

My White Rootedness: A *Testimonio*

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Abstract: This manuscript was developed as a *testimonio* at the end of an intensive cooperative learning project that was held at the author's Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). For ten weeks, seven of the faculty at that institution met as a group to read literature on the power and possibilities of HSIs, to discuss what their experiences were at their institution and what those experiences meant to them, and to invest their interest in co-creating a framework that might elicit a vision for their institution for the future. A *testimonio* sometimes serves the purpose of promoting justice from the inside out as people work to (re)build community(ies) with personal narratives. Within the *testimonio* tradition, secret or guarded roles are shared in essays or stories, in which one is *safe* to self-reflect, to write about one's personal life, and to reflect on the future.

Keywords: cultural humility, *testimonio*, self-reflection

As I am sitting here this morning, contemplating what words to spread across the screen of my computer, I notice the bowl of paperwhite bulbs beside me that I planted just three days ago. The new shoots of green seem to be growing practically as I watch—every day gaining altitude toward the ultimate unfolding of the beautiful scented flowers I love. But today, as I struggle to write of who I am, where I come from, and where I am headed, I notice along the edges of the bowl that the roots have also been growing and can now be seen emerging along its outer edges. Who knows where they will go (biologically determined as they are to stay underground to survive) to serve as the anchor for what emerges above, but yearning to break free in their white rootedness and grow like the nubile shoots of green which rise above them.

Maybe it is my reluctance to put on paper what has been swirling around my mind and heart these past 10 weeks. As the culminating project of our intensive cooperative learning project, which focused on our identity as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), this *testimonio* was assigned to aid us in building our university's community with our own personal narrative. Within this tradition, secret or guarded roles are shared in essays or stories, where we are *safe* to self-reflect, to write about our personal life, and to reflect on the future.

For 10 weeks, seven of us faculty met as a learning co-op to read literature on the power and possibilities of HSIs, to discuss what our experiences at our institution were and what they mean to us, and to invest our interest in co-creating a framework that might elicit a vision for our institution for the future. So, as I stare into the emerging paperwhites, I work to articulate where I am on my journey toward growth. How does my white rootedness both ground and limit me in this walk? Let me begin to explore.

Decisions

The decision I made to leave all that was familiar and join the faculty of California State University at Monterey Bay recently was one of the most difficult decisions of my life, and one I still work to dissect, unpack, and make meaning of. While there is no doubt in my mind that it

was a good decision, there are many and competing narratives (depending on who is doing the telling) that could be spun about this choice. I prefer the central one that continues to emerge in my heart and mind which is this: As I become more aware of the limited time I have available to me as a productive academic, I am eager to find ways to inspire and facilitate a larger scope of influence in my work within social work education.

No, maybe it's more personal than that. As I become more aware of the limited time I have available to me as a human being on this earth, I am eager to find ways to inspire and facilitate my own self-growth and development. *To remind myself that I am still able to do this.* To feel the energy and excitement of engaging in a novel experience and the self-worth that comes with the accomplishment of a challenge.

As Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009) so eloquently writes in her excellent book, *The Third Chapter*:

In order to take on new life adventures you must be eager to develop new kinds of activities, new daily rhythms, new habits of conduct, and new sources of motivation and reward . . . going from a comfortable, settled life of layers and density to being an outsider—where you have no particular expectations, no particular history or identity, no networks, no reputation—able to reinvent yourself with the energy and excitement of a fresh start. (p. 63)

My decision to start this new chapter here at one of the smaller and newer campuses of the California State University system is the beginning of the path toward what I hope is my longed-for, renewed chance for both self-growth and development, and a larger scope of influence within social work education. These also happen to be related to the fundamental, intersecting elements of cultural humility, which include ongoing self-reflection, self-critique, lifelong learning, and a commitment to advocacy and institutional change (Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington, & Utsey, 2013; Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2015). I committed, upon my hiring, to work hard at increasing my limited understanding of Latinx culture and my capacity to better serve in this HSI of higher education. This commitment is what led to my participation in this unique learning cooperative, one product of which is this *testimonio*.

The Personal Is Political

I want to write next about three separate unsettling interactions I experienced recently, which continue to poke and prod at me in my dreams, moments of insomnia, and reflective hours walking or driving. The first was a meeting I had with my dean about my pressing desire to hire a Latinx faculty member for our department, as our small MSW program has none, despite over 60 percent of our students identifying as Latinx, a similar proportion to the clients we serve as social workers in this region.

In (as I recall) my passionate plea for funds to either extend or adapt our search to better yield a Latinx faculty member, she said (as I recall) something to the effect that I should be mindful of

the significant influence a white, non-Latinx academic could have with this population—that I should not undervalue the experience I nor any new non-Latinx hire may have in benefiting this population. This, I should add, has certainly been her lived experience. But it had not been my lived experience, yet, as I struggled with having taken a position that in a socially just world should have gone to a Latinx or other under-represented minority candidate (had there been any).

While I know she was speaking from her heart, I could not assuage the lingering doubts and frustration I took away from this discussion. I *do* think it matters who is sitting around the table or teaching in the front of the classroom. I am unconvinced that we should settle for anything less than diversifying our all-too-homogeneous program faculty. So, while I struggled with trying to make this happen despite limited resources and a sluggish, traditional search process, I simultaneously struggle with trying to be true to her words—to work to serve the Latinx population of students and clients better, despite my white, non-Latinx rootedness.

The second experience was much more caustic. Before the beginning of a chamber music concert I attended recently—in what I perhaps erroneously stereotype as the politically right-leaning, rich-and-white-person-dominated nearby community—I began a discussion with an elderly woman seated on my left. When the conversation led to what I did and where I worked, she asked what I thought of our new university president, “Eduardo”—and I emphasize that she did not refer to him as “President ____.” Already my radar was set for micro-aggression land. I replied that in my limited interaction, I found him quite lovely and very personable. She then replied (verbatim), “Well, I personally don’t find him very impressive. On the radio you can hardly understand what he is saying. He needs to learn to enunciate properly.” With my growing confidence, I retorted, “Did you know our university is an HSI, and that perhaps our president’s accent is purposeful, to identify and demonstrate his community leadership as a Hispanic person?” She then added fuel to this now very ethnically tinged fire with something like, “Well, those people need to know that in this country you will never succeed without learning proper English.” The discussion unraveled from there, with me suggesting that perhaps it is not our president’s tongue that needs adjusting, but her ears, and adding some words (with the color in my face rising and my heart rate now increasing) about the value of a multi-cultural, multi-lingual society, before, blessedly, the music began. At intermission, I moved across the auditorium.

How I still struggle with this interchange! I have retold this now multiple times, perhaps in an attempt to better understand my place in it, perhaps in an attempt to understand it better by seeing how it bounces off those I tell, or perhaps to position myself socially as a loyal member of my new environment by expressing outrage and indignation at the insulting of a member of our university family, or politically, as a left-leaning liberal with a social justice heart. Yet I also wonder, am I one of those well-intentioned liberals who spread stories like this, which, perhaps, only serve to further cement these degradations as part of a hegemonic discourse?

Third story. I sit quietly (as I have multiple times now in some venue of my new community) in a large meeting of social service agency and county leaders—this time, the Children’s Council of Monterey County. As an interested community member, I sit at the outer ring reserved for *the*

public. Around the table, honest, are 16 white, non-Latinx discussants and decision makers and one Latino, who was retiring after an illustrious career as our chief probation officer and who would no longer be participating as a member of the council. Around the outer ring, there were mostly women of color, many who may identify as Latinx.

How can this be, I think, in this county and in this venue—whose mission is to better serve the children of our low-income, agricultural county (who demographically are 75 percent Latinx)—that those whose voices and power matter come from a different population altogether? I do not understand. I do not understand, just as I do not understand the dearth of Latinx faculty in my program or across this HSI campus.

My Place and Time in a Liminal Space

As I contemplate this new chapter in my work life, which propelled me from the East Coast to the West Coast, from all that was familiar to the largely unfamiliar, from having been known to now being a stranger to all, I feel disoriented. I no longer hold the status I held in my previous context, unsure at this stage in my academic transition of all the identities I will hold in my new institution. I'm between here and there in my life and career, but also in my awareness and my development. Perhaps it's a good place to be, or at least it feels like it is. There's a certain comfort in this liminality.

Or maybe this liminal space is just a resting place—on my way to my emergence as being for or against something. Having hard edges. Making decisions that define me. Is it my safe refuge where I am exempt from accountability, at least for the time being—a sort of excuse from pushing myself to know enough to be one place or the other? Or is it, rather, a natural place, from where I can adopt a neutral observer stance more comfortably, the kind of place many mature academics find themselves after their years of brash and opinionated outspokenness?

Gloria Anzaldua (1987) wrote that no one is exempt from contributing to oppression in limited contexts. As such, self-reflexivity and seeing through the eyes of others becomes essential to gaining a deeper understanding than can be achieved by staying within one's social milieu. I take great comfort in her writing, though I admit with humiliation that I was unaware of her work until I made the decision to come here last spring. Her writing and that of many other Latinx writers and thinkers give me direction and strength to be courageous enough to propel myself and my thinking forward in new ways, and to take risks, perhaps like I did with the woman at the concert. Their writing, and the writing of others we read as part of this learning cooperative, inspires me to think about how my work can be built around the important parts of my own identity—the white rootedness curling around for a place of stability and resolve while the green shoots soar.

Dialogue, Cultural Humility, and Growth

Participation in this learning co-op, and preparation of this *testimonio*, has helped me to more closely examine my own beliefs as an academic who is a cisgender, white, heterosexual female of northern European heritage as well as a first-generation college graduate. Cultural humility is

a lifelong process of developmental self-reflection and self-critique, which are important to social work practice, and I am grateful for all the opportunities I have had to step back professionally and better understand my own assumptions, values, and biases. This co-op has given me the time and space to both develop and reflect on who I am in my new context, to grow more culturally humble. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009) writes:

Learning happens best when we allow ourselves to be fully absorbed, to participate, to make mistakes. This kind of openness requires humility, the willingness to take risks, the capacity to look foolish, and, if we are lucky, a lightness of style and a well-developed sense of humor. (p. 158)

I am thankful for the commitment my university is making to help us all as academics in an HSI engage in situating ourselves more meaningfully in this community.

I have gained both vision and voice through my participation in this learning co-op. Through sharing stories, illuminating our values, and asking, always, both what meaning they serve and what future framework they may construct for our institution as an HSI, I have gained some new lenses. Just as I learned after the eye doctor prescribed my first pair of glasses recently, it's not that I couldn't see before. It's that now, when I put on my new glasses, everything in my gaze becomes that much sharper, with harder and clearer outlines and vivid color. I had always seen racism, microaggressions, and the impact of white supremacy. I had even begun to understand my own whiteness. But now, through my learning in this co-op, my seeing each has become sharper, their effects more clear, the reality of it all more indelible.

As my improved vision propels new demands for immediacy, I have found my voice growing stronger and my messages more urgent. The presence of supportive colleagues who have pushed me to express who I am in this community, who hold me accountable, and who provide both the canvas on which to express and the palette from which to choose how best to use our own colors—these have been priceless foundational elements to growing my capacity to have a more meaningful voice here in my academic community and beyond. I am now more confident in sharing my perspective in classroom teaching, discussions, and faculty meetings. I find I have a stronger appetite for experiences that push me to know myself better and to reflect upon that knowledge. I am eager to participate in action that helps me and others recognize the impact of white supremacy and begin to find ways to dismantle it structurally. I know that I have a long way to go, but with better vision and a clearer voice, I can negotiate the path forward more effectively.

I hope I can do what Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009) suggests is the constructive, integrative work that comes in our march toward new growth, where “we learn to use our voices, with new authority and courage, from the depths of our diaphragms, and unlearn the practiced silences and caution that kept us out of trouble in the past” (p. 227).

I have found the experience of participating in this learning cooperative incredibly valuable, and I want to thank my fellow explorers for their support of my journey toward being a better, more humble learner and citizen of the world and of this campus community. You provided a safe

place full of respect for me to express all my ill-communicated, half-formed ideas and recollections of experiences, make my awkward attempts to listen to the things inside my heart, and to find my place and my time to grow here in this last chapter of my academic story. I look forward to where my journey will lead.

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