

## *Testimonios* of Life and Learning in the Borderlands: Subaltern Juárez Girls Speak

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This article presents the *testimonios* of two high school girls coming of age in one of the most marginalized areas of Ciudad Juárez, México who attend a school with a critical pedagogy orientation (Freire, 1970). Ciudad Juárez is a city on the U.S.-México border and considered one of the most violent in the world today. These *testimonios* shed light on the life experiences and identity formation of young women coming of age in the south side of the border and reveal the knowledge and wisdom they have gained in their struggle for freedom, dignity, and life. They also expose the epistemological and pedagogical nature of young women's discourse and wisdom characterized by *testimonios* as counter-narratives, confessions, and *consejos*; and the role of a critical school in promoting such discourse. This article offers insight into the potential of schools to become sites of organic healing, critical consciousness, and agency in dystopic times by cultivating the use of *testimonios* as a way to center and legitimize subaltern knowledge.

The eyes of the world have been on Ciudad Juárez, México for the last few decades. Images and stories of crime, feminicides<sup>1</sup>, violence, impunity, gendered cheap labor, drug trafficking, industrialization, and social inequalities abound in the literature and popular culture depicting this city along the U.S.-México border. Despite the numerous analyses that exist about Juárez, the voices of youth are typically absent. This article presents the *testimonios* of two high school girls coming of age in one of the most marginalized areas of Juárez. These *testimonios* offer salient depictions of experiences, identity formation, and epistemologies on the south side of the border where women's freedom is constantly contested and poor youth are continuously criminalized. Yet, their *testimonios* offer a language of hope and insight into the potential of schools to promote healing, critical consciousness, and agency in dystopic times. Through their *testimonios*, these young Juárez women use counter-narratives to interrupt the media-driven discourse, raise consciousness, and reclaim their humanity. Moreover, their *testimonios* have become part of a habitual discourse of confessions and *consejos*<sup>2</sup>, which they use as a pedagogical instrument for survival, healing, and collective learning.

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### TESTIMONIOS AS THEORY AND METHOD

This article utilizes *testimonio* as a way to bring to the surface a narrative of urgency in the dystopic condition of Juárez and a potential tool to decolonize pedagogical and research practices. These ideas are grounded on Moraga and Anzaldúa's (1981) notion of "theory in the flesh" (p. 23), an organic theory that emerges in urgency and that privileges the real experiences, voices, and knowledge of subaltern women of color demanding attention and action. This is a "struggle of the flesh, and struggle of borders, an inner war" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 100) in which women's brown bodies are the mediums, witnesses, and agents (Cruz, 2001). Brown bodies thus constitute the very sites of collision between the First and Third Worlds and of identity negotiation, where the personal becomes political, and knowledge and theory are generated and materialized through experience. If theory in the flesh is the unification of the mind and body (Cruz, 2001), then the personal narrative becomes a means for agency. As the narrator tells her story, she breaks the silence, negotiates contradictions, and recreates new identities beyond the fragmentation, shame, and betrayal brought about by oppression, colonization, and patriarchy (Moraga, 1993). *Testimonios* allow us to put the scattered pieces together of a painful experience in a new way that generates wisdom and consciousness:

You've chosen to compose a new history and self—to rewrite your *autohistoria* [self-story]. You want to be transformed again; you want a keener mind, a stronger spirit, a wiser soul. Your ailing body is no longer a hindrance but an asset, witnessing pain, speaking to you, demanding touch. *Es tu cuerpo que busca conocimiento* [It's your body that seeks knowledge]; along with dreams your body's the royal road to consciousness. (Anzaldúa, 2002, pp. 558–559)

*Testimonios* thus offer the opportunity to develop and expose theory in the flesh and urge the audience to action as "the voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an 'I' . . . that demands to be recognized" (Beverley, 2000, p. 548). *Testimonios* originated in Latin American, indigenous, emancipatory struggles, calling attention to painful events or series of oppressions and recognition of indigenous peoples' knowledge (Menchú, 1984; Smith, 2005). Other subaltern women of color have also used *testimonios* to advance their emancipatory goals. The Latina Feminist Group (2001) used *testimonios* to reveal both painful and enriching experiences that have given way to their complex identities while collectively interrupting the silence and isolation that served to perpetuate their oppression both in their communities and in the academy. N. González (2006) presented the *testimonios* of immigrant mothers' struggles and excruciating experiences to reveal their epistemologies and forms of agency, as well as their redefinitions of motherhood and pedagogy, and Elenes (2000) discussed the role of Chicana testimonial texts in destabilizing the hegemony of Western academic knowledge and notions of truth.

The *testimonios* I present here exemplify the possibilities of *mujerista* pedagogical and epistemological theory—that which centers *mujeres*' "articulations of teaching and learning, along with ways of knowing—rooted in the diverse and everyday living of Chicanas/Latinas as members of families, communities, and a global society" (Villenas, Godinez, Delgado Bernal, & Elenes, 2006, p. 3). These *testimonios* reflect some of the ways in which the young women in this study develop and share knowledge and agency in their daily lives despite the dystopic living conditions afforded to them.

The *testimonios* emerged from a year-long ethnography that I conducted at Preparatoria Esperanza (pseudonym) in Ciudad Juárez. My goal was to learn from Mexican border girls who were born into a city, infamous for its feminicides and considered one of the most violent in the world. Furthermore, I was interested in learning about the possibilities of agency within a school context characterized by a strong critical pedagogy orientation.

I began my fieldwork in August 2010, more than a year into the vicious drug war and four months after the most massive militarization in the city's history. I interviewed eight working-class girls from Preparatoria Esperanza and had numerous ethnographic conversations and informal interviews with teachers and several other students in the school. I also spent significant time conducting observations in the classrooms, as well as in other school settings, including the hallways, the courtyards, the library, and locations where students had extracurricular activities. During my year-long stay in the community, I collected multiple *testimonios* from all the girls I interviewed and from others with whom I had an opportunity to converse and observe. The *testimonios* that I chose to share here, while very different, are representative of the multiple strategies and approaches to different ways of knowing utilized by many of the girls whom I met. I selected the *testimonios* of young women that demonstrate some of the ways in which their brown bodies experience the material realities of their context and whose experiences and narratives of survival, healing, and transformation embody consciousness, agency, and theory (Cruz, 2001).

As a critical ethnographer (Foley, 2002) and as their interlocutor, I abandoned assumptions of positivist, detached objectivism, and instead sought to speak from "a very particular race, class, gender, and sexual identity location" (Foley & Valenzuela, 2000, p. 218). Thus, I conducted this research from a Chicana feminist standpoint; I was a native of Juárez who became a border crosser from an early age and eventually immigrated permanently to the United States in 1997. Needless to say, this research was an intellectual endeavor as much as it was personal, and my goals were not neutral. As a Chicana researcher, my desire was to be an agent of knowledge and produce transformative research in what I still consider my community. Hence, I was strongly guided by my own cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 2001), which draws on the researcher's personal, professional, and collective experiences, community memory, and existing literature, as a legitimate epistemic framework in the entire inquiry and analysis process of Chicanas' research goals. As the ethnographer, I was a partial insider whose insight is substantially informed by my experiences growing up in Ciudad Juárez and by my work for almost a decade with Mexican families on the border as a bilingual educator and as a critical pedagogue. In addition, I drew from border theories and Chicana feminist thought, which recognize the borderlands as a privileged space not only for the study of multiple and fluid identities, but also as a source of new knowledge and epistemologies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Elenes, 2006; Mignolo, 2000).

The young women narrating their *testimonios* were among the students whom I interviewed or conversed with during my fieldwork. I witnessed the young women share their *testimonios* with friends or peers or with me during interviews. As the ethnographer, I merely serve as the interlocutor through which the narrators seek to bring their situation to the attention of the academic and international audiences. I recorded the narrators' oral accounts, transcribed them, translated them into English, and edited them. I strived to remain as close as possible to the narrators' voices, seeking to affirm the authority of their personal experiences. Thus, some Spanish words remained in their *testimonios*, to maintain the authenticity of their message. I attempted to preserve their individual communication styles by translating some words or phrases in ways that

I considered effective. Simultaneously, I eliminated my own questions, interjections from other students, and significant deviations from the subject to keep the fluidity and cohesiveness of their narratives. While the girls wanted their voices and ideas to be shared, I used pseudonyms to offer some degree of anonymity.

Given the unequal power relations and intrusiveness present even in feminist ethnographic research (Stacey, 1988), a greater effort to decolonize it should employ practices that center the participants' concerns and knowledge and result in theory based on the participants' own point of view and for their own goals (Smith, 2005). Smith underscores that *testimonios* with indigenous peoples can have a decolonizing effect in that there is an inherent "notion that truth is being revealed" (p. 144). As I offer the *testimonios* of young Juárez women, I seek to situate their lives and voices as knowledge and truth that comes from experience and that deserves a protected space and serious attention. The young women offering their *testimonios*, do so courageously as organic intellectuals (in Gramsci's [1971/2000] sense), aiming to intervene in the academic world and seeking solidarity and coalition (Beverly, 2000). But the ideas that these girls express through their *testimonios* are also organic in the sense that they were grown in a soil that they know well, rather than imported from academic circles (Levins Morales, 2001).

[T]he intellectual traditions [they] come from create theory out of shared lives instead of sending away for it . . . [They] grew directly out of listening to [their] own discomforts, finding out who shared them, who validated them, and in exchanging stories about common experiences, finding patterns, systems, explanations of how and why things happened. (p. 28)

## BACKGROUND

To provide a clearer context from which the girls have testified, I briefly describe two of the realms that inevitably helped shape their views, ability, and purposes to talk back. Although a more detailed and extensive discussion is outside the scope of this article, my goal is to reveal through their *testimonios* the girls' agency in negotiating their identities and the contrasting messages inherent in these contexts.

### Ciudad Juárez in Times of Dystopia

Anzaldúa (1987) referred to the U.S.-Mexican border as "*una herida abierta* (an open wound) where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (p. 3). Her description applies to Ciudad Juárez today, more than as a metaphor for a literal reality. Located on the U.S.-México border, across El Paso, Texas, and with a population of over 1,332,000 residents (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2011), Juárez is one of the largest industrialized border cities in the world. In 2008, Juárez became the epicenter of the war on drugs initiated in México by President Felipe Calderón, making it the most violent city in North America, despite the thousands of troops patrolling its streets. More than 11,000 drug-related homicides have been reported in Juárez since 2008 (Goodman, 2011). The impunity that reigns in the city also has given way to an exponential proliferation of additional crimes not related to the

cartels, ranging from armed robberies and assaults to extortions and kidnappings (INEGI, 2011) that victimize people from all walks of life.

### Border Women

Since the 1990s, Juárez has been known as a killing field for women, with hundreds of feminicides committed and still unresolved; violence against women continues as a normalized phenomenon in everyday life (Staudt, 2008). The young, poor women of today were born into the era of the feminicides; many have witnessed violence in the home, have been directly affected by the rise in crime and impunity in the city, and have experienced a perpetual sense of insecurity and risk throughout their lives (Monárrez Fregoso, 2005; Moreno Acosta, 2008; Schmidt Camacho, 2005). Part of this insecurity comes from a general distrust of the authorities, especially on the part of women, who have witnessed a continuous discursive tradition of blaming the victim (Castillo & Tabuenca Córdoba, 2002; Fregoso, 2003; Lugo, 2008; Staudt, 2008; Wright, 2001). Furthermore, these young women and their families represent the sources of cheap labor in the arrangements of a predatory capitalist globalization and the dispossessed sector of the population in the obscene economic inequalities characterizing this border city since the 1970s (Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Lugo, 2008).

According to Leadbeater and Way (1996), urban girls are typically perceived as both potential victims of domestic violence and as pathological threats to society by their propensity for school dropout, teen pregnancy, and addictions. Young poor women of color in Juárez experience additional layers of oppression and stigma. The old colonialist narrative that continues today about the border as a zone of sexual excess, degeneration, illicit drug dealing, and violence (Martínez, 2006) has typically portrayed Juárez women as hyperfeminine, prostitutes, and bound to sexual chaos that requires patriarchal control (Fregoso, 2003). In this way, young Juárez women, have historically had to deal with dichotomous depictions and to adjust to contradictory expectations: seductive but virgin, breadwinners but submissive housewives. While popular culture has objectified and consumed Juárez violence in the form of movies, video games, and makeup (Beck, 2010), more alarming is the patronizing gaze in much of the media and journalistic literature about Juárez that reproduces stereotypes and even portrays poor Juárez women of color as a fetish—as sexual objects of desire (Monárrez Fregoso, 2010; for examples see Bowden, 1998, 1999).

Mohanty (2003) argues that women in the Third World have been pervasively considered victims rather than agents of their own destiny by Western feminist scholarship. Indeed, reports about the violence against women in Juárez often position them as victims, but the young women in this study do not see themselves as such. Activists are constantly threatened, have been harshly repressed and unprotected by the State, and in several cases have been silenced by death (for examples see, Amnesty International, 2010; Ellingwood, 2010; Fregoso & Bejarano, 2010; Frontera Norte Sur, 2011; Hernández Navarro, 2010; King, 2011). Nonetheless, the subjectivities of the young women whose voices are presented here have also been influenced by the political consciousness emerging from women's and student grassroots movements that have denounced police impunity and violent repressions against poor women, activists, and youth.

### *Preparatoria Esperanza: Cultivating Subaltern Voices and Knowledge*

Despite the dystopic landscape that the city offers its youth, the young women in this study attend a public high school that maintains a strong critical and social justice orientation and promotes the development of their own critical consciousness and agency, as well as the use of students' lived experiences and counter-narratives as pedagogical instruments.

With approximately 350 students, Preparatoria Esperanza is the only public high school serving low-income youth from the northwestern zone of the city, one of the most marginalized areas in Juárez. Esperanza's students come from the barrios, characterized by shantytowns, *picaderos* (clandestine houses or small establishments where a variety of illicit drugs are sold and used), gangs, and high crime rates. Thus, the students are constantly criminalized by the police, the military, and other state authorities, as well as stigmatized in the Juárez community at large, due to their working-class background. In my ethnographic conversations with people in the city and the discourses propagated by some of the media and local authorities, many of those unfamiliar with the school, including educators from other schools, often depicted Esperanza students as lazy, mediocre, rebellious, and as drug addicts and gang members. Some believe that the teachers frequently cancel classes, have low expectations, and are there only to make a few pesos.

But Preparatoria Esperanza is quite the opposite of these stereotypes. Despite being overwhelmingly underfunded, it stands as an example of collective activism and revolutionary education that prevails even in the direst conditions of Ciudad Juárez. Esperanza's teachers are highly educated—many having master's degrees and Ph.D.s, have been involved in numerous social movements at the local and national levels, and are extremely committed to their vision as critical educators—sometimes to the point of sacrificing their personal lives and working without pay. Most of them come from the barrios, as the students do, and often take the role of organic intellectuals by remaining grounded in the community and by building reciprocal relationships of trust with students. Activists and researchers in the city who know the school are often eager to partner with Esperanza students and teachers.

The goal of Esperanza, is to foster *autogestión*<sup>3</sup> or what I define as the students' ability to self-author their identities and become critical and active initiators and agents of change. When asked about the vision of the school, the principal stated, "We are not interested in creating objects of production, but rather, in developing critical thinking subjects." The school's cultural and pedagogical practices are characterized by offering to their students an environment of freedom and autonomy, authentic and caring teacher-student relationships, and critical discourse and activism.

One way in which Esperanza teachers deliberately promote the legitimization of students' voices is through critical dialogue (Freire, 1970) and sharing narratives. Because of their scarce resources and lack of access to textbooks, both teachers' and students' narratives of lived experiences become part of the everyday curriculum and are considered a legitimate and valuable knowledge for critically applying and analyzing theory, much like Chicana feminist thought and the practices of *testimonio*.

In contrast to most public *preparatorias* in México where students wear uniforms and abide by strict rules and a rigid curriculum, at Esperanza, students are able to express themselves freely verbally and through dress, music, and art. They are also encouraged to take charge of their own learning inside and outside of the classroom by selecting and initiating their own activities and forms of collective activism. Thus, students have initiated and organized numerous

marches for social action, a radio station, school-wide forums, committees, class seminars, and research projects to discuss topics of interest, such as economic inequalities, gendered violence, homophobia, social movements, neoliberalism, environmental issues, and the city's violence. It is not surprising that when Subcomandante Marcos<sup>4</sup> visited Juárez in 2006, Preparatoria Esperanza was his main host. While not all students and teachers promote or engage in all of these activities, this type of discourse appears to be privileged by the school community in general.

In light of this context, I present the *testimonios* of two different girls. These are only two examples out of many that constitute the type of politicized and pedagogical girl discourse that often takes place among some groups at Esperanza. I chose these particular narratives because they exemplify the type of powerful testimonial discourse prevalent among many girls as counter-narratives, confessions, and *consejos* based on their own life experiences and shared among friends, sisters, and peers.

### TESTIMONIOS AS COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Diana

Diana was an extremely high achieving and vocal 11th grader who identified as a feminist and was the leading organizer of an ecology committee at school. Diana was eager to share her *testimonios* during interviews, seeing it as part of her political activity.

My name is Diana Blanco Corona [pseudonym]. I am 16 years old, and I am a student at Preparatoria Esperanza. I am open and sincere, and I don't have any taboos. I am a perfectionist, energetic, and sometimes impatient. But I like how I am. I am a leader.

I have changed a lot in the past couple of years and in the past months. In middle school my peers didn't like me because I would answer every question and would not let anyone silence me. After I finished middle school, I wasn't interested in school very much. It bored me. But when I started attending this school I began to experience the freedom that it offered. I loved the educational system here because it is up to you to learn. I think that's the reason why I went from a 75 average grade to a 94. That's how much I love school now; yes, I love it. Let me tell you that I am not that fond of studying all the time, but I am very inquisitive. Whenever I don't understand something, I ask questions. I like to research things, especially when they are of interest to me, and I like to converse with teachers and learn from them. The teachers here are open to you. You can talk with them about anything you want. An example that I can give you is the way in which my interest in Cuba was born. I used to talk to my reading teacher every day after class. He would tell me about his experiences and trips to Cuba and I began to do my own research. Then my friends started asking me questions about that, and that made me further my research. So now, I have essays, syntheses, and summaries all about Cuba. In the past, I used to say that school was not for me, and I would put minimal effort in just trying to get by. But when I entered this school, my focus changed completely because it was not about having to do it anymore, but because I was interested in doing it.

But, since December 14, other things have happened that have also changed me. On that day, I went with my mother to the veterinary clinic and we got assaulted, and the man who assaulted us raped me. The veterinary clinic is on a corner of a major avenue where the military are patrolling every five minutes. But, what good does that do anyway, right?

The man did not beat me, but I realized how people can manipulate your mind. Before the man raped me, he told me, "Don't say anything, and don't do anything because I'll kill your mother."

We went to take our cat and were waiting for our turn. A man then arrived with a dog. I remember thinking how odd it was that it looked like a stray dog wearing a new leash. The clinic was about to close. "Open the door," he demanded. "Yes, let's open," said the vet, "he will be the last one." As soon as he got in, he ordered my mother to close the door, pulled out his gun, and said, "This is an assault." And that's where everything started. We didn't know . . . well, I had no idea of how long it all lasted because from that moment I lost any notion of time.

He made me take off my shoelaces and tie up the vet, and then sent me to a little room in the back ordering me to look for I don't know what. He then went to the room with me and told me, "Look, don't freak out, right now I'm going to kill the vet, but if you don't want anything to happen to your mother, don't say anything." He said, "Pull down your pants," but I wasn't registering anything, I was in a nervous shock, gone. Then as he began to take off his pants, he put his gun on the table. I tell my mother that I wouldn't have hesitated to grab it, but he saw me looking at it, and he took it back.

And then that was it. He raped me and then sent me back to the main room. I just sat on the floor and put my face between my knees. I bowed my head so that my mother would do the same and wouldn't look at the scene if he ended up killing the vet. What enrages me is that he thinks that he did us a favor for not having killed us. He would refer to us as "señora" and "señorita"<sup>5</sup> and would say "excuse me" and I don't know what. You see? Like if he was doing us a favor by treating us like that. Then he said, "They're picking me up. Don't leave the clinic in the next 15 minutes." He then told the vet, "I'm going to say that I beat you up, and that I didn't kill you because there were two women." Again, as if we should thank him, you know what I mean?

My mother asked me if I wanted to report him to the authorities, and I said, "Yes." He had the appearance of a soldier, 100%. He was wearing military boots, was dark skinned, had a birthmark on his face, sounded like a Veracruzano<sup>6</sup>, and seemed southern. I reported him, and it was very denigrating having to declare 25 times and being examined in front of I don't know how many people. It was very traumatic. They asked me for my undergarments to get the DNA, but I know they won't do anything, as usual they won't do anything. And I am sure there was DNA everywhere.

I also got several infections, and the homeopathic experts that I know did some tests and found that there is a probability that I was infected with HIV. I was devastated. Before, I used to tell the story and cry, but the therapy from a civil association has helped me, and I'm following a rigorous homeopathic therapy to heal my body. Although sometimes I get attacks of rage, not fear, but rage, I hope to transform this rage into boldness. That's why I'm getting involved in all these marches against violence. This experience changed my perspective completely. But from then on, only good things have happened. I got a job and, and my friends here at Esperanza, and all the new people I have met have helped me heal.

Clearly, Diana's life on the border is not one of excesses, reckless rebellion, or naïve victimization. Her *testimonio* disrupts the images of young border women as being too loose, silent, or passive. Despite her early dislike for school, she was able to gain back her love for authentic learning at Esperanza. She had become a purposeful and self-directed young woman. As such, she was able to self-author her identity beyond her violent and traumatic experience by choosing to re-channel her rage into forms of activism. Rather than a victim, Diana sees herself as a fighter and survivor who despite any situation will rise again full of life, strength, and courage. She has accepted the healing that comes from being in community with others. Her hope is not in the hands of the authorities, which she views as useless. Instead, her healing comes from the support of her friends at Esperanza, civic agencies, and women healers, as well as from her own ability to fight back, which was not born the day she was attacked. For

example, even before this experience, Diana has been writing poetry about the violence against women and has read her poems at women's conventions. Her school also contributes to this healing by offering opportunities for collective agency through various forms of activism, such as marches and forums. Her *testimonio* speaks of the layers of patriarchy and impunity that reign in the city, but it is also a counter-narrative that underscores the significance of the agency she gained back at Esperanza, as well as the collective action and knowledge among many Juárez residents who work tirelessly to heal the wounds and reclaim the humanity of those suffering injustice.

### Gabriela

Gabriela was in the 12th grade, and she was perhaps the most popular girl in the school. Based on my observations and conversations with teachers and students, what made her popular were her friendly, open, and peaceful demeanor, as well as her activism, eloquence, intelligence, and unapologetic counter-hegemonic forms of expression through dress, music, and art. She dressed in a “hippie” kind of style, wore her hair in dreadlocks, and spent much of her free time reading, playing the guitar, and writing raps and poetry, as well as initiating various forms of activism—from painting murals to organizing marches and events, and working on research projects related to social justice issues. She did very well in her classes and was one of the most inquisitive and participative students. Gabriela was clearly a girl whose consciousness and identity were shaped by growing up in the barrio. The police and others who did not know her well saw her with suspicion and contempt, and she had suffered multiple aggressions and discrimination by the local and federal authorities and institutions.

I am only 17 years old, but despite my young age, I could say that I have lived through things that most kids my age haven't. I live with my mother and my 16-year-old sister. My mother is a supervisor at a local supermarket where she works very long hours and makes about \$1,700 pesos [about 150 dollars] a month. Some days, we don't even get to see each other at all, due to her schedule. As a child, I saw how my father would abuse my mother. She divorced him, but then she got a new partner who brought a lot of problems to our home. I really disliked him, but he was murdered last year by accident.

I am passionate about music and art. That's how I try to make a few pesos, selling crafts on the streets and boulevards while my boyfriend does his torch juggling routines. Other times I sell candy or homemade burritos. I have looked for jobs, but employers usually reject me because of the way I look. They don't like my dreadlocks, and they probably want me to wear a miniskirt. You know how it is—they care more about your appearance than about your intellect.

Since I was about 11 years old, I have been involved in activism. Ever since I was a little girl I would hear about the murders and the things they did to women. In fact, that was the first issue that I undertook. Ever since I had use of reason, I would be working on campaigns with my sister, Paty. We did marches and organized the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on March 28 and other dates commemorating all those Mexican women who were raped or murdered. So from the beginning I was involved in those things and that shaped my perspective of Juárez.

Have you heard of Géminis Ochoa? He was the leader of the flea market, a real activist, and so was his wife. One morning last year he invited my boyfriend and me to sell our crafts at the flea market. But by the afternoon they had already killed him. They killed him because he was the leader

of the street vendors, and since he was making too many waves, the soldiers killed him right there in downtown in the midst of all the people. It was all over the news. I went to support his wife because they had always helped the people. It was a struggle for the people, and they killed him for being a revolutionary.

The police are always after us. When we went to the last march a couple of police officers told us, “We know who you are. You better watch out because we’re going to hunt you until we get each one of you.” And yeah, you’ll see them roaming in the barrio threatening us. Like the other day the police had been chasing one of my friends and a few minutes later he was found dead on the ground. All my friends were crying and, yes, I cried a lot too, but I tell you, I have to be strong.

So I do feel stressed, to think that we have not gotten out of this, out of this violence. And to think that Juárez is not just any place because this is a border. A kilometer north from where I stand there’s a whole other world. We are so close and so far away. I sit on top of the hill and look down and can see that line that divides two very different worlds. Yet you can see the influence of the United States, on TV, everywhere. Even in the violence. Juárez is where all kinds of people end up, those escaping the law in the United States, those who are deported, people from southern México, and suddenly you have a combination of Americans, Mexicanos, and Chicanos living here. Some see this border as a place of hope. That’s what my friends from the South tell me; it is their dream to come here. And here we are, trying to get out. I feel so sad to see how paranoia has overwhelmed people. I tell one of my teachers that I like to gather people and help them clarify things because people today are very confused. That’s why we need to keep people informed, not through the mainstream media because that is mere manipulation, but amongst ourselves. That is why I helped organize the march with other students because it is where we can speak up.

Gabriela’s *testimonio* speaks of the struggles and loneliness of growing up in the barrio where patriarchy, violence, and poverty strike. It reveals the stigma that poor youth carry for not following normative ways of dress and behavior. It also offers evidence of institutional oppression through a policing system that criminalizes poor youth and silences activists. However, like Diana, Gabriela’s *testimonio* demonstrates a strong spirit of survival and critical agency. Growing up in a context and discourse of violence toward women has made her a fighter and organizer. At her early age, she is also able to analyze the various layers of power and oppression that produce violence on the border. There is no fatalistic passivity in her. It is clear that Gabriela talks back as a witness of oppression, who has acquired knowledge from lived experiences.

Both Gabriela and Diana speak to a collectivity—they stand alongside others who have experienced trauma and in many cases, death, wishing to bring healing while pointing to the power dimensions that create these realities. Their goal in sharing these experiences was to counter the narratives propagated in the media and in middle- and upper-class circles about poor youth being ambitionless, drug addicts, or criminals, as well as discourses about women being loose or passive victims, which erases not only the suffering, but also the knowledge and activism that exist in the barrio. They also wanted to raise consciousness among those who maintained naïve views about the realities in their community, including their girlfriends, class peers, family members, and other people from the barrio, by pointing to the oppression caused by neoliberal agendas, patriarchy, and cycles of corruption. Their activism was in part what brought them healing, as they engaged in a collective effort to re-invent themselves and their communities beyond tragedy.

## TESTIMONIOS AS CONFESSIONS

In addition to *testimonios* as counter-narratives of what it means to be a young working-class woman in the border, *testimonios* took a pedagogical role in shaping the identities of girls at Esperanza. These often came in the form of confessions as they talked with their friends or in the poetry and songs that some of the girls wrote. This type of discourse involved making themselves vulnerable by sharing stories about intimate or difficult experiences, or even what they considered shameful behaviors, and the reflections that they provoked. One afternoon as we “hung out” in the school courtyard Gabriela shared the following *testimonio* with two other girls and me. Margarita, one of the girls, had told us about how she became bitter and aggressive after she had felt too repressed at home and marginalized in middle school by various girl cliques. To that, Gabriela responded:

Listen, I used to be real crazy. But I began to change because I got into a lot of trouble. When I was in middle school, I had very curly and kinky hair, and I would put it up in a pony tail, and it would get all puffy, so they would pull me aside and ask me to fix it. I would tell them that my hair was naturally like that, Afro, and I could not style it any other way. So they made me cut it very short and straighten it every day with the flat iron for a whole year. My mother has an Afro, too, because my whole family is very dark and has African features. Her hair was her inheritance to us, “How are you going to take off my curls that I’m giving you?” she would say. I think that really injured me.

At that middle school, they would also make us stand up to chorally greet every adult that entered the classroom. I thought it was so ridiculous, so I began messing with them by standing whenever one of my classmates who was 18 years old walked in. The teachers would get annoyed, and I would respond, “He’s an adult, too, isn’t he? You said you wanted me to do that with every adult.” Of course, I was being sarcastic, but it seemed to me that they just wanted to keep us students down and blindly obedient.

In fact, I had just gotten out of detention for wearing makeup and the wrong stockings the day that Armida [the principal of Esperanza] showed up at my middle school for a recruitment visit. As soon as she said that Esperanza didn’t require uniforms like the rest of the schools, I thought, “That’s the best school.” But I also became interested in it when I learned about how critical the teachers were and that Subcomandante Marcos had been here.

But when I first enrolled at Esperanza, I was different. I used to listen to hard-core rock and punk music, and I dressed in that same style. I wore dark eye makeup, tight dark clothes, and chains. I didn’t talk to anyone, I didn’t like anyone, and I would treat everyone badly. Everyone was afraid of talking to me.

Since in my mind I was superior, I thought I could do anything, and I didn’t give a shit about what anyone thought. I would get all drunk and high. I got into punk culture, and that really messed me up. I used to hang out with guys who trained me to be aggressive. This one guy would hit me, and I would punch him in the face with all my strength, like a *vato* [guy]! Sometimes I didn’t want to be like that, but I was too prideful, and I didn’t want to get rid of that image that I had made for myself. I didn’t want to appear weak.

I behaved like a *chola* [female gang member], and I was an anarchist, so *la chota* [the police] meant nothing to me. Once, I even started a fight with this one *chota* at a bar. I beat the crap out of her, and she was real skinny, so I was stronger. It was awful; I had never beat up someone like that. But you don’t know how many times I’ve seen *chotas* come to the bars to sell cocaine, pot, heroine, and all kinds of stuff. Most people don’t know about that, and if I told them, they wouldn’t believe me. But I ended up in prison after beating her up, and I drove my mother sick and tired of having to get me out of jail.

But after being here for some time, I started to think that that attitude didn't match the real me, so I began to change. I still like the same music, but I left that life behind. I changed because I saw how it was affecting my family, especially my sister. I was always fighting with her, and she couldn't defend herself because she was younger than me. I would pull her hair and hit her, and with a lot of anger, but I didn't know where that anger came from. And I was making my mother ill. I realized that I couldn't keep living like that. My head hurt for being high all the time. I saw myself in the mirror, how skinny I was getting and I thought, "If I continue on this path, I'm gonna die."

I guess it did affect me in some way how they treated me in middle school because they wouldn't let me be who I was. But I have changed. When I saw the freedom here at Esperanza, I knew that nobody would repress me anymore, so I started by dread-locking my burnt hair. I have liberated myself, as some would call it. I have felt more free because I can wear my hair any way I want and dress any way I want, and I can now think what I want to think. I realized that I didn't belong to the cliques I used to hang out with before, because they are aggressive and like to fight. And I like to fight too, but for the right reasons and with real arguments. It's better to fight with the mind than with fists.

The exchange between Margarita and Gabriela demonstrates the confessional nature of their *testimonios*. Through them the girls shared truths from their own experiences and taught and learned from each other lessons about self-authorship, agency, and critical reflection. The girls who were present listened attentively and respected the confession, while negotiating their identities by affirming similarities or differences. Margarita, for example, said, "I am not the way I used to be anymore either. I dress the same way, but I don't fight anymore." Gabriela's *testimonio* encouraged Margarita to self-author her identity as a changed person as well.

These confessions also pointed to issues of oppression and resistance. In her *testimonio*, it is clear that Gabriela's negative behavior was originally affected, in part, by the way her middle school teachers and principal controlled and repressed her body based on racist and authoritarian ideas. While not excusing her own negative behavior, Gabriela exposes the unjust treatment that she received. Consequently, when sharing her confession, the girls who listened appeared to gain knowledge and admiration for her honesty and strength, rather than judging her negatively by focusing solely on her faults or mistakes. For instance, Marsella, one of the students who struggled with issues of self-esteem, expressed to me that if she had to pick a role model, it would not be a famous person or a historical figure; it would be Gabriela, a girl with whom she could identify and who demonstrated how to love herself regardless of what the world thought.

Gabriela's *testimonio* also demonstrates the role of the school in allowing her to experience theory in the flesh through her own transformation and self-authoring of her identity as an intellectual fighter. Her school provided her a space where she could be herself, reflect on her behavior and feelings, and redirect her anger toward furthering social justice goals. With her body no longer being policed, Gabriela's need to fight with peers and loved ones gradually began to decrease, as she was able to accept her own body and freely negotiate new ways of being. For example, she began to explore aspects of the Rastafari movement that helped her embrace her African roots and physical features, as well as create a new identity that sought inspiration through spirituality and music. While Gabriela did not explicitly identify herself as a Rasta, she did adopt some of the ideologies of the movement as well as the dress style, music, and language. For example, she does not abide by Rasta religious ideas, nor does she follow any other specific religion despite her family's long tradition of Catholicism, but instead believes in a higher power or god, who she calls Jah. What is important to note is the freedom and space that the school offered her to weave her exploration and bodily expressions of the Rasta ideology with her critical

and social justice orientation, as this clearly helped Gabriela heal and develop her own theories and new forms of agency.

### TESTIMONIOS AS CONSEJOS

Girls at Esperanza also shared *testimonios* often with the goal of providing advice to others. These *consejos* were sometimes implicit in their confessional narratives. Other times, they were explicit and deliberate. The following *testimonio* was one of the many raps that Gabriela wrote spontaneously during her free time as one of her hobbies and that illustrates this idea. This particular excerpt speaks of her experiences and those of her friends in the barrio, with which many other youth can identify. It concludes with a *consejo*, urging the listener to reject the life of drug dealing and addictions and find spiritual peace.

I was 15 years old when cocaine got to my hands  
 What's the situation here in the barrio?  
 There're no more basketball or soccer games  
 We all saw how Carlitos was devoured by the barrio  
 When a shooting burst out in the middle of the crowd  
 And Carlitos remained dead on the ground . . .  
 I know you're tired, I can see it in your eyes  
 It's been a while since the coke won't do it anymore  
 The effect fades away and the sorrow continues

You look weary and old  
 Listen to these words  
 They bring a message of peace for your soul  
 It's not a bunch of lies,  
 Jah points at my mouth, and I speak the truth  
 Listen to the words of life. This is the only way out  
 This one will forgive you and heal your hurt,  
 Will erase the pain, fill in the void,  
 The memory of your friend broken on the ground  
 Or the time when you had to tell your girl goodbye . . .  
 Did you listen, my friend? Do you know I'm with you?  
 I don't force you, but I give you these words  
 So you can think of your decision  
 To choose between life or remain between the blocks

Gabriela explained that Carlitos is an interpretation of the boy who used to enjoy sports and create barrio hip-hop, but fell in the trap of drug dealing and addictions. She also indicated that her MC friends like to use this character as well as that of God in their raps. Finally, she explained to me that in her conclusion, the choice between life or the blocks, represents not only a personal decision to improve one's lifestyle, but the choice to take a stand or continue being a puppet of world powers like the United States, who continue to fuel the drug business. Her *consejo* thus incorporates not only her own experiences and knowledge of the barrio but also a necessary understanding of power dimensions and the role of spirituality in the search for healing.

These *consejos* illustrate the pedagogical nature of *testimonios*, particularly when one considers their close relationship to the culturally situated meaning of *educación*. Not limited to formal academic preparation, the Spanish term often refers to the inculcation of morals, ethics, respect, and social and personal responsibility that serve as a basis for all other learning (Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Valdés, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). But beyond the inculcation of cultural values, the *consejos* inherent in these young women's *testimonios* embody *mujerista* pedagogies that involve the interrogation and critique of social practices and power, while offering a language of hope and agency validated by the wisdom gained from their own life experiences (Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001; Hernández, 1997).

## DISCUSSION

These *testimonios* offer a window into young women's definitions of their lives beyond the feminicides, the violence, and the fear, as well as their desire to reclaim their humanity and seek solidarity. Considering the harsh and violent context in which these girls' lives unfold, textbook or traditional school learning is not only insufficient, but is also irrelevant. The challenges that these urban girls experienced on a daily basis, have caused them to not only develop a keen awareness of power dimensions and strategies to defend themselves (Pastor, McCormick, & Fine, 1996), but have also led them to acquire identities embedded in critical consciousness (hooks, 1991). In this way, *testimonios* become a necessary way of knowing, a pedagogical tool based on the truths from which they can speak back and learn the lessons that help them survive and resist oppression in such a contested space.

These *testimonios* also bear witness of the importance of Preparatoria Esperanza in decolonizing both curriculum and instruction by privileging and legitimizing subaltern and critical discourse where "the voice of a witness is accorded space and protection . . . silencing certain types of questions and formalizing others" (Smith, 2005, p. 144), and thus giving way to greater student agency. In this type of environment, *testimonios* naturally emerged and became part of the cultural and pedagogical practices inside and outside the classroom.

It is important to note that while these *testimonios* occurred in the school setting, they often transpired from spaces outside the classroom, during conversations with friends, or came in the form of poetry or raps that girls wrote in their personal journals and shared during their free time. I listened to and observed girls participate in this type of testimonial discourse to highlight the challenges of growing up female and poor in Juárez. Their testimonial conversations involved issues of self-esteem and imposed body images, gendered repression and violence, abuses from the authorities and other public institutions, and discrimination in their access to college and employment to name a few, but they also included stories of victory, strength, activism, honor, and resilience in which the girls or other women in their lives were the protagonists.

Furthermore, these were not simply stories, but rather, a politicized discourse that situated the girls' experiences in the context of power dimensions and systemic oppression. This discourse sheds light on the powerful *mujerista* pedagogical spaces that were a natural part of these girls' lives on the border and through which they individually and collectively self-authored their identities as Juárez women (F. González, 2001; Trinidad Galvan, 2001; Villenas, 2006). It also highlights the possibility for schools to expand the notion of education and develop a more relevant and empowering curriculum by validating the wisdom, agency, and ways of knowing

of subaltern young women embedded in ordinary and intimate spaces, even in some of the most dystopic and contested contexts, such as Ciudad Juárez. Neither the status quo, nor educational reforms imposed from above and motivated by neoliberal goals have been able to bring healing and hope to a generation of Juárez youth profoundly immersed in sorrow, fear, poverty, and desperation. In a space where women's bodies are positioned as docile objects and abused by patriarchy and voracious capitalism, young women's reclamation of voice and knowledge requires more than a Cartesian approach to learning and schooling. It requires epistemological tools that take students' everyday life and suffering seriously. Through the use of *testimonios*, this school was able to nurture the development of theory in the flesh—a theory where the realities of their lives, including the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional struggles of navigating a predatory and precarious territory, and the very injuries, longings, and healing felt and experienced in their bodies “all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23). This type of transcendental knowledge has the potential of changing lives and, in some cases, breathing life back in the midst of death. As Diana said, pointing to a dry tree after sharing her *testimonio* in the middle of the most devastating winter in her life, “Just like that tree, my roots are strong, and I will be green and alive again.”

## CONCLUSION

The complex conditions that poor youth experience in Juárez today are unique, yet marginalized communities and suffering exist everywhere. In the United States, for example, Chicanas, as well as other students of color and low socioeconomic background have and continue to experience political violence and marginalization in schools and in society in general due to racism, classism, patriarchy, and linguistic discrimination among many other things. They often face deficit views due to their cultural background and a subtractive schooling context (Valenzuela, 1999), and in many cases they are forbidden from exploring their own histories (as in the case of Arizona today). The intelligences and knowledge developed and weaved in their daily border-crossing experiences as they negotiate their identities and navigate multiple and, in many cases, opposing cultural worlds are often unrecognized and neglected in schools (Carrillo, 2010; Godinez, 2006). As the standardization of curriculum becomes more prevalent and yet more disconnected from the daily lives of marginalized communities in Juárez (as well as in the United States and in the world), the recognition and use of *testimonios* as an epistemological and pedagogical tool would reflect an emphasis on the urgency to seek new theories and knowledge beyond the ones that continue to fail the disenfranchised. The use of *testimonios* would enable students and educators to interrogate current schooling rituals (McLaren, 1986) and to create new truths and theory felt and produced in their own flesh and situated in their daily material realities. *Testimonios* as a pedagogical practice fosters humanizing knowledge stemming from students' and teachers' own narratives of survival and resistance, and promotes theory that offers both a language of critique and a language of hope through the reclamation, transformation, and emancipation of their own lives and communities. While practicing this type of pedagogy in the highly controlled contexts of U.S. schools may involve looking for or fostering liminal spaces, the current conditions of minority students in schools and the possibilities for creating empowering learning spaces should be compelling enough to take on the challenge.

The *testimonios* that Diana and Gabriela shared, while painful, demonstrate their agency and strength. But a look into their lives today offers even more hope of the possibilities for a renewed future despite tragic experiences and ever-present obstacles. Both Gabriela and Diana completed high school successfully and have continued their process of *autogestión*. Diana persisted in her efforts to improve her health and focused on renewing her spirit by supporting the healing of others, working as a *masseuse* at a local spa. After graduation, she spent a year at an institute in Guadalajara that specializes in holistic healing. Upon her return she continued to be actively involved in a non-governmental organization (NGO) that focuses on coaching youth to support their personal development through life experiences, research, reflection, and personal and collective consciousness. She is currently attending a local university to become a physical therapist.

Gabriela has persisted in her activist goals and identifies herself as a promoter of urban art and community work. Among many other activities, she completed a one-year internship at an NGO led by feminist leaders in her community through which she helped found El Instituto Paulo Freire, a community-based school that draws from the talents of urban youth to offer extracurricular activities and teach arts, crafts, literacy, and musical skills to young children from the *barrio*. Through her internship, she also attended various conferences nationally and in the United States, building coalitions for social justice. Today, Gabriela is an education major at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez.

Clearly, the successes and triumphs over tragedy evident in these young women's lives today are not the result of a standards-based curriculum or a strong accountability system. Instead, they stem from the knowledge and wisdom that they learned through their own life experiences. Needless to say, recognizing and legitimizing this embodied theory by incorporating it in the daily practices of teaching and learning has the potential to impact students in powerful ways.

## NOTES

1. I utilize the term "femicide" over "femicide," following Fregoso and Bejarano's (2010) conceptualization of the term which interrupts essentialist constructs of female identity by underscoring how gender norms, inequalities and power relationships, rather than the biological notion of the female sex, increase women's vulnerability to violence.
2. *Consejos* are spontaneous homilies utilized to give advice or to instill behaviors and attitudes and relate closely to the concept of *educación* (Valdeás, 1996; Valencia & Black, 2002).
3. While the translation of the word *autogestión* is usually found in dictionaries as *self-management*, this English term does not fully encompass the meaning of this word at Preparatoria Esperanza. Elsewhere, I (Cervantes-Soon, 2011) have provided a nuanced analysis of the way this term was used and what it represented to both students and teachers at Esperanza. Suffice it to say that, to them, *autogestión* involved not only self-management skills, but also, and more importantly, the ability to "read the world" (Freire, 1970) and the power dimensions of their context in order to be critical self-makers and agents of change. For this reason, I chose to maintain the Spanish term and the definition above.
4. Subcomandante Marcos is a public intellectual and the spokesperson for the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), a Mexican guerrilla movement demanding rights for indigenous peoples.
5. "Señora" and "señorita" are formal ways to refer to women, Mrs. and Miss respectively.
6. A person from the Mexican state of Veracruz, a state from which many of the soldiers in Juárez are recruited.

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