A. Inside she felt shame for how he spoke to her in front of her peers, as if she was being petty about her grades, when what she really wanted to know was if there was a tangible skill she needed to work on, but it was clear that his feedback would not help her find the answer to that question. Her professor raised the issue in a way that responding to him in front of everyone would make Rose seem too aggressive. She would have liked to comment on how their previous conversation led her to believe he took issue with her grammar and formatting, but his comments now seemed to be about the merit of the content of her writing. Pedagogically, she could not decipher what was required of her, what she had done wrong, and perhaps more importantly, what she had done right. Instead, she concluded that this professor was more harmful than helpful in this regard and moved forward with the intention to not let his pedagogy influence her craft. She held a quiet anger for the remainder of the quarter and decided the best thing that could come of this, would be for this scene to just end. My collaborators stories led me to ask: what this does to their journey towards finding their narrative voice, epistemically, and where they go to find it when the classroom fails them?

**Towards Epistemic Recovery: Reframing of Film School Pedagogy**

Toliver's words continued to echo in my mind as I sat with the stories of my collaborators to recover what we have been taught to forget—the journey which led Toliver to Endarkened Storywork (2021). She situates this work in a place that precedes slavery and academic institutions towards a reclaiming of Black storytelling in academia, which had become

a new kind home to her. In following Toliver's call for narrative reclaiming, journeying across such a bridge would also take us to a place that precedes colonization and white supremacy.

These words, this idea of shedding the weight of lessons that encourage—or perhaps demand, the forgetting of the embodied familiar, the stories that weave the fabric of who we are what we know, and how we came to know it, is yet another bridge Toliver's work offers those of us engaging in storywork through qualitative research. One that is created to recover the stories lost to the violence of epistemic erasure. I am first filled with gratitude for critical Black feminist scholars like Toliver, who have been my teachers alongside Chicana, Latina, Indigenous, and Asian feminist scholars who have done the hard work, the heart work, to model how we engage in epistemological recovery. Secondly, or perhaps all at once, I am enraged by the scope and reach of the harmful effects of epistemological racism, sexism, and erasure in academia and in media industries. Lastly, in an exhale, I return to gratitude for my collaborators, whose generous narrative offerings continue to teach us how to imagine new possibilities to build bridges for our collective communities towards recovering "what we have been taught to forget" in film schools and on sets—to make room for imaginaries liberated from the confines of these lessons.

***Asset-Based Pedagogies:*** In drafting this article, my mentor and advisor, Danny Solórzano, asked me whether the fact that my research collaborators came from cultural backgrounds that emphasize storytelling as a way to communicate and make meaning, gave my collaborators an advantage in film school classrooms where storytelling techniques were a driving mode of communication. I explained the pedagogical paradox my collaborators encountered when being asked to write what they know, and having those stories rejected (something I shared in an earlier section of this article). It is telling that Danny, a phenomenal educator who consistently seeks out the assets students bring with them to the classroom, without

knowing much about my collaborators, immediately looks first to their strengths to understand how they might approach their work. However, Danny is a critical race, and ethnic studies scholar who has taught using asset-based pedagogies for many years, often drawing on films and visual arts as pedagogical tools that align with his students' epistemes. In his article, "Images and Words that Wound," Danny describes the asset-based pedagogical approach he engages with his students using a Freirean problem prosing approach to engage students in critical discussion of films that were set to premier soon, films that depicted Latinas/os in stereotypical and deficit ways. His students did not stop at uncovering the problems, they continued their investigation of the production of these films and interviewed various actors and producers from the industry. Ultimately, the students organized a boycott and protest resulting in the delayed release of problematic films, with some going straight to video distribution without theatrical release. While they did not stop the films from being released all together, they were vocal in their communities, and towards the industry about how these films did not represent them and how instead, they caused harm. The value of Danny's pedagogy is not only seen in his students' abilities to think critically, but in how he invites students into the process of acting towards transforming these practices. This process creates an arsenal of tools for transformation that serve these students beyond any classroom. If we truly wish to respond to the calls for transforming film school pedagogy that film students have put forth, we need to be more intentional of creating opportunities for them to build the arsenal of tools they need by first nurturing the tools they already have. Another asset-based pedagogical approach can be framed using a community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005), where educators and students both intentionally name the forms of capital students bring with them into the classroom. In this study, my collaborators, as Danny pointed out, do have strong storytelling assets, rooted in linguistic,

familial, social, navigational, aspirational, resistant, and spiritual capital. As a dominant form of expression and connection for my collaborators, storytelling is so deeply entrenched into their ways of knowing the world, and their ways of making worlds, that it is informed and practiced through the overlapping assets of their community cultural wealth. It shapes who they are and how they come to map out their systems of knowing, and their systems of creating.

**Pedagogy Built through Resistance: Standing Alone and Standing Together**

When students choose to attend a class, they enter that space with a vulnerability in knowing that they have something to learn. With that sense of self, that sense of others, of the space between them—students epistemically attune to a vulnerable position in order to learn. Too often educators fall into the trap of assuming that they do not need to share in that vulnerability with their students, reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge production and gatekeeping. In film school, this hierarchy is reinforced by the idea that industry experience alone is the pedagogy needed to teach film students. Teaching film is a multidimensional endeavor. There are technical, business, practical, safety, creative, interpersonal, and theoretical components involved with learning how movies are made, and what it takes to endeavor to make them. For students whose epistemes are marginalized, simply showing up as themselves is an act of resistance that can teach others, invite others to do the same—or in Meera's case, it can set an example for opening space for more nuance and complexity when navigating programs designed to track students into singular roles,

Meera, a South Asian woman, entered film school with excitement to learn, but a self-consciousness over her abilities to make films. She explained that this insecurity stemmed from how she did not think of herself as a "film nerd" or "film buff" (i.e. someone who studies film and has an extensive knowledge of the canonical works)—she identified as "just someone who

tells stories." I, like Danny, believed that storytelling skills were the strongest asset a film student has, and was taken aback by Meera's comment about how she felt self-conscious for *only* being a storyteller, as if it was not enough. I draw on the conceptualization of Ananda Marin and her co-authors' on the importance of storytelling and *storylistening* for learning to explore the following question: What does it mean for film student to consume stories that harm their epistemes and simultaneously be denied the opportunities to produce and share stories that are epistemologically affirming?

> *To illustrate the role of storywork for African peoples, Hampaté Bâ gives an example from the Bambara tradition where storytellers go by the name of dieli, which also means blood. Like the crimson plasma that spreads nutrients and oxygen (and also viral infections) throughout the body,* ***griots 'circulate in the body of society, which they can cure or make ill, depending on whether they attenuate or exacerbate the conflicts within it'*** *(Hampaté Bâ, 1981). (Marin et.al., 2020, p. 2200)*

Meera, and my other collaborators, described the dialogical acts of *storylistening* in their homes, in their communities, and while watching and studying film. They understood the language of film intuitively and developed a sensibility for it, but often had to rely on their own imaginations to fill gaps of representation and opportunity, to heal the damage done by the erasure their stories and the warped representations that harmed their sense of self and sense of others. Meera was enrolled in a producing program, where students rarely took on other roles or completed production coursework as directors. However, she fought for the opportunity to enroll in a writing/directing workshop course where she produced a film about gender-based violence and survival. Had she not advocated for herself, drawing on resistant capital, she would not have been able to operationalize the wealth of assets she had developed as a storyteller. In reflecting on her experiences, she says this film was one of her greatest points of pride for her development as a filmmaker. She is primarily a producer today, but credits her experiences as a writer director, for her well rounded understanding of the importance of character and story.

Some of my collaborators shared that most of the shows they grew to love were centered on characters who were white girls and white women. Abeena described how she and her friends so internalized the pedagogy of white-centered stories that the artwork they produced also only depicted white girls and white women. It was only until they looked back at their creative works, as adults armed with an informed critique, that they questioned why they had not drawn or written Black characters that looked like them.

> *Hampaté Bâ (1981) suggests that the health of a community's social relations is tied to the circulation of stories. His notion of 'the word' also illustrates that* ***storywork is the process through which the axiological values of the society are given <u>flesh</u> through their <u>solidification in discourse</u>****. (Marin et.al., 2020, p. 2200)*

For film students, like Abeena and my other collaborators, who aspire to make films that improve "the health of social relations" in and beyond their communities, the epistemic alignment of their sense of self, sense of others and sense of the world, is a far more crucial tool than having memorized the canon of Hollywood and the auteurs who made them. In conversation with them about how we might describe our storytelling sensibilities as Women and Femmes of Color filmmakers, we take note of how we are particularly drawn to the embodied facets of storylistening and storytelling, especially with one another.

As we ended our interviews, Jade shared that she needed to speak these stories out loud. She named that even as a screenwriter, some of what she thinks and feels makes its way onto the page, but the dialogue we share with others can improve the creation of narrative adaptation and storytelling. Jade told me it felt like therapy, and that she had a friend with whom she wanted to share the experience. We then recruited Alejandra to the study. It was powerful to hear each of their perspectives on classroom experiences they shared, like watching a scene play out from two separate POVs and narrators. They detailed experiences with microaggressions towards their

representations of certain cultures, sexualities, genders, immigration statuses, and economic classes. They then shared how they strategized with one another in preparation for the comments they had come to expect from classmates and professors. They had reclaimed the storytelling and storylistening discourse, shifting pedagogical power, inviting others to bring their own systems of knowing and creating, with the knowledge that they would be protected and supported by each other. My collaborators did not always have these pedagogical partners with them in their courses. In fact, most of their experiences as they progressed in their studies, became less and less diverse, and they felt increasingly marginalized and tired of weathering the epistemic isolation.

If a person's sense of self withers in the shadow of the stories that render them other, then what stories are left to tell and whose voice do we hear when they are told? It is a haunting question akin to describing a spiritual possession, like the experience I described earlier, speaking with a disembodied voice. To recover epistemic alignment and reclaim one's assets through storytelling and storylistening is to engage the bodymindspirit[44]. Gloria Anzaldúa opens her book, *Light in the Dark/ Luz en lo Oscuro (2015),* with the following quote and reflection:

> *There's something epistemological about storytelling. It's the way we know each other, the way we know ourselves. The way we know the world.* ***It's also the way we don't know: the way the world is kept from us, the way we're kept from knowledge about ourselves, the way we're kept from understanding other people*** *(Barrett, 1999 as cited in Anzaldúa, 2015, p.1).*[45]

> *When writing at night, I'm aware of la luna, Coyolxauhqui, hovering over my house. I envision her muerta y decapitada (dead and decapitated), una cabeza con los parpados cerrados (eyes closed). But then her eyes open y la miro dar luz a los lugares oscuros, I see her light the dark places. Writing is a process of discovery and perception that produces knowledge and conocimiento (insight). I am often driven by the impulse to write something down, by the desire and urgency to communicate, to make meaning, to make sense of things,* ***to create myself*** *through this knowledge-producing act. I call this*

[44] See Anzaldúa, 2015
[45] Andrea Barrett, Writer's Chronicle, vol. 32, no. 3, December 1999 as cited by Gloria Anzadúa in Light in the Dark (2015)

> *impulse the* ***'Coyolxauhqui imperative': a struggle to reconstruct oneself and heal the sustos resulting from woundings, traumas, racism, and other acts of violation que hechan pedazos nuestras almas, split us, scatter our energies, and haunt us*** *(Anzaldúa, 2015, p.1)***.**

The *Coyolxauhqui imperative*, defined in the context of struggle, contends with systemic oppression to make ourselves whole in the wake of that which made us pieces. In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian education philosopher, makes a distinction in pedagogical approaches which aim to reproduce systems of oppression, and those that resist. Engaging Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed alongside Usha Iyer's pedagogy of reparations, to explore the *Coyolxauhqui imperative* towards epistemic alignment will require acts of resistance and repair in pedagogies of storytelling. Freire criticizes the siloing of knowledge which places it solely in the hands of the teacher, describing the banking system which seeks to train students in memorization which can hinder critical and creative thought. He instead argues for teachers to engage with students as co-creators of knowledge, subverting traditional power dynamics in the classroom. As film students, my collaborators brought with them pedagogical experience as teachers and mentors, that if given the opportunity, could have greatly served the professors and students they encountered in their program to repair the harmful narratives perpetuated in the field they studied. In coming to know them as I have, I know that they are the kind of filmmakers that will change representation in a way that moves beyond diversity, and towards decolonizing and reclaiming storytelling through film. We have much to learn about pedagogy from them.

> *I used to work with system impacted youth and I would find that it was easier to connect with them through creative ways. I really liked the idea of grabbing people creatively, grabbing them through, whatever was real—just talking to them instead of using this specific elevated jargon that most of my peers and my mentors would use. If I would just talk to them, I would get so much further as far as understanding them (Rose).*

Rose describes her passion for storytelling in connecting with young people she hoped to better understand and build trusting relationships with. Rose took on a pedagogical role that disrupted typical approaches in order to form authentic connections, subverting the teacher-student hierarchy to create lateral reciprocity, a co-creative space, where she invited students to take up activities such as writing, art, music etc. She would deviate from asking the re-traumatizing questions she was expected to ask and instead asked, "What are you watching? What shows? What movies? What *moved you*?" She got the answers she was after, but with a more informed contextualization because the responses not only illuminated what she wanted to know, but *how* her students had come to form these experiences and their understanding of those experiences—in other words, she came to know what worked for them pedagogically because she understood them epistemically. This approach sparked by her genuine curiosity opened room for an exploration of topics students then had a chance to further unpack with others with whom they felt they could relate, in modes of communication that are marginalized in research, the spoken word, the visual arts, the musical. Women of Color Epistemologies, Endarkened Epistemologies, Chicana Feminist Epistemologies, call on us to think beyond binaries, beyond dichotomies, beyond the myth of objectivity and lean into the sensibilities that ground us in our systems of knowing that connect us to one another. By intuitively pivoting her pedagogy towards epistemic alignment, Rose opened up a space where these young people could share their worlds, how those worlds were constructed, and then imagine new ones in creative ways, alongside one another. Colonial, imperialistic, and white supremacist ideologies dehumanize us all. Opening spaces that exist outside of them, despite them, is a movement towards humanizing us all. This pedagogical act towards humanizing one another was one of the turning points that led Rose to

film. It made her want to recommit to connecting with people and making the kind of social change she aspired to make—this time through the reciprocal pedagogy of filmmaking.

Seeking connections or documenting the ones we have already made—this is one of the things that drives us to make movies. When you have a story to tell, you hope there is someone ready to explore the world you create to tell it. In her preface for Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, a title whose paradox she makes sure to name, Cheryl Clark names the relationship she has held with Lorde's work, which she describes as

> *'a neighbor I've grown up with, who can always be counted on for honest talk* ***, to rescue me when I've forgotten the key to my own house*** *, to go with me to a tenants' or town meeting, a community festival' (p. 6).*

My interpretation of Clarke's words is one rooted in epistemology. Similar to what Toliver asks us to consider, what we have been "taught to forget"—Clarke shares who we turn to when we find ourselves locked out of "[our] own house"—in other words, when we have been taught to forget ourselves. Some of my collaborators shared stories of "that one professor" who took them under their wing, who changed the course of their program, inviting them to grow into themselves authentically. However, some did not find that support from their instructors. Some found it with other marginalized students, or outside of film school all together. Epistemic alignment in film school should not come down to "the benevolence of a single teacher."[46] All of them knew that the way back into their house was by finding others, who were willing to know them for the whole of who they are, so that they might become the filmmakers they want to become.

[46] See Dr. Robert Cooper Life History Interview in From the Margins to the Center: Black Faculty in ED & IS at UCLA https://vimeo.com/832960282/3a09ad1234

**Final Thoughts**

I lost the keys to my house somewhere in film school. I felt pressured to make my thesis film about white characters, and when I left film school, I struggled to figure out that I struggled to make films because I did not even know I had been locked out. Back to Danny, my mentor and advisor with a strong background in Ethnic Studies—he helped me find the keys to my house. In fact, once I opened the door, he stepped inside with me and as I tried to hide and get rid of the messy parts that I had been told did not belong with a graduate student in educational research, he helped me see the wealth I had accumulated. He helped me sort through the boxes I had packed away in shame and frame the stories I carried of my loved ones with pride. He introduced me to tools that challenge deficit frameworks and narratives, and tools that center the culturally relevant assets of students and educators. Danny is the kind of pedagogue that many of us who know him, aspire to be. I see him in my collaborators, where I also see Ananda Marin, Dolores Delgado Bernal, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, and Gloria Anzaldúa—and I wonder how these stories might have turned out, had my collaborators been in programs where their epistemes were pedagogically, systemically nurtured, instead of systemically erased and marginalized. Ethnic studies is one way People of Color find our way back into our houses when we are locked out, revisiting the familiar of our lived experiences with a critical and loving understanding of our stories and communities. I found epistemic alignment to become the scholar, filmmaker, and educator I am still becoming, through my studies and collaboration with critical scholars. In concluding this paper, my hope for this pedagogical piece leads to further epistemic ruptures, to more houses being unlocked, to a film education that teaches us to know and remember who we are, and moreover, *how* we came to know and how we came to create.

**The Scene After the Credits Roll:**

**INT. DORM ROOM HALLWAY—NIGHT**

ROSE sits on the floor, her back up against a closed door, she is on her phone. She's watching MICHAELA COEL's Emmy acceptance speech[47].

**MICHAELA COEL**

Write the tale that scares you, that makes you feel uncertain, that isn't comfortable. I dare you. In a world that entices us to browse through the lives of others to help us better determine how we feel about ourselves, and to in turn feel the need to be constantly visible, for visibility these days seems to somehow equate to success—do not be afraid to disappear. From it. From us. For a while. And see what comes to you in the silence.

JADE walks down the hall towards Rose.

JADE

Hey, are you locked out?

ROSE

Yeah, I'm waiting on someone to come let me in.

JADE

Do you want to come hangout in my room until they come?

ROSE

Sure, thanks. That would be better than sitting on the floor.

Rose smiles up at Jade who extends her hand to balance her as she stands.

**INT. JADE'S DORM APARTMENT—CONTINUOUS**

Jade goes into her fridge and grabs some drinks, offers one to Rose.

JADE

…I meant to check in with you about what happened in our writing workshop yesterday. That was

[47] Michaela Coel's Emmy Acceptance Speech: https://youtu.be/7FI6kwRFRtU?si=HreP0bTL1z2PT_a-

really fucked up. He shouldn’t have talked to you like that, it seems like he has something against you. Is everything ok?

ROSE
Yeah, I think I made him angry by asking about my grades, and ironically, then he gave me an A, I think to just shut me up.

JADE
I don’t get it, your scripts are my favorite to read. I’m sorry he withholds his shitty feedback. I feel like he just doesn’t get you. I think your stuff is funny in the smartest way. Not the kind of funny that makes you laugh out loud, but the kind of funny that bubbles and builds, makes you smile cuz it reminds you of all the crazy shit you’ve done and feels so real. I almost feel like you write about me and my friends sometimes, it’s a trip.

ROSE
That means a lot. Thanks.

Rose is quiet, plays with her drink.

ROSE
So you notice the way he talks to me? The fucked up things he does?

JADE
Yeah! I do. You’re not alone in seeing it.

ROSE
Can I ask you something? Why don’t you say anything? When I speak up and no one else does—it does make me feel alone. I’ve given up because of it.

JADE
I’m sorry… I… don’t know what to say. I mean that I don’t speak up because I don’t know what to say, or I’m worried that I’d be speaking for you or something, and honestly, I just didn’t know if you’d want me to.

ROSE
I would.

JADE

Understood. Then I will.

Jade smiles at Rose and they cheers with their drinks.

## Chapter 7:
## Article 3

## Exploring Nepantla: A *Coming of Conocimiento* story about Cultivating Creative Capital in Film School


### Abstract

*This is a Coming of Conocimiento counterstory, a play on a coming-of-age story that draws on Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of conocimiento, "searching, inquiring, and healing consciousness," (2015, p. 19). Through this Coming of Conocimiento counterstory, this paper seeks to theoretically, epistemically, and pedagogically explore the possibility of adding an eighth form of capital, creative capital, to the community cultural wealth framework: familial, navigational, resistant (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, 2005), linguistic, aspirational, social (Yosso, 2005), and spiritual capital (Perez Huber, 2009). Creativity fuels our abilities to form connections and co-construct meaning throughout the learning process. It is perhaps most recognized in the arts, such as writing, film, photography, and music (etc.). However, this paper also explores creativity as a deeply personal, internal way of being, knowing, becoming, and moreover, theorizing towards creative capital as grounded in an* ***epistemology of creating.*** *I discuss how in conversation with mentors, femtors, colleagues, and research collaborators, we consider how creative capital gives way to imaginaries beyond systems of oppression, how it informs our ability to know ourselves, and our ability to create ourselves—processes which call on us to journey inward, and outward. In discussing manifestations of creativity through an asset-based approach, this paper theorizes how, as a crucial foundation for culturally relevant pedagogies and research praxis, cultivating creative capital reinforces a commitment to co-creating knowledge and pedagogical tools. I then present a cinematic critical race counterstory in the form of a screenplay, to illustrate how creative capital can be cultivated in film school and tell a story of coming to conocimiento.*


### Introduction: Making the Road

> ***Myles Horton****: I believe in another frame of reference. When I talk about Highlander and my experiences at Highlander, people forget that at the time I was having those experiences and having those influences on Highlander, there were other staff members also doing the same thing. I can only tell the way it looked from my perspective. It gives the impression that there were no other perspectives.*
>
> ***Paulo Freire:*** *Yes.*
>
> ***Myles Horton:*** *That's the hesitancy I have, so I would hope to be able to kind of avoid that. And the other thing I would hope to do would be to make it clear that my ideas have changed and are constantly changing and* ***should*** *change and that I'm as proud of my inconsistencies as I am my consistencies. So, I'd just like to shy away from the idea that somehow, I've had these ideas, and they've had such and such an effect.*

In *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990), Myles Horton and Paulo Freire document their conversation on social change through participatory pedagogy. In opening, Horton wants to make clear that his work in the Highlander Folk School[48] is one piece of a larger whole that must not be overlooked or simplified to erase the other people and their contributions to making the Highlander schools what they became. I open this article with a similar intention, to honor the collective conversations and offerings that have shaped this work and will continue to shape this work. I look forward to the inconsistencies born of the learning process, as they are a sign of growth and collaboration.

**Towards Creative Capital**

This paper aims to explore how one might define *creative capital*, as an extension of community cultural wealth (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, 2005; Perez Huber, 2009), in conversation with Women of Color feminisms, critical pedagogies, and the lived experiences of MFA Women and Femmes of Color in film school.

> ***The creative process is an agency of transformation.*** *Using the creative process to heal or restructure the images /stories that shape a person's consciousness is a more effective way of healing. When you allow the images to speak to you through the first person rather than restricting these images to the third person (things of which you speak), a dialogue—rather than a monologue—occurs (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 35).*

I begin with the story of how I came to understand the conceptualization of cultural capital in a transformational sense. In Daniel G. Solórzano's graduate seminar on Critical Race Theory, he assigned presentations for student groups to take up the readings for the week and create a visual presentation and engage our classmates in pedagogical activities we facilitated. My group was assigned readings on the Theories of Cultural Reproduction by Henry Giroux (1983) and

[48] Miles Horton was the founder and director of the Highlander Folk School which opened in 1932. It became the first fully integrated school in the South where he and his colleagues, along with Black activists, cultivated a participatory framework for schooling that sought to empower students to become agents of social change—particularly in the 1950's during the Civil Rights Movement.

Theories of Resistance as discussed by Daniel G. Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001). Coming from a film background, where discussing diversity was rare, and even rarer still were opportunities to imagine how one might actually change the lack of true representation in the industry—I felt that I was finally armed with a framework to understand how we transform and engage with oppressive conditions in critical ways, and how we resist falling into the traps of reproducing oppression in our pedagogy. The transformational resistance framework explores how students engage in resistant behavior, as defined in four quadrants where the X axis represents the degree of commitment to social justice and the Y axis represents the degree of an informed critique of oppressive structures. I adapt this model, by layering another dimension, in addition to the underlying original model which looks to broader social structures of oppression and broader forms of demonstrating a motivation towards social justice—to consider how film students might engage in transformative forms of resistance, where an informed critique of oppression is further cultivated through critical media literacy, and a commitment to social justice can be enacted through critical media production.

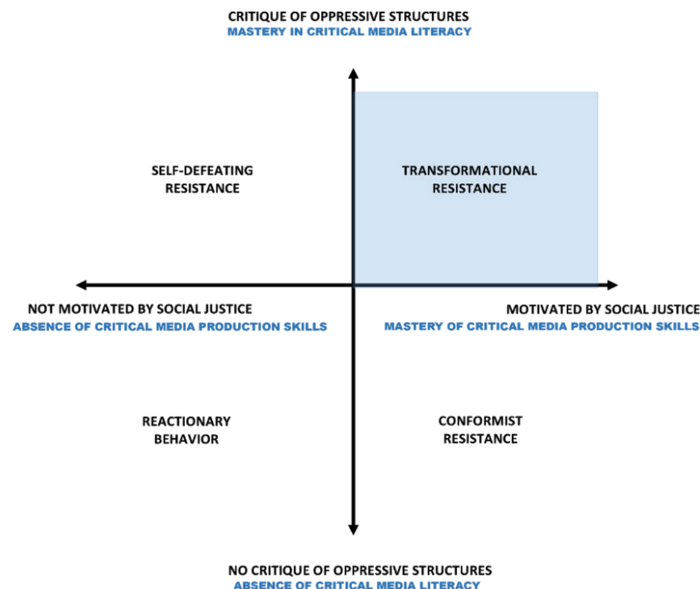


*Figure 3.1, Illustrating Mastery of Critical Media Production*

In this seminar, I also learned about Community Cultural Wealth through the work of Tara J. Yosso, Lindsay Perez Huber, Daniel G. Solórzano, and Octavio Villalpando. As an asset-based approach to decenter and challenge deficit narratives about Communities of Color, CCW provides a framework from which to examine how cultural capital manifests as assets and unpack the various ways those assets show up for students, particularly Students of Color. These forms of capital include familial, navigational, resistant (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Yosso, 2005), linguistic, aspirational, social (Yosso, 2005), and spiritual capital (Perez Huber, 2009).

In conversation with Daniel G. Solórzano (Danny), I learned more about the origins of Community Cultural Wealth, and how it grew and developed with various critical race scholars. He shared that when first thinking through possible forms of cultural capital, he along with Octavio Villalpando, Dolores Delgado Bernal and Tara J. Yosso, named around seventeen forms of capital, but decided to simplify the list to begin with and see how the work would grow. One of the earlier forms of capital he theorized about was something he referred to as *aesthetic capital*, where he described the way People of Color engage in the creation and observation of various forms of visual aesthetics rooted in cultural representations. For example, this included music, films, photography, public murals, paintings, and even the ways Chicana/o/x families curated their homes with iconography that could be religious, political, or familial. Furthermore, Danny not only observed the ways that aesthetic capital showed up in his community and other communities he visited or studied—he brought aesthetic capital into his classroom as a pedagogical tool. He told me stories of how he often came upon murals while driving through LA and kept his film camera handy to document the murals he would find in alleyways, in public parks, and on the sides of local businesses. He would then transfer these photographs onto slides, and project them for students during class, using a projection system that allowed his to

transition between images with a cross-dissolve aesthetic. As Danny's student, years later, I witnessed how his aesthetic choices in his pedagogy solidified my understanding of course material. One of my strongest abilities to interpret and unpack information, to learn, is through visual mediums. Danny uses different technology now, but the essence of his use of aesthetic capital has only grown. He invites his students to observe the exhibits he visits, the murals he sees on his drives, and asks us to deeply consider artifacts in our own work and homes. Those of us who have been in community with Danny know just how important presentation slides are in being purposeful and intentional about how we visually and linguistically tell the stories that need to be told for the purpose of a lecture or class activity. He also incorporates audio in very important ways, playing music and films that transport us into stories through sight and sound. In conversation with Danny, and in reflecting on my time as a student in his classes and as a TA for him, I think the strengths and assets of aesthetic capital not only lie in how it gives us a framework from which to observe and create, but also how we *interpret* aesthetic as learners. He prompts his students with questions like "What do you think of when you see this mural?" sometimes, he asks locals who he encounters while taking the photos of the public art the same kinds of questions and shares what he learned from them with us. The interpretation of the aesthetic capital presented in class, or encountered in our communities is a crucial space for challenging deficit ideologies and making powerful connections across space and time.

While working with my research collaborators for my dissertation, I noticed how essential creativity is to the process of learning, especially in the arts. I had of course experienced this as a student in Danny's classes but was able to name it and recognize it in a different way in conversation with my collaborators. During our interviews, they named the ways they struggled with tapping into a *flow* of creativity for class assignments, and in their personal projects as a

result of feeling that their stories and aesthetic choices were rejected in class environments and on film productions. In other words, their creative approaches were framed in deficit ways by their professors and peers. I drew on what I knew from a critical race approach to challenging deficit ideologies, to think through how an asset-based approach would help me better understand the experiences my collaborators faced, and furthermore—how to repair the harm caused.

This is how I came to theorize about *creative capital*. I would define *creative capital* as an epistemic and praxis-oriented form of cultural capital, which manifests internally and externally—an epistemology in constant development of systems of knowing and systems of creating. Creative capital is informed by how our minds organize and interpret the world around us and how we choose to externalize these interpretations. The processes we engage in the exploration of creative capital can of course be informed by other overlapping forms of capital, such as familial, navigational, aspirational, linguistic, social, resistant, and spiritual. However, there is a particular strength to how we come to know and create ourselves in the context of these various forms of capital. We create our systems of knowing, through our interpretation of the world, and in community with others. We also create systems of expression, systems of creation. Creative capital encompasses our inner creative worlds that can never possibly be expressed in totality externally. There is a particular strength to knowing our own mind and recognizing its power to create, which is further fortified by our coming to *conocimiento,* by the "searching, inquiring, and healing [of our] consciousness," (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19). The flow of the process of conocimiento can be disrupted and harmed by deficit pedagogical experiences, particularly as they relate to the creative process.

## Entering a Flow State

Walt Hickey discusses "the flow state" in his book, *You are What You Watch*, in the final chapter, "What Stories do to Their Creators" (2023). He defines the flow state in the following way:

> *Indeed "flow" isn't just a convenient shorthand for how it feels when creativity exits the body. A "flow state" occurs when a person is completely engrossed in a task that commands their full mental attention. This is often pretty thrilling: A flow state happens when the challenges of a task meet a person's high skill, something that leads to a sense of self-satisfaction. Conversely, when a challenge exceeds a person's low skill, they feel anxiety; when something unchallenging is beneath a person's high skills, they feel boredom, and when someone unskilled does something not challenging, they feel apathy. But when a person's high skills meet a challenge, studies show, they'll often get a boost in mood compared with their counterparts (p. 190).*

In extending this definition of creative flow and the ways that our skills aid in or hinder our ability to enter a flow state, I contend that it is not only the skillset itself, but our interpretation or impression of our skillsets. By this I mean, we could in fact be highly skilled in the things needed to engage in a task successfully, well informed and prepared—but if we engage in the assessment of that skill in pedagogical situations where the gatekeepers of knowledge frame our skills in deficit ways, this can in turn disrupt our flow. Moreover, developing the skills needed also calls on those who hold pedagogical power to engage in reciprocal ways of learning where all are considered creators and keepers of knowledge[49]. As I discussed in my previous article, "The *Coyolxauhqui Imperative:* Reimagining Film School Pedagogy Through Epistemic Alignment," the epistemic harm that results from the denial of a student's lived experience can further harm their ability to learn. It is therefore vital to prioritize epistemic alignment pedagogically, in order to cultivate opportunities for creative capital to flow. Please indulge me in reading the following

[49] *See* Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2000), bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), and Usha Iyer's Pedagogy of Reparations (2022).

lengthy excerpt. It is powerful example of the significance of cultivating time, space, and practice towards for creative capital, especially for women artists.

> *I think often and deeply about women and work, about what it means to have the luxury of time-time spent collecting one's thoughts, time to work undisturbed. This time is space for contemplation and reverie. It enhances our capacity to create. Work for women artists is never just the moment when we write, or do other art, like painting, photography, paste-up, or mixed media. In the fullest sense, it is also the time spent in contemplation and preparation. This solitary space is sometimes a place where dreams and visions enter and sometimes a place where nothing happens. Yet it is as necessary to active work as water is to growing things. It is this stillness, this quietude, needed for the continued nurturance of any devotion to artistic practice-to one's work-that remains a space women (irrespective of race, class, nationality, etc.) struggle to find in our lives. Our need for this uninterrupted, undisturbed space is often far more threatening to those who watch us enter it, than is that space which is a moment of concrete production (for the writer, that moment when she is putting the words on paper, or, for the painter, that moment when she takes material in hand). We have yet to create a culture so utterly transformed by feminist practice that it would be common sense that the nurturance of brilliance or the creation of a sustained body of work fundamentally requires such undisturbed hours. In such a world it would make perfect sense for women who devote themselves to artistic practice to rightfully claim such space" (hooks, 1995, p. 125-126)*

bell hooks names the internal power of cultivating creativity, particularly for women artists, creating in the context of a patriarchal society. The challenges of finding and creating the space for the kind of reflection and thought needed to be creative, is further compounded by intersectional forms of epistemic harm, including epistemic racism, homophobia, and classism. Time spent in our internal worlds, with care, can have transformative effects on our ability to see ourselves as creators and to create. Therefore, in what hooks captures in the previous passage, this time to oneself is often more threatening to those who would seek to keep us from creating. In the context of a film school education which is modeled after industry practice which is capitalistically motivated in a neoliberal context—film students' time is not their own. Their time spent in reflective thought, towards creation is reframed in ways meant to serve the industry and students are not taught how bridge their sense of self, sense of others, with their sense to create—they are taught how to feed the commercial market.

So how then do we repair the divide born from the epistemic wounds of colonial and capitalistically motivated racism and oppression? How does one reclaim narrative agency and cultivate, nurture creative capital? Anzaldua writes about the creative process, the ways our imaginations bridge self-image and images of others through dreams and through words. She discusses the significance of creating purposefully through imagination and offers the following exercise by C.G. Jung (1973) to unpack a creative praxis.

> *Jung suggests the following process:*
>
> > *Start with any image, contemplate it, carefully observe how the picture begins to unfold. Don't force it; just observe, and sooner or later the picture will change through a spontaneous association that causes a slight alteration. Note all these changes. Step into the picture yourself. If it's a speaking figure, talk to it and listen to what he or she has to say.*
>
> *You alter your state of awareness into what Robert Bosnak calls an image consciousness (1986). This intentional interaction is similar to fiction writing's willed, active fantasy; without any partial control on the dreamer / writer's part, the artist's conscious and unconscious personality unite to create the art produced. The writer records the conversation between these inner images and her ego. You could say that the writer, through her interactive participation, merges herself in the conscious / unconscious processes and gains possession of her characters by allowing them to possess her. Imagination is an active, purposeful creativity (Anzaldúa, 2015, pp. 35-36).*

It is perhaps the most important thing to cultivating creative capital, that this "possession" described by Anzaldúa is enacted by an entity that yields to the agency and power of the creator's epistemology. We need to hear our own voices, and the voices of those we hope to represent in our work, beyond the noise and possession of ideologies rooted in white supremacy and other forms of oppression. In educational spaces this requires intentional anti-racist and decolonial approaches. *In The Anti-Racist Writers Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom*, Felicia Rose Chavez blends memoir and pedagogy to detail the facilitation of cultivating safe spaces for creative accountability and exploration. She challenges the dominance and control which forces authors into practicing silence during traditional workshop settings,

where the writer is expected to withhold speaking, or defending their work in response to the critiques from their peers. Instead, she invites students to explicitly name the way they would like to receive feedback, and what kind of feedback would be helpful. Students drive their own creative workshops, practicing how to purposefully invite the opinions of others into their creative process. This foregrounds agency in cultivating creativity. Furthermore, Chavez speaks to her role as a facilitator and how other spaces like one-on-one discussions of students' work are spaces for trust building towards further developing their writing.

As is the case in writing workshops, creative capital also extends to the products of our creativity, as does our external manifestations of creative capital—the way we discuss our imaginations, our ideas, the way we make music, the way we capture the world through film and photography, the way our paintbrushes offer interpretations of the inner workings of our mind. In the externalization of our creative capital, the opportunity for collaboration and co-creation adds dynamics to the creation of our systems of knowing and systems of creating that then reverberate in the world around us, in harmony, in alignment, or in resistance.

Furthermore, I see creative capital in conversation with aesthetic capital, where creative capital encompasses the epistemologies, the systems of knowing and creating, and aesthetic capital is found in the manifestations of the choices we make while creating or observing—a praxis of agency and power in creation and interpretation.

**Storying Our Findings**

I will now turn to the cinematic critical race composite counterstory (Lopez, 2024), to emerge from my work with my collaborators, seven Women and Femmes of Color in MFA film programs. Each collaborator engaged in a three-part life history interview resulting in twenty-one hours of conversationally reciprocal *platicas* about the experiences they had that led them to film

school, experiences during film school, and experiences in professional settings. Below is a table which details how my collaborators self-identified.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Gender</th><th colspan="2">Sexuality</th><th colspan="2">Race/Ethnicity</th><th colspan="2">MFA Program</th><th colspan="2">Creative Roles</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">6</td><td rowspan="2">Women</td><td rowspan="2">4</td><td rowspan="2">Heterosexual</td><td>2</td><td>Latina/x</td><td>4</td><td>Screenwriting</td><td>7</td><td>Producer</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>Black</td><td>2</td><td>Directing</td><td>7</td><td>Writer</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">1</td><td rowspan="2">Non-Binary Femme</td><td rowspan="2">3</td><td rowspan="2">Queer</td><td>2</td><td>South Asian</td><td rowspan="2">1</td><td rowspan="2">Producing</td><td rowspan="2">6</td><td rowspan="2">Director</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>East Asian</td></tr>
</table>

***Table 1, Collaborators***

As I have mentioned in previous papers, I engaged in a process of cinematic critical race counterstorytelling to honor the lived experiences of my collaborators in a creative language familiar to them to invite them into the interpretations I made of our findings. I also chose to composite characters and experiences to protect their anonymity and further bridge the way their collective experiences spoke to one another. Where I have previously shared excerpts interwoven with academic styled narrative, this counterstory will stand alone with a beginning middle and end. I will provide an overview of themes explored, questions explored, and the resolutions or conclusions we came to.

This work was carried out with a FilmCrit approach, building on the tenets of Critical Race Theory in education as defined by Daniel G. Solórzano as a framework that operationalizes the intercentricity of race and racism, and other forms of oppression, a challenge to the dominant ideologies, the centering of experiential knowledge, a commitment to social justice, and the interdisciplinary perspective. FilmCrit extends this framework to consider the way engaging in filmic methods requires further tenets—namely the understanding that films are constructed, and centering the importance of reciprocity through a cultural intuition framework as films are inherently collaborative mediums, whether in their creation, or in their consumption,

operationalizing the framework methodologically, theoretically, pedagogically, and in creative praxis. I detail this process in my earlier article, "FilmCrit: Using Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling as Critical Race Feminista Methodology" (2024).

The following story explores questions such as: "What drives us to create?" and "What keeps us creative?" Through various modes of storytelling (voice over, dialogue, monologue, visual cues, action lines etc.), I portray the internal and external aspects of creative capital. This story, written as a screenplay, offers examples of how creative capital is cultivated or denied in film school, and ultimately how through pedagogical intervention, creative capital manifests in communities, contributing to collective stories and histories.

I have composited the lived experiences of my collaborators to story this fictionalized representation of their true experiences, and included their reflections and imaginings towards transforming their experiences in order to reclaim the ending of this story through their imagining of what film school could be for students like them. At the end of this article, I offer a reflection on the counterstory and future possibilities for cultivating creative capital in and beyond the classroom.

In this episode of *Exploring Nepantla* introduces the characters of this series and stories the ways my collaborators reclaim pedagogy to cultivate creative capital. This is the first episode of what I hope will continue to develop as an episodic series, exploring tensions born from resistance and reimagining spaces of learning and creating in film school. I named this series Exploring Nepantla, after Gloria Anzaldua's concept of Nepantla, that place born from being torn between ways of knowing, the exploration of such a space brings tensions born from being torn between ways of creating.

## How to Read a Screenplay

For readers not familiar with screenplay format, I hope to offer a guide for how to read a screenplay, and the significance of the formatting. Screenplays are formatted in such a way that one page roughly translates to one minute of screen time. This is a significant way to estimate the total running time of a film from preproduction through to postproduction. The margins are wider on the left to allow for three-hole punching for crew members to keep physical copies with them as needed. Though we now work in highly digitized workflows, the format nonetheless lends itself to keeping notes in the margins if needed and maintains the consistently of estimated run time that has traditionally been used in film. The title page is the first page of a screenplay, which includes important information about the production company, studio, or author contact information as well as the title of the screenplay and the source material if it is an adaptation. To demonstrate the various components included in a screenplay, I give the first pages and first examples of what you will come across while reading the CCRCC, Exploring Nepantla. A script or screenplay is the document that all departments reference for their particular roles. Cinematographers reference the actions, the dialogue, the time of day, the location details in the screenplay, along with input from the director, to create shot lists and design their setups. Actors use it to rehearse their physical performance and learn their lines. In the following section I provide images with descriptions of each section to provide an overview for how to read and interpret a screenplay.

*Exploring Nepantla* ← Title of Screenplay

by
Brenda Yvonne Lopez and
The WFOC Film School Collective ← Names of Authors

(Based on, dissertation study) ← Reference for Adapted Material

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

Contact Information for Author or Studio

Scene Heading:
Specifies if the scene is an Interior or Exterior, or if it transitions from one to another (INT./EXT.), Location, Year (if set in a different year) -- Time of Day
Scene headings are important for collaboration across multiple departments, so that everyone know the specifcs of a scene's setting.

INT. EVEE'S LIVING ROOM, 1997-- DAY

Action Lines:

These lines are screen direction, describing the action and visuals, at times auditory ambiance.

These lines are not spoken in the final production, they guide the action.

EVEE, 7, Latinx, sits at the table, eating cereal and watching the TV. We see her mom behind her in the kitchen, quickly drinking her cup of coffee. She has a roller in her bangs and a tight hairsprayed pony tail. Evee walks over to the TV set as if in a trance, and sits directly in front of it, centered. Early morning sun light comes through the window. Evee's mom, enters frame, dressed in a waitress uniform, puts her back pack and shoes on while Evee looks straight ahead, not moving, save for where her mom lifts her arms to place her backpack on her shoulders and her feet to put her shoes on. Evee's mom takes her hand and turns off the TV, Evee finally turns to the right of the frame as her and her mom exit.

Every new scene heading indicates a new scene

INT. EVEE'S LIVING ROOM, 1997-- AFTERNOON

Evee returns to the same spot, tosses her backpack to one side of her, and turns on the TV. We see her from exactly the same position. She is centered, watching ARTHUR on PBS. The light in the room travels on the wall behind the TV, casting shadows that show time is passing quickly. We push in on Evee from behind and continue the motion from the front, where we see her face, as we pull out. She is enraptured by the TV, it glows over her face, greens, pinks, blues. The shadows behind her continue to move until the room is dark, her mother's sleeping on the couch behind her. In a tight close up we see Evee's eyes and her smile, she looks like she's in love.

INT. ABEENA'S BEDROOM, 2001 - NIGHT

ABEENA, 12, Black, and two of her friends, JASMINE, 12, Black, and TARA, 12, South Asian, sit cozied up, each in their own open sleeping bags. They have face masks on, Rose paints Abeena's nails. Tara tosses snacks into Abeena's mouth. They're watching Lizzie McGuire, and giggling.

Character Name → ABEENA

Dialogue → Ooooh oooh I love this part!

EXT. TRUCK BED, MOVIE DRIVE IN, 2001 - NIGHT

Alejandra, 10, Latina, and Meera, 10, South Asian, sit against the back of a pick up truck's bed with the window in the middle open to hear the sound coming through the car stereo. They are eating popcorn they brought from home in microwave bags, and Hot Cheetos.

(CONTINUED)

PROFESSOR BURKE
Hi, you must be Alejandra.

ALEJANDRA
(hesitantly)
Yes-- I... Yes I'm Alejandra.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Thanks for your enthusiasm, but I think maybe we'll start with a less complicated example. Is that alright?

ALEJANDRA
Oh, sure.

Small Directional Note:

Parentheticals are used to convey specific directional notes including emotional choices and other information such as O.S. (for dialogue spoken Off Screen) or V.O. (for dialogue spoken as narration through Voice Over)

*Exploring Nepantla*

by
Brenda Yvonne Lopez and
The WFOC Film School Collective

(Based on, dissertation study)

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

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(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Pillows and blankets all around them. We can barely make out Alejandra's dad in the driver's seat behind her, he's reading, and the glow from his small flashlight, backlights the girls with a soft halo.

We see the rest of the drive-in, cars parked all around them, people walk by, and a large screen with the movie HOOK plays in the distance. Alejandra turns to Meera.

ALEJANDRA
I saw the behind the scenes for this movie, it's so cool! I'm going to watch it again after.

MEERA
Can I come!?

ALEJANDRA
DUH.

The girls instinctually trade their snacks.

INT. VIDEO RENTAL STORE, 1997 - NIGHT

ROSE, 10, Black, looks through the movies on the shelves. ROSE'S DAD, PHIL, 38, Black watches her with a curious look.

PHIL
Why are you actin' like you're not gonna pick the same movie you pick every time?

ROSE
Maybe I want to watch something different...

PHIL
Mhm.

ROSE
Dad! Can I get two movies? Pleeeease?

PHIL
... alright. Can I pick the second one?

ROSE
Sorry! I already decided!

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Rose takes two movies out of the shelf. She slams them down on the counter to pay. We see Sister Act One and Sister Act Two on the counter.

INT. JASON'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

JADE, 12, East Asian, jumps on her brother's bed. Her twin brother JASON, 12, East Asian, hides in a dark space looking through a crack in the door at JADE. JADE wears a Harry Potter cloak and points to the door he is hiding behind, he steps out, they both draw their wands at the same time--

JADE & JASON
Expelliarmous!

JADE
Ahhhhh!

Jade falls to the bed dramatically and rolls over and over, opening one eye to see Jason who is now standing over her with his wand pointed directly at her face.

JASON
You need to work on your acting, that was soooo dramatic.

JADE
It's called PHYSICAL COMEDY.

JASON
It's called BAD ACTING.

JADE
Whatever! I think we need to change the script anyway. What if instead of you bursting out, I force the door to swing open with a spell?

JASON
Ooooh I like that. Let's do that!

TITLE SEQUENCE:
SPLIT SCREEN INTO
EIGHT BOXES

We see Jade, Alejandra, Rose, Tara, Meera, Abeena, and Evee as little girls, each in their own box, with their respective names. The title of the film appears in the lower right box, *Exploring Nepantla*. Each of the girls transitions into their adult selves.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM, 2024 - EARLY MORNING

ROSE, 26, sits next to mom’s hospital bed, takes her hand in hers and puts it up to her cheek. Her mom, Violet, wipes a tear from Rose’s cheek.

VIOLET
Honey, you’re gonna miss your flight.

ROSE
I’ll be fine, mom. You sure you got everything you need?

VIOLET
I’m sure. You’re auntie will be here soon. Don’t worry, please. I couldn’t be prouder. I can’t wait to hear all about your films.

ROSE
I love you mom. I’ll call you when I’m settled okay?

Violet nods and give Rose a kiss on her hand.

VIOLET
My beautiful Rose. I love you.

EXT. LAX - DAY

Rose stands outside waiting for her Uber. She texts her mom, “landed and headed for the apartment.” Rose exits frame as she takes her backpack off to climb into a car. Behind her we see Alejandra approaching, coming into focus, on the phone.

ALEJANDRA
Si mami, si. Claro que si, te llamo otra vez en cuanto llegue al apartamento... ahh no me digas que se me olvidaron los buritos!

Alejandra smiles to herself, she forgot them on purpose.

ALEJANDRA
Okay mami ahora si tengo que colgar, ya esta por llegar mi raite. Te quiero mucho. Adios.

Alejandra leans into a car window to hear her driver.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

DRIVER
For Alejandra?

ALEJANDRA
Yes!

INT. LIVING ROOM, JADE'S APARTMENT - DAY

JADE breaks down an empty box, takes it out the door and leaves it against a wall in the hallway. Her door is open to the hall. She returns to her living room, takes a seat and exhales. Her living room is peaceful, decorated in minimalistic furnishings and abstract movie posters. Jade's head perks up and she opens her eyes as she hears voices down the hall.

INT. DORM APARTMENT HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Alejandra juggles a large, broken piece of luggage and Rose steps out into the hall to help her. Jade looks on and starts to walk down the hall towards them.

ROSE
Here! Let me help you.

ALEJANDRA
Thank you!

ROSE
Where are you headed?

ALEJANDRA
Actually, this one, 210.

ROSE
Oh so you must be Alejandra? I'm Rose, I'm your roommate.

ALEJANDRA
Rose! It's so nice to meet you.

Rose and Alejandra smile at each other and then turn to Jade, who seems to be frozen.

JADE
Oh! Hi! I didn't want to interrupt, I just thought I might offer to help. I'm Jade, I live in 215.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEJANDRA
Thanks Jade! Do you want to come in to our place?

JADE
Oh, sure.

INT. ROSE AND ALEJANDRA'S APARTMENT - LATER

Rose, Alejandra, Jade sit on the floor of an empty apartment, eating snacks and sipping on drinks.

ROSE
I kinda like the space here. We just need a couple of things, a couch- a dining table...

ALEJANDRA
Yeah, it's gonna be nice!

Alejandra takes a satisfying sip of her drink, releasing the tension in her shoulders.

JADE
So what programs are you in?

ALEJANDRA
Screenwriting-- the MFA.

ROSE
I'm in film too, but directing.

JADE
No way-- I'm in Screenwriting too!

ROSE
Did you also pick this floor because the theme is social justice?

JADE
Yeah! I just thought it would be nice to live somewhere, where I'd be able to find like-minded people. Might make being the only Asian in class feel less lonely.

ROSE & ALEJANDRA
Same!

ROSE
Well, not exactly the same, but you know what I mean.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEJANDRA
Yeah, like being the only one is a lot.

JADE
We should plan some writing sessions together... if you guys want.

ALEJANDRA
That sounds perfect.

ROSE
Yeah, I'd be down! I've been in touch with someone else who's going to be in the directing track with me-- her name is Abeena, she might want to join us too.

ALEJANDRA
Awww, we have a little writing group, already! This is gonna be fun.

Jade smiles.

INT. SCREENWRITING CLASS, LOS ANGELES, CA - DAY

Rose, Alejandra, Jade, and Abeena sit next to each other, around a table. The rest of the seats are filled with white men, save for one that is taken by a white woman. They look to each other with knowing looks and take their laptops out.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Welcome everyone. I hope you all received the syllabus. I got everyone's first assignments, they are uploaded to the class site for your reference during workshops. Most of them were in really good shape-- we'll take a look at them all and explore some new ideas for some of your scripts together.

Alejandra shares a concerned look with Rose.

PROFESSOR BURKE
My hope is that you walk away from this class with a feasible and compelling short script.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PROFESSOR BURKE (CONT'D)
Try to lean into subjects you're familiar with, write what you know, before venturing into too much research on new subjects. Okay, with that--who would like to go first?

Alejandra raises her hand.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Hi, you must be Alejandra.

ALEJANDRA
(hesitantly)
Yes-- I... Yes I'm Alejandra.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Thanks for your enthusiasm, but I think maybe we'll start with a less complicated example. Is that alright?

ALEJANDRA
Oh, sure.

TIM raises his hand, answering before he's called on.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Ah, yes. You are?

TIM
Tim.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Perfect. Get us started Tim!

Alejandra plays with the corner of her laptop screen. Rose looks at her trying to catch her gaze but she doesn't look up.

INT. SCREENWRITING CLASS, LOS ANGELES, CA - LATER

Burke adjust his reading glasses and looks up to the class.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Excellent, Tim. I look forward to seeing more. We have time for one more today--how about uhh uhh Abeena? Am I saying that right?

ABEENA
Close enough. Sure. I can go.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PROFESSOR BURKE motions for ABEENA to take a seat at the front of the classroom which is set up for a workshop style feedback session. Abeena takes her seat, adjust her notebook on her lap, and readies her pen to take notes. Professor Burke does not make eye contact or preface his comments, he jumps right in.

PROFESSOR BURKE
This is too specific. Recently a study out of Hollywood found that films with such cultural specificity actually alienate audiences. You should consider broadening the reach of your story by pulling back on some of the hyper specific cultural references.

ABEENA
You told us to write what we know. This is what I know.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Yes, write what you know-- but not like this.

ABEENA
I'm sorry, I'm confused. How am I supposed to write what I know, based on my own experiences, and not be culturally specific?

Professor Burke looks up to make eye contact with Abeena and lets out a disappointed sigh.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Abeena, there is no need to be combative. These workshops are meant to provide constructive feedback. I'll remind you that you are not supposed to respond to this feedback, simply note it and use it as you wish. Getting upset will not fix the problems with your script and the best way to defend your script is on the page.

Professor Burke raises his index finger over his mouth signaling for Abeena to be silent and looks around to her classmates.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Does anyone else have notes for Abeena?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

Jade jumps in.

JADE
I loved it. I thought it was touching, and I could totally relate to your main character. I think you did an amazing job of balancing humor and dramatic tension with family dynamics-- she's an older sister right?

Abeena goes to open her mouth to respond, looks to Professor Burke, then back at Jade and simply nods.

PROFESSOR BURKE
(exasperated)
--if you are asked a question you can respond Abeena...

ABEENA
Yes. She is the eldest of four children.

JADE
I love her. You did a great job with conveying her role in the family, almost like she's a parent.

ABEENA
Thanks.

The class falls silent.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Any more notes?

JAKE
I agree with Professor Burke-- it felt like it was trying too hard to be about race. I-- don't know how to put it, but it felt forced.

ABEENA
What? I--

Professor Burke holds up a finger to his mouth at Abeena.

ROSE
I completely disagree. It actually feels entirely real to me. Maybe it feels that way to you because you don't relate?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

JAKE
Maybe.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Perhaps. That is what I meant earlier-- sometimes if we take cultural specificity too far-- it can be alienating to readers and audiences.

ROSE
I didn't feel alienated. Quite the opposite actually.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Well yes but you're...

Rose raises her eyebrows daring him to continue.

PROFESSOR BURKE
I'm simply saying that we want to think about the market you're writing for. Not everyone is going to find this relatable. Most people won't.

Rose looks to Abeena, Abeena's eyes are downcast onto her notebook. She pretends to take notes.

INT. FILM SCHOOL HALLWAY - LATER

Rose follows Abeena out.

ROSE
Abeena, wait!

Abeena turns to Rose, her eyes are watery.

ABEENA
Hey Rose, it nice to finally meet you IRL.

ROSE
Yeah, same, are you okay?

ABEENA
Oh. Yeah. Of Course. I'm probably just jet lagged.

ROSE
That was not okay. I'm sorry he spoke of your work like that. He is totally wrong.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ABEENA
(halfheartedly )
Thanks, I appreciate it.

ROSE
What are you up to now? Wanna grab some food?

ABEENA
Yeah! Actually... I have an idea.

INT. ABEENA'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Rose sets a table. Abeena brings over a pot of food. There is a knock at the door.

ABEENA
I'll get it!

Abeena opens the door, Alejandra and Jade stand in the hallway each holding a dish.

ABEENA
Come in! Thank you for coming all short notice.

ALEJANDRA
Thanks for the invite! I brought some birria, it's a beef dish, hope that's okay.

ABEENA
Yum! I made some Joloff, it's a rice dish.

ALEJANDRA
Oh perfect!

JADE
I brought dessert. It's store bought. Sorry. Hahaha

ABEENA
All good!

They sit down around the table and smile at each other. Rose serves the wine.

ROSE
To a shitty first day!

ABEENA, ALEJANDRA, JADE
To a shitty first day!

INT. ABEENA'S APARTMENT - LATER

They are nearly done with their food.

ROSE
Okay so how are we gonna get through this quarter?

JADE
Mmmm good question.

ALEJANDRA
I'm sorry but I think I'm going to switch sections. I had a one on one with him and I just can't.

JADE
That's fair. Maybe we should all switch?

ROSE
I can't. The other section is during our production class.

ABEENA
Yeah, I have the same problem. We can stick it out together, Rose.

ALEJANDRA
What if we come up with our own exercises, that help us develop our stories in ways that feel right to us...

ABEENA
Like in our writing group?

ALEJANDRA
Yeah but like we give each other assignments, and feedback.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ALEJANDRA (CONT'D)
I took this class in undergrad in Chicano studies and the professor was from an Education background--he taught us about this concept called community cultural wealth, and there's this amazing article by Tara Yosso where she talks about the need to challenge deficit ideas about Communities of Color by acknowledging and making room for the different assets students bring to class-- assets like their language, their abilities to tell stories, to navigate the world, family connections, social connections, and resisting oppressive systems.

ABEENA
That's super interesting. So how do you think we could use that in our writing group?

JADE
I keep thinking how everyone tells us to write what we know and then shoots our work down when we listen-- but maybe we can make this a space where we actually do write what we know. We could use the framework you shared Alejandra, to make assignments for us where we research our own communities and the assets we see.

ROSE
I like this. I like this a lot.

ALEJANDRA
Alright! How about we start with interviewing someone in our family, seeing if there's anything in our family's history that we might want to adapt for our next scripts?

Everyone nods enthusiastically.

INT. JADE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Jade finishes setting up a light next to her dining table where her laptop is open with a video call. Her mom and brother are framed on her laptop screen.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

JADE
Ready Jason?

JASON
Rolling!

JADE
Perfect, me too. Okay mom, ready?

JADE'S MOM
Yes!

JADE
Mom tell me about when you were little, what was your favorite thing to play?

JADE'S MOM
Oooooh, that was so long ago.

Jade smiles wide as her mom's voice trails off.

EXT. SAN ISIDRO PARK - DAY

Alejandra films her niece, Bella, dancing folclorico. The song finishes and her niece runs towards the camera.

ALEJANDRA
Excuse me Miss Thang! Can I ask you a few questions?

BELLA
(puts on big sunglasses)
I only have five minutes, make it quick.

Alejandra lets out a great big laugh.

INT. UNIVERSITY LIBRARY STUDY ROOM - NIGHT

Jade, Rose, Alejandra, and Abeena all sit around a table, laptops out.

ABEENA
Okay! Who wants to go first?

ROSE
I can go!

Rose passes around printed copies of her script.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

ROSE
Okay, so I interviewed my Auntie B. She's taking care of my mom right now at the hospital. I asked her about her childhood and what it was like growing up with my mom. We talked for like two hours on the phone, I don't think I've ever gotten to do that with her before. Anyway, she told me story, and it gave me the idea for this short.

ABEENA
That's great, Rose! You want to cast the parts? We'll do a table read.

We don't hear the conversation. We watch as Rose lights up, points to the page and points at each of her friends while assigning the roles. They overact and give their table read all the energy they can muster. Rose is beaming. The sound comes back in the room. They are all bursting in laughter.

JADE
Oh my god! I did not see that coming! Did that actually happen?

ROSE
Yeah, I was shocked my sweet Auntie B had it in her, but she swears its true. But I also took a few creative liberties and inserted myself into some of it. In a way, these characters have a little bit of all the women in my family.

ALEJANDRA
It is really well done. I feel like I want to know more about this world, especially with how you move back and forth between the past and the present. Do you think you'll write more in this world, maybe a series?

ROSE
I hadn't thought of it to be honest, but I can for sure see that now that you mention it.

Rose starts typing a few ideas down.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ALEJANDRA
This is so fun! Who's next?

INT. SCREENWRITING CLASS, LOS ANGELES, CA -- MORNING

Rose and Abeena sit in silence, bored.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Okay, who's next?... How about Rose?

ROSE
No thanks

PROFESSOR BURKE
Sorry-- what? I--

ROSE
You should choose someone else. I don't want to workshop my script.

PROFESSOR BURKE
You realize this impacts your grade?

ROSE
I completed my pages.

Rose hands her script to Professor Burke.

ROSE
I just don't feel safe sharing it in this space -- you all don't exactly welcome work about race, and well, as a Black woman I experience racism in very different ways to others in this class, including you. I don't trust you with this because I've seen how you treated others' stories where race and culture were prominent elements in the themes of the stories.

PROFESSOR BURKE
I -- I think maybe we should take a brief ten minute break. Let's come back at half passed eleven.

Students awkwardly exit the classroom. Rose stands to exit.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

PROFESSOR BURKE
Rose can I speak to you privately for a second?

ROSE
Sure.

PROFESSOR BURKE
It is obvious you're angry--

ROSE
I'm not angry.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Well you made a scene in class, I think it's pretty safe to say you're worked up.

ROSE
Do you always take it upon yourself to speak for others? To ignore them when they tell you how they feel or rather how they don't feel? I. Am. Not. Angry.

Professor Burke scoffs.

ROSE
I just know better than to trust you to facilitate a workshop on my work.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Then why are you in my class?

ROSE
Because I have no choice. It's a requirement, and the other section is during my production course.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Okay, let me start again. This is clearly not going well.

Professor Burke brings one of his hands to his face, pinching the space between his eyebrows and shutting his eyes tightly as he exhales sharply.

PROFESSOR BURKE
You have to workshop your scripts, if you don't, you risk failing the course-- I don't want to fail you. Can we try again? Give me a shot.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (2)

ROSE
I-- I don't know.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Okay how about this. How about you tell me how you want to proceed?

ROSE
... I read this book by Felicia Rose Chavez called The Anti-Racist Writer's Workshop, and she talks about how she asks her students to take control of their own workshop sessions. They name what they want feedback on, what they are looking for.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Would you want to facilitate the workshop for your own script?

ROSE
I think I could do that. But I can talk right?

PROFESSOR BURKE
Yes, it would be pretty difficult to do if you couldn't.

Professor Burke laughs.

ROSE
Yeah, maybe that's the point. It IS pretty difficult to authentically workshop our work in silence... maybe you should offer this to everyone.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Maybe you're right.

Students begin to file back into the room and take their seats.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Okay everyone, Rose and I decided to switch things up.
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED: (3)

PROFESSOR BURKE (CONT'D)
I haven’t done a good job of making this space a constructive space for everyone, so in an effort to change that, I am giving you back the workshop, if you’d like to, you can facilitate your sessions on your own work, and I can debrief with you one on one in office hours if you’d like. Sound good?

Everyone looks around and hesitantly nods.

PROFESSOR BURKE
Okay. Rose is going to start us off and lead us in workshopping her script.

We don’t hear the dialogue as we watch Rose talking to her peers. They read from the script, she interrupts briefly with a note and asks them to continue. Laughter breaks out. Professor Burke observes quietly. Abeena gives Rose a big smile. Rose raises her eyebrows at her.

**Conclusion** Inspired and informed by our collective film school experiences, and the experiences we had beyond schooling, this story introduces the way these characters came to fall in love with the medium of film and how they came to reclaim the film school classroom. Creative capital was nurtured with friends, family, and in solitude, where these characters got to explore and *play* in order to better create and fuel their imaginations.

In sharing drafts of this script with my collaborators, we reflected on the process that brough us to this point. One of my collaborators told me again how our conversations about this work felt healing for her in remembering and reclaiming her film school experiences in a new light, in an empowering way. Another collaborator wrote me affirmations in an email about how in reviewing my dissertation as a whole, she could see how I incorporated theories and methods to be true to social justice commitments the two of us share. Perhaps the sweetest and saddest response I received was from one of my collaborators who gasped when we read the scene where Rose refuses to workshop her script. She simply asked me, "Imagine?!" Later she shared how radical that moment was for her, how it pushed her to wonder about her own power to shift pedagogy in a creative classroom. Finally, she shared how much she wished she had this writing group in real life. After speaking to a few other collaborators, it seems we might be coming together to do just that—starting a collaborative writing group, possibly to continue writing this series.

In future episodes I hope to introduce the adult versions of Meera, Tara, and Evee who went to film school in New York. In those episodes we will explore more classroom experiences, on set experiences, both in film school and professionally, and familial and community spaces. This series will highlight how community cultural wealth shows up and how it is cultivated with

intention. My hope for the future of this work is to see it adapted across disciplines in Ethnic Studies, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Education, Sociology, and of course in Film.

# Chapter 8:

# Conclusion

This study began as my own journey to *conocimiento* and became a deeply communal practice of discovery and creativity. It was challenging at times to conduct a research project on a subject matter so close to my own experiences. However, the intentional centering of collaborative thinking and conversational reflection helped me do this work in community—making it feel like a process of healing.

I set out to explore the methodological, pedagogical, epistemic, and artistic praxis of learning with WFOC MFA film students with the following research questions in mind: (RQ 1) "What are the lived experiences of WFOC in film school? How might these experiences inform inclusive film school practices?" and (RQ 2) "How might collaborative filmmaking-based research methodologies enable narrative reclaiming?" Below is a table that represents how my three articles answered these research questions and the findings discussed in Chapters 4-6.

| | **RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of WFOC in film school? How might these experiences inform inclusive film school practices?** | **RQ 2: How might filmmaking-based research methodologies enable a narrative reclaiming?** |
|---|---|---|
| **Article 1*: FilmCrit: Using Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling as Critical Race Feminista Methodology* (*Published, OSE*)** | Previews some of the key findings from the study through excerpts of screenplay composite CCRCs. | Details the methodological framework that emerged from this study: *FilmCrit, a*s well as a counterstory method that was further developed, *Cinematic Critical Race Counterstorytelling (CCRC).* |
| **Article 2: *The Coyolxauhqui Imperative: Reimagining Film School Pedagogy Through Epistemic Alignment*** | Examines the power of pedagogical relationships built in the context of epistemic erasure, negotiations, and alignment, in film school. | Offers methodological and praxis-oriented approaches co-creative processes. |
| **Article 3: Exploring Nepantla: A *Coming of Conocimiento* story about Cultivating Creative Capital in Film School** | Unpacks the concept of creative capital and the need for incorporating a transformational resistance framework in the development of key creative skills. | Stories the filmmaking and pedagogical methods used by Women and Femmes of Color in this study, as well as in and beyond the film industry, to demonstrate how creative capital materializes through a CCRCC. |

**FilmCrit**

A major finding and contribution of this study, which I detailed in Chapter 5, Article 1, is the methodological framework developed in community with my collaborators and scholars across different disciplines. FilmCrit defines a praxis-oriented framework that builds on the CRT in Education tenets to arrive at the following tenets:

1. **The intercentricity of societal and institutional structures such as race, racism, gender, sexism, and other forms of oppression** A FilmCrit approach, much like a CRT in Education approach, unapologetically centers a critical understanding of systems of oppression as a valid and important place from which to begin critical inquiry.

2. **An intersectional approach** that engages in a critical understanding of overlapping and simultaneous perspectives and experiences across race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other social factors. An intersectional perspective could be engaged in theoretical, methodological, and/or analytical stages of a FilmCrit framework.

3. **A challenge to dominant ideologies** including deficit ideologies such as meritocracy and colorblindness that perpetuate race-neutral narratives which contribute to the marginalization and erasure of People of Color.

4. **A commitment to the pursuit of transformational social justice** throughout the FilmCrit research process (i.e. pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution of scholarship and film work) by first, identifying the ways in which systems of oppression are at play (see first two tenets) and building on this informed critique to ultimately produce transformational scholarship and tools that are directly committed to transforming oppressive conditions.

5. **The centrality of experiential knowledge** in the inquiry, design, and execution of research with an emphasis on using and possibly expanding tools for research design and research methods that are responsive to participants' contributions. This includes a commitment to engaging in research practices that protect participants/collaborators, honor their stories, and ensure their access to the scholarship that emerges from their contributions.

6. **An interdisciplinary perspective** that purposefully bridges theory and praxis through every phase of production/research. A FilmCrit approach will often lead a researcher to interdisciplinary work—this work should demonstrate a commitment to the bridging of theory and praxis in ways that best serve the study and stakeholders involved.

7. **A commitment to reciprocity** with research participants/collaborators wherein participants/collaborators are given options for participation that are protective of their stories, likeness, and well-being. For example, it is important to note that filmic methods

often require on-camera participation, or audio recorded data, and other identifiable modes of participation for data that may be shared in the final distribution of the scholarship to emerge from the study. In this respect, a FilmCrit commitment to reciprocity asks researchers to engage in ongoing informed consent and ensure that participants retain options for how/if their likeness and experiences are presented in identifiable ways. Providing alternative modes of filmic participation that provide opportunities to exercise anonymity is key to ensuring that the methodological approach is rooted in reciprocity. Additionally, this commitment to reciprocity extends to larger communities that the work is meant to represent and speak to. This commitment materializes in the creation of scholarship that is accessible to these communities, both in content and medium.

8. **A critical understanding of film and media as constructed works**[50] wherein the context for pre-production, production, post-production, and methods/channels of distribution are motivated by various key decisions that ultimately shape findings and pedagogical outcomes. This is further underscored by a Chicana Feminist challenge to the myth of objectivity, in interrogating and leaning into the ways subjectivity shows up in research/film. In this way, a FilmCrit approach embraces non-fiction and fictional representations produced and analyzed in the context of a study, with a critical and meticulous understanding of *how* the non-fiction and fictional works were produced. This process should be made explicit and transparent in discussion of rationales for methodological decisions.

FilmCrit bridges theory and production in film and in research. I hope that this work continues to develop in community with other scholars and filmmakers who find themselves at the intersections of critical theory and filmmaking.

**Epistemic Alignment as Transformational Healing of Pedagogical Wounds**

In Article 2, I discuss the multifaceted ways my collaborators unpack and reclaim their epistemic alignment in the wake of the harm caused by their pedagogical experiences, both through popular media and their film school experiences. What we found, together, is that filmmaking towards healing is a commitment to social justice. Furthermore, filmmaking with a commitment to social justice requires us to challenge deficit and dominant narratives that seek to erase, distort, and/or replace the lived experiences of People of Color. Epistemic alignment

[50] *See Critical Media Literacy* (Kellner & Share, 2019).

manifested in the lived experiences of my collaborators across various spaces of learning, in and beyond film school classrooms.

**Creative Capital**

Finally, another key finding to emerge from this study is the theorizing towards *creative capital* as an epistemic and praxis-oriented form of cultural capital. I contend that creative capital manifests internally and externally—as an epistemology in constant development of systems of *knowing* and systems of *creating*. Creative capital is informed by how our minds organize and interpret the world around us and how we choose to externalize these interpretations. The processes we engage in the exploration of creative capital may also be informed (sometime simultaneously) by other forms of capital, such as familial, navigational, aspirational, linguistic, social, resistant, and spiritual. However, how we come to *know* and *create* ourselves in the context of these various forms of capital, is at the core of how we come to identify as learners, and how we engage in learning. We create our systems of knowing, through our interpretation of the world, and in community with others. We also create systems of expression, systems of creation. Creative capital encompasses our inner creative worlds that can never possibly be expressed in totality externally. There is a particular strength to knowing our own mind and recognizing its power to create, which is further fortified by our coming to *conocimiento,* by the "searching, inquiring, and healing [of our] consciousness," (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 19).

**Future Directions**

I hope to continue to engage in work that bridges multiple ways of being, knowing, and creating—in and beyond classroom setting. I would like to explore making more films through a FilmCrit framework alongside other filmmakers of Color. Through an asset-based approach to teaching, learning, researching, and creating, I hope to produce films as a practice of a

participatory co-creative process. Furthermore, I am interested to see how such films can be used pedagogically across disciplines, and really dive into what we can learn through the making of films.

I hope to also return to a documentary practice with this work and produce a docuseries on film school pedagogy with Women, Men, Non-Binary, and Queer folks of Color. I see this work developing with interviews and platicas with writers, directors, cinematographers, editors, production designers, faculty, administrators, and students at all levels of schooling.

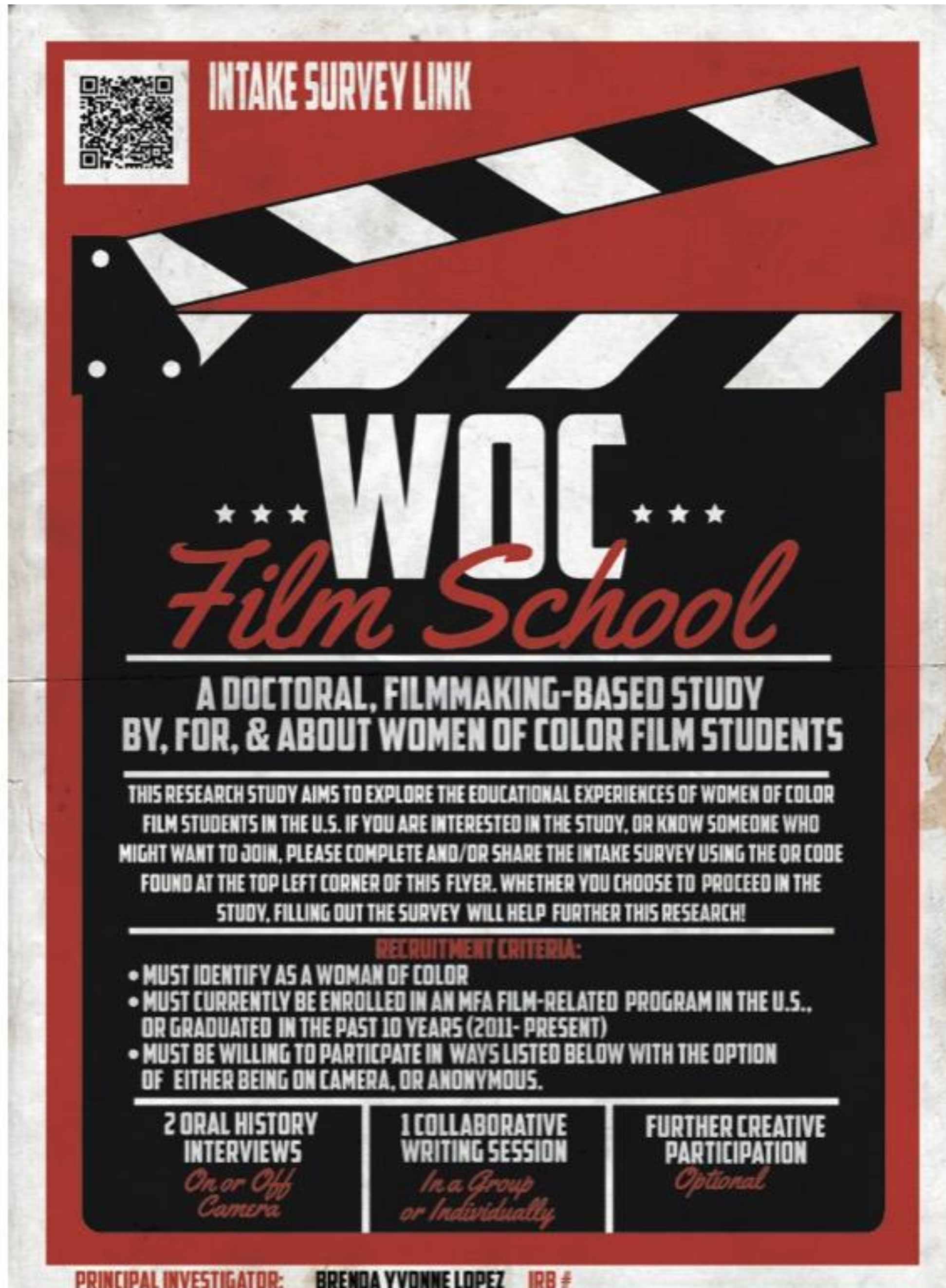
Another future direction I would like to explore is a study on the physiological effects of epistemic erasure and epistemic alignment in film representation, studying how microaggressions and microaffirmations affect our bodies. I plan to extend the conceptualization of the physiological effects to also discuss the ways these filmic representations affect our bodymindspirit. I see this work in alignment with the work of Kenjus Watson who studies the physiological effects of racial microaggressions on Black men.

Finally, I hope to write a transformative space into existence. All of my collaborators shared with me how important it is to them to contribute to their respective and allied communities, wanting to create spaces where other filmmakers can see themselves and grow into the filmmakers they want to be. This desire to build community is strong. It is epistemic. It is pedagogical. It is transformational. It is resistant. It is decolonial. I imagine a summer institute guided by Ethnic Studies, Critical Race Studies, Critical Pedagogies, and decolonial forms of storytelling through film. I imagine that students from film schools across the country could come together for a summer of screenwriting, making films, and watching films together in critically grounded ways. My hope is that such a space would give students the opportunity to

come to their own conocimiento, to become agents of change when they return to their respective programs, armed with confidence and a replenished sense of self and community.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer



# Appendix B: Online Intake Form



## WOC Film School Intake Form

Thank you for showing interested in contributing to my educational study and accompanying documentary project. Responses submitted for this intake survey will remain confidential. Identifiable information will only be seen by me, the principal investigator for this study.

* Required

1. Email *

______________________________

### About this Research Project/ Documentary Film:

WOC Film School, is a filmmaking-based research study aimed at exploring the educational experiences of Women of Color in film school. As the principle investigator, and film director, I have designed this project with the aim to produce film content and scholarship that centers the lived experiences and needs of Women of Color film students.

What we know about the state of Hollywood in relation to the professional opportunities for Women of Color is a story of narrative erasure. As seen in the work of the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative's report on film directors of the 1,300 top grossing films, of the last thirteen years, Women of Color directors worked on only 13 of those films (Smith et. al., 2020). Only 13 out of 1,300. What's more, these directors averaged the highest metacritic scores of all directors across race and gender. So why are they working the least?

As a Chicana filmmaker, first generation college student, and graduate of a film school program, I position my questions in education and begin from a critical race and intersectional feminist standpoint. I ultimately want to investigate: what is the promise of film schools? How are film schools serving Hollywood's most marginalized storytellers? What can we learn from Women of Color filmmakers and students to build more inclusive spaces in the context of film schools? I believe this is an important place to interrogate the history of intersectional erasure in film, because in so much as I can gather, the driving promise of a film school education is a curriculum geared towards industry preparation. In such an unwelcoming field, it is critical to listen to the students and graduates themselves, in order to reimagine industry preparedness through a lens of educational and professional inclusivity.

Film schools remain an understudied field in education, and we know far too little about the experiences of Women of Color in film school generally. Please consider completing this survey whether or not you aim to participate in the full study/film. Your responses to this survey will be an important contribution to understanding issues Women of Color film students face, and see what areas need further research. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you would be interested in further participation, which is completely optional regardless of filling out this survey.

* I purposely use the term Women of Color to begin this project, with an understanding that gendered, racial and ethnic identities are often complex and overlapping. I will revisit the use of this term in conversation with my recruited collaborators and will be more specific about how we identify individually, and as a collective, along gendered, racial, and ethnic identities.

## Appendix C: Prompt for Self Portraits

I want to first and foremost thank you for your time and willingness to embark on this co-creative journey. As a way of introducing ourselves to one another in this collective, I am proposing that we each share a narrative self-portrait. This could be in the form of a short video, an anonymous written story with an illustration, a photo with a voice recording, etc. Please feel free to take this prompt in any direction you want creatively-- we just want some way of getting to know you, your story, and what brings you to this work. I am leaving it completely up to you how you want to introduce yourself to our collective.

As was mentioned during recruitment, you have the option of participating in this project anonymously or not. For the sake of creating a space of trust, I ask that content shared between us be kept between the collective unless it is explicitly stated that the person sharing their content consent to it being shared beyond the group or asks us to share. In other words, when in doubt please protect and keep stories shared within this collective.

Your participation choices may be fluid. You might want your name and identity associated with certain components of the project (on-camera interviews or verité scenes) but want to share other components in a way that preserves your anonymity. In my capacity as researcher and director, I will aim to be as clear as possible with each of you, on a one-on-one basis, about how material will be featured in the publicly distributed film(s) in regard to your image or anonymity. Stories, conversations, and materials shared with me, for which you indicate a preference to include in the study anonymously, will be associated with a pseudonym of your choice in all content produced, written or filmic.

With that said, as you think through how you might want to compose your self-portrait in introducing yourself, please consider your preference for whether you would like your self-

portrait to be shared only with me, with the collective, and/or for the final publicly distributed film(s). I will only share content with this collective when you explicitly give me permission to do so. This includes interview content and materials or stories you share with me during off-camera conversations or other meetings. I will explicitly ask for permission in written form, to share specific content and indicate the scope of how the content will be shared (for example: during writing sessions, with pseudonyms, in publicly distributed film(s) etc.). All anonymous content recorded and collected for this project will be stored on two encrypted hard drives and locked in a cabinet to which only I have the passwords and physical key.

Along with your self-portrait submission, please also attach an ongoing consent form, specifying your preference for how this submission should be included in the study.

## Appendix D: Life History Interview Protocol

Before Film School:

- Please tell me about yourself, the story of where you come from and how you grew up.
- What first sparked your interest in film?
- What are some of your early memories of movies and or TV?
- How did these films/shows impact you?
- How would you describe your personal relationship to cinema and TV?
- What made you want to study film?
- How did you go about finding the right program? Did you have any connections to film schools? Did you know of anyone who could help you in your journey?
- What did getting an MFA in film mean to you at when you were seeing programs?
- What were your aspirational goals before entering film school?

During Film School:

- Can you tell me about your first impressions of film school?
- What kind of experiences did you have while settling in?
- Can you tell me about the courses you took that most impacted you, and how?
- How did your awareness of your identity show up for you in film school spaces?
- How did faculty respond when issues of sexism arose?
- How did faculty respond when issues of race and racism arose?
- How did fellow classmates respond?
- How did this make you feel? How did you respond?
- Did you feel supported in your program in reaching your goals? If so, how?
- Where and how did you receive support during this time in your life?
- How would you have liked to have been supported as a film student?
- How do you think your experience might have been different if you attended film school at an institution which centers intersectional awareness on issues of race, class, and gender?
- What would be your vision for the future of MFA film programs?

After Film School/Professional Experience:

- Do you have industry experience? If so, in what roles, and how would you describe these experiences?
- Do you feel that your film school education prepared you for the industry? If so how?
- In your professional work, where and how do you find support?
- In what ways are your film school experiences similar to your professional experiences? In what ways are they different?
- What would be your vision for the future of the industry?

**Appendix E: On-going Consent Form:**

Name:_________________________________Recorded by:__________________________
Date & Time: _____________________________________________________________
Location: ________________________________________________________________
People Present: ____________________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________________
Methods of Recording: (audio, video, photo, written submissions, field notes, artifacts, etc.)

- ❏ audio _____________________________________________________________
- ❏ video _____________________________________________________________
- ❏ photo _____________________________________________________________
- ❏ written submission(s) ___________________________________________________
- ❏ field notes __________________________________________________________
- ❏ other: _____________________________________________________________

Keep name anonymous:

- ❏ yes
- ❏ no

If yes, please indicate preferred pseudonym: _____________________________

Keep image confidential:

- ❏ yes
- ❏ no

Keep voice confidential:

- ❏ yes
- ❏ no

Signature:________________________________________

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