Pedagogical Border Crossings: Testimonio y Reflexiones de una Mexicana Académica

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ABSTRACT
I am an assistant professor at New Mexico State University; however, the path to getting to this position has been about crossing borders, about learning in and from the borderlands. The borderlands that my body has had to cross, physically and figuratively, have left many heridas abiertas (open wounds) but have also provided me with knowledge. The pain and struggles are constant reminders of the collisions that happen between el primer y tercer mundo and how these experiences leave open wounds. The inextricable relationship between Mexico and the US is deepened as Mexicanos like me are forced to come to El Norte, whether by choice or brought by parents. At almost 11 years old, my life changed—I crossed, with the help of a coyote, into Los Angeles, California. In the US, xenophobic spaces and actions have influenced and shaped my epistemologies and my awareness/conocimiento about navigating anti-immigrant spaces. This conocimiento was affirmed by and informs my teaching and research. This acute awareness, facultad (Anzaldúa, 1987), and use of these teaching tools are what I term pedagogical border crossings.

KEYWORDS
Testimonio; borderlands; Mexicanos; pedagogical; migration; border crossings; undocumented; xenophobia

Una lucha de fronteras/A Struggle of Borders
Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another. Because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan

Crossing borders
As I sat there in a remote and small community in Chiapas, Mexico, watching the women wash by hand, feed their chickens, and cook in a makeshift wood-burning stove, I was constantly reminded of why my mother first migrated to the United States in 1985. She was escaping the palpable poverty and scarcity of jobs—not much has changed since she left Mexico. The daily chores my suegra1 and sisters-in-law perform are reminders of what it means to merely survive and of the reason why millions leave for El Norte each year. Over the winter break, we went to visit my in-laws and my husband’s extended family—he is the only one in the US, and just like my mother did for our entire family—they depend on the few dollars that he is able to send biweekly. He has been in the US for less than 10 years, unlike me; I have been here most of my life.
Mis primeras enseñanzas fueron en español.² Aprendí español primero y después inglés³—‘I’m still learning this foreign language. Tal vez esta fue una de las primeras fronteras que cruce—la del lenguaje.’⁴ Yo nací en Veracruz, México, pero por unos años viví en Puebla—de ahí fue que mi madre emigro a los Estados Unidos en 1985⁵—I was seven years old. Being the oldest daughter and granddaughter placed many responsibilities on me, which included caring for younger siblings and doing household chores. I had no childhood, no time to play with toys; I moved across the blurry border of being a child, then a caregiver to younger sisters. As soon as I started school in Mexico, I was eager to learn to read and write so I could communicate with my mother. My desire to continue communication with my mom, who was en El Norte, motivated and pushed me to be a fast learner. I wanted to write her letters—I wanted to stay in touch. Yo aprendi ingles when I came to this country. I arrived on September 4, 1989, along with my grandmother, an aunt, uncle, and an older brother. We crossed the physical border between Mexico and the United States, we came sin papeles, undocumented, sin derechos, without knowing how to live, how to be in El Norte. I did not know then that our crossing to this country was not “legal,” but I did begin to understand that I did not belong in many spaces—starting with school. In order to understand how I see my life experiences as various borderlands I have had to cross, I will share my testimonio. In this piece, I am sharing how these experiences have informed and transformed my teaching and research.

Currently, I am an assistant professor at New Mexico State University; however, the path to getting to this position has been about crossing borders, about learning in and from the borderlands. The borderlands that my body has had to cross, physically and figuratively, have left many heridas abiertas (open wounds), but have also provided me with knowledge to survive and thrive. The pain and struggles are constant reminders of the collisions that happen between el primer y tercer mundo⁶ and how these experiences leave open wounds (Anzaldúa, 1987). The inextricable relationship between Mexico and the United States is deepened as Mexicanos like me are forced to come to El Norte, whether by choice, brought by parents, or forced by poverty caused by neoliberal policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At almost 11 years old, my life changed—I crossed, with the help of a coyote, into Los Angeles, California. I knew we had come hiding from authorities, sin papeles. My experiences as an undocumented person and student, even through part of graduate school, have taught me that the crossing of borders prevails/continues—I experience marginality based on my phenotype, my accented English, gender, appearance, my “Mexicananess.”

Institutional borders

Macro/institutional change and systems of oppression with anti-immigrant laws such as Proposition 187 alerted me to the vulnerabilities of being undocumented in the educational system. In 1994–1995, I was about to become a sophomore in high school when Proposition 187 was passed in California—prohibiting undocumented people access to social services and public education. Having been in the US for only five years, I quickly learned that some people despised Mexicanos. Becoming aware of my vulnerable status was the beginning of my political consciousness and activism—we held a walkout in protest of the passing of Proposition 187. It was powerful. Xenophobic spaces and actions have influenced and shaped my epistemologies and my awareness/conocimiento about navigating anti-immigrant spaces. I have learned to name my realities; I have learned the power of bearing witness, through testimonio, about injustice, oppression, and inequities that undocumented people experience. At the micro level, through mentorship and serendipitous opportunities, this conocimiento was affirmed and informs my teaching and research. This acute awareness, facultad (Anzaldúa, 1987), and use of these tools are what I term pedagogical border

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²My first teachings were in Spanish.
³I first learned Spanish, then English.
⁴Perhaps this was one of the first borders I crossed: the language barrier.
⁵I was born in Veracruz but was raised in Puebla, Mexico, for a few years, and that is where my mother migrated from in 1985.
⁶First and Third World.
crossings. These familial, communal, and cultural knowledges made it possible for me to become a professor and to continually reflect upon what it means to be a Mexicana academic—one who has experienced theory in the flesh (Moraga, 2002).

**Border crossings in US schools: A testimonio**

This is a brief testimonio I am about to share. Testimonio is about lived experiences and serves as a basis from which to theorize (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). It connects personal oppression to domination by those in power in society and serves to “document silenced histories” (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 3). A unique and collective process, testimonio generates new understandings based on familiar and familial memories, lived experience (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Testimonio has the power to give our life experiences an authority not historically granted by systems of knowledge and power (Flores Carmona, 2014). Testimonio is a legitimate source of knowledge and truth. In the courses I teach, the testimonios we share are the outcome/product after doing deep reading and connecting to theories that speak about our realities and experiences in academia as women of color, Chicanas, Latinas, or Mexicanas in the US. I could share in length about the cruzando la frontera/border crossing experience. I could share about learning that I was a raced-classed being when I attended schools in West Los Angeles. I could write about having grown up too fast, about learning English and translating for years for my family, about understanding what it meant to not have papeles,7 about patriarchy, about mentorship, about longing to belong and not fitting in. Inevitably, I will write a bit about all of this, because it is all interconnected, it is all that has informed my mestiza consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987) and what has contributed to my pedagogical repertoire.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns ambivalence into something else (p. 79).

Elenes (2011) builds on Anzaldúa’s work and describes this constant negotiation of identities and our understanding of them as “a continuous process of border crossing” (p. 22). Because of this, many Chicana/Latina scholars have embraced the borderlands metaphor as a powerful expression of our Chicana/Latina experiences and our juggling of multiple, intersecting identities (Elenes, 2011). The juggling of contradicting cultures and the ambivalence were, in fact, manifested in my experiences in the US educational system.

When we arrived in the US, my mother had recently moved from her one-bedroom apartment to a three-bedroom, two-baths house with a big yard in South Central Los Angeles. As the oldest daughter-sister, I had grown accustomed to having responsibilities in the house. My mother worked for minimum wage in the garment district in order to maintain the home as a single mother. There were five of us children, our grandmother, an aunt, and an uncle. My younger sister and I were bused to a school in West Los Angeles for several years because the local elementary school was overenrolled. Our days were long, starting at 5:00 am and ending close to 4:00 pm—but our days were not longer than our mom’s long hours at two jobs. Because I attended a school in an affluent community west of the inner city, the elementary school we attended had many resources and we began to learn English right away. Once I learned basic conversational English, I was helping to translate documents, set up services for relatives, and even translating at parent-teacher conferences.

The stark raced and classed differences I encountered in West LA made us highly noticeable—we were poor, we were recent immigrants, we were marked. I experienced blatant discrimination when I started school in West LA. The teacher, Ms. Weiner, a blonde, tall woman, would sit all of us “new”

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7Not have legal status.
kids who didn’t speak English way in the back of the classroom. We worked on meaningless worksheets and would leave her classroom for about two hours each day to learn English from a teacher from China. All of us from other parts of the world were seen as embodying deficits and as not having any valuable prior knowledge, not culturally nor communally—this was a palpable and traumatic language border crossing experience. The class difference made matters worse; our clothes and shoes were not brand name and my sister and I shared clothes. Thankfully, my mother’s talent as a seamstress helped us not feel as inferior or less than.

My mother would often go shopping for material/fabric to makes us original, one-of-a-kind outfits late at night—the sound of her maquina de coser still rings nice memories of sacrifice and dignity. These garments were put together carefully, but our peers at school could still mark us as inferior and not belonging to their class status—the yellow bus dropping us off was the first marking. Migrating, making ends meet, stretching money as far as it could go, teaching me the value and tool of communicating with adults, learning to speak with teachers and to navigate the school system, making sure that I learned where we came from and to be proud, are all things my mother has done. When I was younger, I resented not having had a childhood like other children, but later in life and even now, I understand my mother’s “doing” and the lessons that spring from her practices and rituals in the everyday (Villenas, 2006). In fact, these pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal, 2001) are vital tools, essential knowledge that derives from a deep understanding that a child of immigration (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001) has to become equipped with instruments, knowledge of the home, in order to survive in this country. These sets of tools, of communal and familial knowledge, indeed helped me navigate educational spaces, as an undergraduate, as a graduate student and, currently, as a faculty member. These tools have also helped me relate to students in my classes—some have experienced similar circumstances, have faced similar discrimination, and have demonstrated resiliency and strength as they navigate higher education. Together, we are able to draw from our pedagogies of the home and put those tools into practice. In fact, this is how we mend the mind, body, spirit split that academia can reproduce, and this practice allows us to center our epistemologies and testimonios as legitimate sources of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012).

**Going to college: Cecilia and the Nasatirs**

Cecilia Burciaga used to remind me, “When I first met you in my office you hardly smiled, you stood there with your black nail polish and shorts—no sentias el frio.” I did learn to feel “el frio” in academia, but also the immense difference that mentorship can make in someone’s life. When I arrived in Los Angeles, overcrowded schools in the inner city forced hundreds of students to get bused west of South Central into more affluent communities. I learned English quickly and became noticed by teachers as a student with “potential.”

When I was in eighth grade, I was fortunate enough to be selected to be part of a mentoring program in Los Angeles and I was matched with Dee, a woman from west of the inner city. Dee and Michael, the Nasatirs, took me in as part of their life and family. By high school, they had known of my situation for a few years and had tried many ways to find a solution to my unjust situation. Adoption, a student visa, and private colleges were just a few of the solutions we considered, since the DREAM Act did not exist as an option at the time. The Nasatirs helped me overcome many of the financial and social barriers I faced in the educational system. As a sophomore at Thomas Jefferson High School, I was encouraged by my English teacher to begin preparing for college—taking advanced placement courses and talking to school counselors about college. In the eleventh

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8May she rest in peace.

9You did not feel the cold weather.

10The legislative Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act is a process for undocumented immigrants in the US to be granted conditional residency, work permits, and in-state tuition for students upon meeting certain qualifications.
grade, while still in the mentoring program, I remember going to career day and listening to a speech delivered by beloved Chicana scholar and administrator, Cecilia Burciaga:

While walking along the beach, a young man saw a beautiful strong Chicana in the distance leaning down, picking something up and throwing it into the ocean.... The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back in, thousands will die. When questioned about the difference that she could possibly make when thousands of starfish laid stranded before her on the shore... the fierce Chicana leader picked up another starfish and replied with a gentle smile: “It made a difference to that one.”

I was deeply moved and inspired by Cecilia’s speech and I felt even more motivated to pursue higher education. While the Nasatirs have been my mentors in life and part of my family, Cecilia Burciaga guided me through academia and continued to support my academic endeavors and to inspire me to live life with courage and passion—to do work that matters—for my family, my community, and me.

My mentor and her husband knew the circumstances I faced at home, my mother’s motivation, and my desire to continue learning—all this propelled me to apply to universities in California. I was first in my family to graduate from high school and Dee and Michael were able to pay for five years of out-of-state international student tuition, room and board for me. When the time came to fill out college applications, I simply wrote down the first nine digits that came to mind for a social security number, as I did not know what else to do. I did not hear from any of the six campuses I applied to but, to be quite honest, I was not disappointed. I am sure that, once admissions realized my number did not seem legitimate, my file was placed as a non-resident, international student, or as undocumented, in the trash. I wasn’t sure what college was about and I feared what it could be—this was yet another border crossing. Dee and Mike contacted Cecilia and, soon after, I was admitted to California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). I am sure that Cecilia explained my situation to the admissions office at CSUMB and they understood that we would pay the high tuition rates.

Reflections: Lessons learned

My mother has taught me lessons of sobrevivencia (survival) through her silence, el misterio (the mystery), and her everyday actions and her “doing” (Villenas, 2006). While my story is unique to my experiences, it is a collective testimonio of many immigrant children (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). Indeed, many children of immigration have learned to “mediate the new culture for their family,” even with limited knowledge of English (Jones & Trickett, 2005; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). In many ways, my migration story and what I have experienced in educational spaces demonstrate how deeply connected I am to my research and to how I teach—it all comes from the bodily experiences—it is about learning where we come from and valuing the sacrifices all border crossers make and what we learn from these crossings as survival knowledge.

In my classes, whether teaching a course on Testimonio Methodology, Critical Multicultural Education, or Critical Race Theory in Education, I embrace a “sentipensante pedagogy” (Rendón, 2009). “Sentipensante pedagogy is integrative in the sense that it focuses on wholeness and nonduality. A key ontological principle of sentipensante pedagogy is that it asks instructors to work with individuals as whole human beings—intellectual, social, emotional, and spiritual” (Rendón, 2009, pp. 134–135). Through testimonio pedagogy, for example, a sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogical approach is about being able to grapple with and handle the multiple truths students bring into our courses, all inextricably connected to their positionalities, their silences, their testimonios, their realities as raced, classed, gendered beings. Sentipensante pedagogy, according to Rendón (2009), “represents a teaching and learning approach based on wholeness, harmony, social justice, and liberation” (p. 132). My testimonio pedagogy, then, allows me, as the teacher, to talk with students and move toward an understanding of our identities, our fragmented lives, and the ways that we constantly negotiate this bodily fragmentation in the borderlands. We listen, connect, engage, and

\[1^1\]I have modified the story to reflect the difference Cecilia made for me. She passed on March 25, 2013.
support one another by sharing our testimonios of pain, struggle, survival, trauma, and resistance—and how these lived experiences inform our epistemology and re/construction of knowledge in the borderlands (Flores Carmona & Malena Luciano, 2014). These intricate and messy teaching practices and the lessons learned also show how the borders I have crossed are full of possibilities to further understand educación/education in the borderlands and the students I work with.

I continue to think about the ways institutional/macro/systemic acts and change have influenced my life, but also how the experiences at the micro level have shaped my epistemologies and pedagogies. My mother’s border crossing in 1985 and being left behind and learning to read and write as a matter of urgency, then crossing into the US as an undocumented person, afforded me with resiliency and courage. Being bused to a more affluent school showed the segregated schooling and that learning a new language was a necessary tool to understand the systems of oppression that are in place in educational settings. When I came to the United States, I knew that we had come hiding from the authorities, but I did not know or understand exactly what it meant to be undocumented until I asked—until I faced discrimination and exclusion. I learned that I needed a social security number to apply to college. Simultaneously, the passage of Proposition 187 in California made us fully aware of the rights we lacked because of our status. It was this initiative that became the catalyst in the development of my relationship with my mentor and her family. They realized the precariousness of my situation and began to think of alternative ways of helping me.

Meaningful mentorship and genuine care from teachers and professors have taught me that, as an educator, I need to approach teaching and learning in a holistic manner. Each student brings their lived realities, their sets of navigational tools learned at home and in their communities. I now understand these knowledges as assets. I also recognize that I embody some social identities that grant me access, privilege, and resources—I now speak English, I am a naturalized US citizen, I have degrees, and my socioeconomic status has changed. I have fostered social networks and, through my research and scholarship, I can share my lived experiences, my knowledge. At the same time, navigating and negotiating through xenophobic spaces and actions have influenced and shaped my epistemologies and my awareness/conocimiento about anti-immigrant spaces. This conocimiento affirms, informs, and transforms my teaching and research and the praxis of this acute awareness provides me with pedagogical border crossing tools in the classroom and in life.

References


