

Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources

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People of color in the United States have utilized the liberationist *testimonio* as both methodology and narrative development. This essay provides a discussion about the roots of *testimonio* in Latin America and how it has been transformed, integrating qualitative research approaches, oral history, spoken word, and memoir writings by Chicanas and Latinas. The major objective of this essay is to provide guidance for the bibliographic search as a reference guide to the research scholar. Beginning with an exploration of terms used for bibliographic searches, the essay provides insight on navigating Library of Congress terms and desired outcomes in situated knowledge. A special feature of this essay is a primer bibliography organized in three sections. Part One identifies a selected list of Latin American *testimonios* identified as Roots/Origins. The second section focuses on Chicana/o Scholars' Uses of Narrative/*Testimonio*, focusing on experiential reflections in diverse institutions, locations, and in personal writing as a methodology to conduct research and to bear witness to their experiences. The third section is called *Testimonio* and Dissertations by Chicana/o and Latina/o scholars, using *testimonio* as a methodology in educational research.

The use of personal narratives in U.S.-based scholarship in the areas of critical race theory, Chicana and Chicano Studies, and other critical studies is informed by the practice of *testimonio* as a legacy of reflexive narratives of liberation used by people throughout the world. Chicanas, in particular, might also be influenced by the deliberate use of personal theoretical insight as prescribed by Collins (1991) in her paramount work, *Black Feminist Thought*. This type of writing entails a first person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness. Presented at times as memoirs, oral histories, qualitative vignettes, prose, song lyrics, or spoken word, the *testimonio* has the unique characteristic of being a political and *conscienticized* reflection that is often spoken. To be sure, the *testimonio* does not remain in its oral state; but rather, it is often taken (as in interviewed, recorded, and transcribed) or written from the outset perhaps in diaries, letters, or journals. What is certain is that *testimonio* is not meant to be hidden, made intimate, nor kept secret. The objective of the *testimonio* is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action. Thus, in this manner, the *testimonio* is different from the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing, oral history narration, prose, or spoken word. The *testimonio* is intentional and political.

The objective of this article is to discuss how students and scholars might encounter testimonial narratives as well as theoretical works useful in the analysis of said scholarship from the point of view of the bibliographic search. Moreover, our objective is to assist in translating how the term *testimonio* is used in reference materials, sometimes referring to any oral form (as in oral history, interviews, accounts, or vignettes) and also in relation to the categorization of work based on oral accounts in any form. We bring to this discussion extensive work as bilingual and bicultural scholars who have gained insight into the uses of *testimonio* in our scholarship and our professions. We use the term “*testimonio*” as a unique expression of the methodological use of spoken accounts of oppression. We also use the words “testimonial,” “narrative,” and “testimony” because of the focus on the predetermined terms used in library research as defined by the Library of Congress.

For most scholars, the introduction to *testimonios* has been in English translations of Spanish language narratives produced by various people outside of the United States. Examples of some often cited writers are Partnoy (1986), Poniatowska (1979, 1980), Castellanos (1961), Freire and Horton (1990), Barrios de Chúngrara (1978) and Menchú Tum (Burgos-Debray, 2009). These writers and narrators frame a way of writing that originates in the individual but takes from the social events interpreted as unjust or illicit as stamps of oppression. Within Chicana and Chicano Studies, some authors using *testimonio* narratives include Galarza (1971), Villarreal (1959), and Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983). During the 1980s and 1990s, as cultural studies and postmodern methodologies began to frame critical scholarship as subjective and political, Chicanas in particular drew on the reflexive form of *testimonio* using such concepts as agency, subaltern, or native (Anzaldúa, 1999; Lomas, 1994; Pardo, 1998; Pérez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). Feminist epistemology influenced Chicanas and empowered them to develop the narrative format as redemption—as takers of the stories, as readers of the narratives, and as creators of the analysis.

In the following section, we first suggest that origins matter, briefly exploring the roots of *testimonio*. This section lays the ground for a discussion of terms and an identification of bibliographic sources that can be useful to students and scholars who are engaged in the use of *testimonio* as methodology, to theorize, and as a means of conscientization. We also discuss the fragile commitment of the subject headings imposed by the Library of Congress as obscuring the sources we seek.

ROOTS/ORIGINS

Scholars argue that the Latin American *testimonio* is comparable to the North American memoir. However, the main feature of the testimonial text is the construction of a discourse of solidarity. 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. Authors of U.S.-based *testimonios* include Hurston (1970), Medrano (2010), Villegas de Magnon (Lomas, 1994), Martin (1992), Douglass (1994), King (Carson, 1998), Chinchilla (1998), Alvarado (1989), García (1994), Galarza (1971), Sanchez (1940/1966), Ortiz (1995), Pérez, (1996), Zavella (1987) and Decierdo (1980). Many of the *testimonios* are speeches, newsletter columns, *corridos*, spoken word, or other shorter forms

of writing and would most likely go unidentified if we used conventional search or categorization approaches to find them. Empowered by the womanist framing of knowledge exemplified by Patricia Hill Collins and members of the Memphis Center for Research on Women, Chicana scholars embrace *testimonio* as “emerging power” that makes them “agents of knowledge” allowing them to “speak to the importance that oppression, [and] the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people” (Collins, 1991, p. 221).

Some scholars define *testimonio* by focusing on the form of the narrative. Specifically, it is an account told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of events. This definition focuses on *testimonios* as evolving from events experienced by a narrator who seeks empowerment through voicing her or his experience. Thus, the politicized and self-conscious element in this point of view is paramount in this definition. A *testimonio* must include the intention of affirmation and empowerment.

In Chicana and Chicano education research, *testimonio* is situated in the liberationist pedagogy exemplified by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Indeed *testimonio*, liberationist pedagogy, and its corollary epistemological project evolved at approximately the same time. This pedagogy advocates writing as a means of liberation—dialogically informing a narrative that is first spoken and then used to make literacy meaningful as a dynamic entry to conscientization and liberation from oppression. *Testimonio* allows the narrator to show an experience that is not only liberating in the process of telling but also political in its production of awareness to listeners and readers alike. Moreover, like Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *testimonio* empowers the speaker or narrator to transform the oral to its written representation not as an act of oppression and ignorance but rather as an acknowledgment of the revolutionary aspect of literacy.

The collective goal of *testimonio* is to name oppression and to arrest its actions whether as genocide, racism, classism, xenophobia, or any other type of institutionalized marginalization. The aim is to speak for justice against all crimes against humanity. The truth of the survivor story may not be empirically, scientifically, or legally true. Nevertheless, the speakers are aware that the very manner in which they tell the story may hold for them a harrowing reality of reliving the oppressive experience. It is, to paraphrase Anzaldúa (1990), an act of removing a mask previously used as a survival strategy. Voicing the experience provides a kind of active journey from torture, oppression, or marginalization that ultimately leads the speaker or writer to become the empowered survivor. The *testimonio* is not to be kept secret but requires active participatory readers or listeners who act on behalf of the speaker in an effort to arrive at justice and redemption.

Another important characteristic of *testimonio* is the role of memory and reconstructive epistemology. Some scholars argue that memory may recast the experiences in less than absolute truth. The very nature of human survival enables human beings to recast their memory to accentuate their experiences as merciful vignettes allowing them redemption. Engaging in testimonial acts both empowers and destroys. For the speaker or narrator, the very act of telling is a double-edged sword. Thus, testimonial writing may have psychoanalytical value. Fundamentally, however, the objective of *testimonio* includes the knowledge that reflection and speaking lead, eventually, to liberation. For education scholars this method is a pedagogical aid to help students develop an analytical frame that demystifies structural marginalizations. Perhaps this is the most important characteristic of *testimonio* in educational research or in the classroom, for it holds the Freirian promise of conscientization to hope, faith, and autonomy. From these endeavors come documents, memories, and oral histories that can be used to recast and challenge pervasive theories,

policies, and explanations about educational failure as a problem, not of individuals but of systemic institutionalized practices of oppression.

Once introduced to *testimonios*, both the narrator and the listener experience cathartic epiphanies that open their eyes to the power of individual accounts that ensure that social and political events become part of the greater human consciousness. Although a *testimonio* is technically an account made by one person, it represents the voice of many whose lives have been affected by particular social events, such as totalitarian governments, war violence, displacement, or other types of broad social affronts on humanity. *Testimonios* often serve as awakenings for tellers and readers alike. For example, Partnoy's (1986) narrative *testimonio* demonstrates the power of the personal account as a tool, not just in storytelling but also as an aid in the process of healing. In her *testimonio* she describes the torture she experienced at the hands of the Argentinian military and in the very descriptions reclaims her own humanity.

The years of violent turmoil in Central and South America yielded important examples of the use of testimonies. Who could argue the power of *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala/Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y así me nació la consciencia* (Burgos-Debray, 2009) or *Si Me Permiten Hablar/Let Me Speak* (Barrios de Chúngrara, 1978) as accounts of the implications of military interventions and multinational capitalism? While Menchú's account has been challenged as not being her own authentic story, the point is that *testimonio* holds elements of experiences shared by the collective group to whom one belongs. Thus, the *testimonio* of racism and xenophobia expressed by Chicana scholars and students alike may constitute composite elements that can be triangulated with other evidence (Cuádriz, 1993). However, the cornerstone of *testimonio*, like oral history, is not the speaking of truth, but rather, the telling of an account from an individual point of view whose conscience has led to an analysis of the experience as a shared component of oppression.

In the United States, Chicanas and Chicanos use *testimonio* as a tool to express marginalization resulting from race, gender, and sexuality, such as the book *Telling to Live* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) and as a means of expressing agency, for example in *This Bridge Called my Back* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) and *Gay Latino Histories/Dying to be Remembered* (Roque Ramírez, 2010). In other cases, narrative is used to locate social membership as racialized and classed subjects experiencing social mobility, such as *Narratives of Mexican American Women* (A. García, 2004), *Voicing Chicana Feminisms* (Hurtado, 2003), *Migrant Daughter* (Tywoniak & M. García, 2000) and *Memories of Chicano History* (M. García, 1994). Most recently, immigrant youth have deployed *testimonio* successfully to address undocumented student experiences beginning with short narratives in the University of Southern California *Handbook on Undocumented Students*, followed by *Underground Undergrads: UCLA Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out* (Madera, Wong, Monroe, Rivera-Salgado, & Mathay, 2008). In all of these cases the act of self-naming, as Chicanas and Chicanos, and as AB540/DREAM students (rather than the racist formulations of racial/ethnic and immigrant political classification, such as "illegal alien" or "Hispanic") provide important evidence of the power of collective self-naming.

THE LOGIC OF SEARCH TERMS: THE POWER OF THE KEYWORD

Although we may take great care to understand what *testimonio* is and is not, clearly from the discussion above, identifying resources in this area must be broadly defined. Researchers are

constrained by mainstream terms defined by librarians who may or may not understand the nuanced bilingual and bicultural use of a term, such as *testimonio*. To merely translate the term into its English counterpart, *testimony*, does not capture the theoretical underpinnings of this term. The terminology constraints that all researchers encounter are embedded in the knowledge-base of people who serve as indexers for materials in the research databases and the Library of Congress subject headings. As Chicana and Chicano scholars produce their own epistemological tracks, they recast terms, introduce new forms and transform extant categories. However, to conduct exhaustive research, scholars must think like the mainstream to find resources to provide context and validity to our experiences. To search extant resources for our scholarship and possibly for the placement of our own research, we must resist the idea of self-invention. Therefore, we must use the terms *testimonio*, testimony, testimonial, narrative, and biography interchangeably, while understanding that in doing so we are in direct violation of the very practice of *testimonio*.

To identify references for this non-exhaustive report on testimonial writing, we begin with an examination of terms. The search for materials for the bibliography encompasses a range of resources because there is no consistent subject term or keyword to locate testimonial narratives. As an entry point, a valuable resource for locating similar titles is to begin with a known text. For this project we began with the library catalog record for the book *Telling to Live* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). The objective was to determine how the mainstream indexers classify this book, which we know is a collection of *testimonios*. Search on this source produced the terms “Hispanic American Women,” “Social Conditions,” “Feminists,” “Sex Discrimination Against Women,” and “Ethnic Relations,” all of which would be useless in locating additional resources in search of *testimonios*. Two somewhat useful terms derived from this title were: “biography” and “anecdotes”—yet, the latter term reflects a Library of Congress assessment that *testimonio* is not a reliable approach to produce knowledge and expertise. Moreover, the use of the term anecdote also places this book in the area of fiction, which may then dismiss the liminal accounts told by the authors, all of whom are prominent Latina feminist scholars whose intention was to write testimonies of their life experiences. In its common understanding, the term “anecdote” is a term used to refer to accounts of questionable validity.

The book *Telling to Live* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001) includes the word *testimonio* in its subtitle and therefore ties itself to this tradition of writing. But the Library of Congress indexers did not identify the text in the library catalogue. It is important to note that there are significant limitations in the classification of scholarship and that the use of keywords may result in problematic outcomes. Drawing on the practices we use in college bibliographic instruction, our best advice here is to state that a bibliographic search for sources begins by considering all subjects, topics, and terms simultaneously. It is also important to remember the need to use “the master’s tools” (Lorde, 1984, p. 110), not because we agree with them but because we want to have a productive bibliographic search.

An illustrative example of this approach is using the term “Hispanic” when we seek to find Chicanas and/or Latinas. The prominent sociologist Joe R. Feagin (2011) argues that terms are politically and culturally defined. Given that indexing terms are determined by the Library of Congress (LC), and that those terms tend to be informed by and for the mainstream, they may be read as a reiteration of the dominant frame (Feagin, 2010). Yet, we wish to point out that this instruction allows for empowerment and redemption as well. We must use the research terms, while knowing that subject headings used by LC indexers draw on “official” designations to classify scholarship regardless of their accuracy. Applying a critical understanding about how

terms are developed is both empowering and frustrating. Indeed, Chicana/o scholars use their multicultural expertise to navigate the mainstream research terms, thereby demonstrating their cultural competency of both the mainstream and their own experience.

We subjugated this knowledge to explore the outcome of using “*testimonio*” and “narratives” as primary search terms. Our use of the terms was to demonstrate that the terms yield inaccurate bibliographic searches. That is, we intentionally used terms we knew were not conventional Library of Congress index terms. The initial results of our search were as unsatisfactory and frustrating as we expected. Like the redemptive role of *testimonio*, we reflected on the bibliographic instruction advice. The initial search results were limited, but they yielded small treasures. Aware of the exploratory nature of research, we had to accept good and missed outcomes—always hoping for good. We can definitively assert that there is no perfect term for the topic of *testimonios*. The word “narrative” yields sources in *testimonio* proper, but it also identifies literary sources because “testimony” is a genre of literature.

The initial effort led us to select other terms closely related to *testimonio*. Using the terms, “memories,” “story,” “oral history,” “autobiography,” “voices,” “memoirs,” and “interviews” provided a whole new set of sources. None of these terms perfectly exemplify *testimonio*, but they provide results that could be examined to determine if they meet the type of narrative we seek.

We construct the search by drawing on terms used by contemporary scholars of color in the United States to the broader area of life documents used to record unknown, ignored, marginal, and seemingly inconsequential accounts as defined by traditional scholarship. Consider the valuable resource that the contemporary form of testimonial accounts, expressed in spoken word, will yield as accounts of organic knowledge and expressions of resistance in the future. Youth rightfully see this approach as a highly effective means to narrate/speak their realities of city life, poverty, violence, racism, and other issues they confront in both general society and schools. Yet, unlike traditional *testimonio*, this approach is more like poetry or haiku, depending on its length. Nevertheless, this form of expression, because it is oral, poses a possibility for testimonial analysis.

The point is that while there is no exhaustive approach when conducting a search to compile a bibliography on using the testimonial approach as methodology, drawing on scholarship by critical race scholars offers terms useful to this endeavor. Each research scholar must struggle with alternative forms of expressing what is being searched. There is never a “wrong” or “bad” search when going beyond the limitations of our library research tools. Yet, the researcher can shape the parameters of the search. The idea of research is never about getting the absolute answer, but rather it is about identifying ideas, forming a foundation for the research that the scholar wants to explore and, ultimately, about being faithful to the approach. Here, we offer examples of relevant reference sources, but each researcher must explore and refine a search that is suitable to her or his needs. The critique of extant LC indexing terms is paramount as a means of establishing authority drawing from the parameters of critical race scholarship that have also redressed scholarship over the years.

RESOURCES

Our intention with this essay is to frame a discussion and to propose a reference tool. We recommend and identify resources that may be overlooked, ignored, or discarded but that may

have a great deal to contribute to the scholarship of educational *testimonio*. For example, the radio has been an important distributor of narratives to the general population. An important example is Studs Terkel's *Almanac*, which, in the 1950s, provided a space for the *testimonios* of ordinary people to be heard throughout the country, telling their lives during the Jim Crow era, as union workers, and in many other situations. The current *StoryCorps* broadcast by National Public Radio (NPR) records people's stories, airs them, and then houses them at the Library of Congress, and these could most definitely be seen as abbreviated *testimonios*. Focusing on immigration, *The Golden Cradle*, an NPR project about immigration provided narratives of immigrant women whose experiences of diasporic lives also contribute to this situational *testimonio* approach. Maria Hinojosa's Latino USA (latinousa.org) also draws on journalistic approaches to highlight testimonies in contemporary accounts on both Public Broadcast Television and NPR.

Various library archives include important oral histories that are *testimonios*. The University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library houses oral histories by Paul Taylor and Manuel Gamio and more recent efforts to document people of color in the Bay Area, for example the World War II accounts by the ship workers of Richmond. UCLA's Chicano Studies Research Center Library houses various interviews and oral histories, including the forced sterilization records of Mexican women. The Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas at Austin is an important repository of Texas-based narrative materials that document Mexicans in the Communist Party, most notably Emma Tenayuca. The Schomburg Museum and Library houses Black Culture, Afro-Latino and Garifuna narratives. Many local libraries and archives also yield important accounts of people who thought of future generations by documenting their lives on tape or paper. For example, History San José (a local Silicon Valley historical organization) contains a collection of oral histories conducted this decade on the cannery workers of Santa Clara County—many of who are Mexicanas and Chicanas.

Focusing on youth and children as chroniclers of history, the *Foxfire* series by Eliot Wigington started as an experiential magazine and published interviews and essays describing life in the Appalachian region. More than ten books have been published in this series over the course of the project. How is this *testimonio*? We need only examine the oral history interviews that tell comparable class oppression experienced by rural, poor, white people to understand that privilege is not shared as the product of whiteness, but rather it is informed by economic and political inequality. In their important "talked" book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, Freire and Horton (1990) tell of their work on liberation pedagogy, identifying similarities between the residents of Appalachia and the South American peasants—both groups affected by institutional barriers of discrimination based on class, neglect, educational exclusion, and ethnocentrism. A powerful deployment of *testimonio* has been used by the undocumented student movement. UCLA's underground undergrods, (Madera et al., 2008) and USC's The College and Financial Aid Guide for AB540 Undocumented Students (Oliverez, Chavez, Soriano, & Tierney, 2006) drew on this methodology to address the particular form of repression resulting from unofficial immigration.

Other important sources include slave narratives (for example, Project Gutenberg, Henry Louis Gates, and the Library of Congress); narratives of Japanese Americans in camps (for example, Sherna Gluck and Ronald Takaki); and the World War II project narratives of Chicanas and Chicanos directed by Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez at University of Texas at Austin. The Oral History Association provides important resources for documenting, teaching, preserving, and also serves

as a publication outlet for narratives. Most importantly, these sources also provide valuable research terms and categories that are useful in situating narratives and lived experiences.

A last resource for rescued, challenged, and innovative terms can be found in dissertations by Chicanas and Chicanos whose use of the personal narrative has become a chosen methodology to tell the stories of the Chicana/o and Latina/o communities. Likewise, the term “*testimonio*” in current scholarship as a keyword has experienced a growth in usage. A keyword search in *ProQuest’s Dissertations & Theses* identifies “*testimonio*” as appearing in 36 dissertations and theses in the periods of 1990–1999; the number explodes to 835 only a decade later in the 2000–2009 period. By 2010, 206 dissertations or theses have been indexed using this term¹ Chicana scholars transform the scholarship and the codification of their work.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

We began with an exploration into the conventional understanding of *testimonio*. Using both the traditional *testimonio* and other methodological cousins, such as oral histories and interviews, we conclude that the important aspect of this endeavor is precisely the objective of *testimonio*: It provides an outlet for affirmative epistemological exploration. Thus, this essay means to recast the narrative endeavors of Chicana and Chicano scholarship as having roots in the liberationist urgency of Latin American *testimonio* while addressing the memories of racialization in U.S. lived experiences. We do not lay claim to having produced an exhaustive bibliography, but rather to have addressed the importance of knowing the terms for bibliographic exploration and situating knowledge. Below, we identify selected titles to assist in the work of scholars using *testimonio* as methodology. We include narratives created by Chicanas and Latinas because they provide an important space for narrative works in contemporary scholarship. That *testimonio* is an important multifaceted approach to educational research is perhaps the most important affirmation. If classrooms and educational research reproduce oppressions, then the use of *testimonio* as methodology² by Chicana/o researchers in their scholarship makes an attempt to speak about the oppressive cataloguing by mainstream terminology. Unlike the cultural hegemony of empiricist research, the *testimonio* provides both a methodology and a theory for hope and liberation. We provide citations that include non-Chicanas/Latinas because the sources are important in their shared experience as bibliographic contributions. The bibliography is organized in three sections. Part One, identifies a selected list of Latin American testimonies identified as Roots/Origins. The second section (on Chicana/o scholars’ uses of narrative/*testimonio*) focuses on experiential reflections in diverse institutions, locations, and in personal writing as a methodology to conduct research inspired by, and to bear witness to, their experiences. Some of the sources in this section specifically relate to education or educational experiences, and they are indicated with an asterisk. The third section is composed of dissertations by Chicana/o and Latina/o scholars using *testimonio* as a methodology in educational research.

NOTES

1. An analysis of these citations confirms that the use of *testimonio* is as diverse as discussed above. The term *testimonio* is deployed without necessarily reflecting a methodology.
2. For a more exhaustive bibliography see the bibliography chapter in *Telling to Live* (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). We use some of the same titles; however, we also include other historical materials not included in *Telling to Live*, and we offer more recent titles.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHIC (RE)SOURCES

Latin American *Testimonios*—Roots/Origins

The sources identified in this section provide a backdrop of “classic” works used in the postcolonial writing developed in or by Latin American people to publicize oppressive regimes. These sources readily appear in the conventional search of *testimonio*.

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Chicana/o and Latina/o Narrative/*Testimonios* in Education

Chicana/o and Latina/o scholars have used narrative approaches to telling their own stories and the stories of others (drawing on qualitative research methods, including oral history and in-depth interviews) to produce *testimonios* primarily focused on educational and social mobility. Citations specifically geared toward education or that draw on educational experiences are marked with an asterisk.

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Dissertations

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