5-2017

Empowering the Self, the Researcher, and the Leader: A Testimonio of a Latina in Higher Education

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EMPOWERING THE SELF, THE RESEARCHER, AND THE LEADER:

A *TESTIMONIO* OF A LATINA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Graduate College of
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2017

Major Subject: Educational Leadership

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May 2017

ABSTRACT

Cardoza, Daria Lisa, Empowering the Self, the Researcher, and the Leader: A Testimonio of a Latina in Higher Education, Doctor of Education (Ed. D.), May, 2017, 152 pp., references, 107 titles.

This dissertation, my *testimonio,* is a critical self-reflection about my experiences as a Latina in higher education. I write my story with an awareness, a critical consciousness, of who I am as an individual in the shared spaces of my life—as a daughter, a sister, a mother, a student, a researcher, a teacher, a learner, a partner, a lover, a leader, and a work in progress—and an acute desire to be an agent of change. Through my educational journey, I have been able to honor my epistemological, *mestiza* consciousness, challenge how I view the world, my ontological framework, and understand how my ethics and values shape my work, my axiological influences. I utilize Wilson's (2008) Indigenous research paradigm that respects and values relationships and relational accountability.

I share my personal, academic, and professional story through autoethnographic *testimonio* as a research method to challenge the master narrative about socioeconomically poor, rural students, teen parents, and Latina leaders in higher education. Through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana/Latina/Mexicana feminist theories, provides for me the theoretical, epistemological, axiological and methodological congruency that permeates who I want to be as an individual, a researcher, and a leader in higher education.

My dissertation is organized in both a traditional and non-traditional approach, much how I have lived my life—the chapters represent a standard structure while the content takes on a more organic format. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction and includes a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and research questions; Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature, theories, and frameworks that have influenced my life and by extension, my research and my dissertation; and Chapter 3 describes the methodology utilized and the reason why it was selected. Chapters 4 and 5 serve as the data findings and conclusion, respectively.

My *testimonio* must be shared not only within academia, but with families that value education and the abundance of rewards that are brought about by that goal.

DEDICATION

I dedicate my dissertation to my boys and my entire *familia*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am forever indebted to my *familia*: my boys, Hilario Gabriel and Diego Maximiano, who are my inspiration and my daily reminders of my life's service; my parents, Osvaldo and Alicia, for their unconditional love and support in all of my endeavors; my sisters, Connie, Karina, Sara, Selina, and Rebecca, and their families for their love, laughter, and patience.

To my *abuelos y abuelas, tias* y *tios* for every bit of their love, I would not be the same person I am today without everything I learned from you about what it means to be *familia.*

I owe much gratitude to my chair, my longtime teacher, mentor, friend, and cultural leader, Dr. Francisco Guajardo, as well as to my entire committee: Dr. Martha Cantú, Dr. Velma Menchaca, and Dr. Miguel de los Santos. Their firm support of my research was unparalleled.

To all of my friends and colleagues for their gentle reminders, constant check-ins, and affirming words as I traversed this path through the doctoral program and the dissertation – especially Ernesto, Adriana, with whom I am honored to cross this literal and figurative stage; Olga, José, Rich, and Cely, who came before me and truly served as my guides.

To my work boss, my true mentor, a gringo with a Mexican heart – thank you for always challenging me to lead with the heart, believing in me to be your sidekick, and trusting my experience and my judgment with major decisions.

To Rob, for loving and accepting all of me.

To everyone whose paths have crossed mine, for sharing a little about life, challenging me when necessary, and teaching me lessons I didn't know I needed to learn.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I was introduced to a group of high school students to give remarks on the importance of going to college, how to prepare for it, and what to expect. I never thought I would find a job where I was able to share about my college experience, much less get paid for helping students find their own path into higher education. Yet, here I was, fresh out of college, with a Master's degree in hand, trying to relay the importance of pursuing a higher education and how the newly established Valley Outreach Center at the University of Texas-Pan American was going to assist by providing tools, training, and expertise in college application, financial aid, and other college-preparedness processes. The students were all from a local rural high school, one very similar to the one from where I graduated, and I had been asked to share with them tips for going to college. I opened my speech by sharing a story with the students, one that I thought would get them thinking about their decisions and their future:

> *I want to share the story of a young girl, much like many young ladies in the audience here—she is Hispanic; she grew up in a small, rural community; she came from a large family; a large family who statistically lived in poverty…and she attended public schools in one of the poorest areas in the nation. At the young age of 16, before graduating from high school, this young girl gets pregnant and is married the following year, at 17.*

I pause. I know many students in the audience can relate. They probably know a friend or relative whose story I could be telling.

> *Now, let me now tell another young girl's story. This young girl is also Hispanic, also comes from a large family who lives in poverty and attended the same school as the first*

young girl. She, however, worked hard, studied, and graduated as the valedictorian of her class.

I ask the students to guess what the future holds for the two young girls – is there a difference? Hands go up as the eager participants draw from stereotypes and misinformation to surmise that the first girl likely does not attend college, lives at home, and ends up on food stamps or government welfare. The second girl, they predict, probably receives grants and scholarships to attend a university and does well. Hoping that the educators in the room are also listening, I continue:

Comparing these stories, we, as educators, try to understand the difference between the two girls; we try to make sense of the world; we try to understand their different realities by looking at data—what went wrong, so to speak, and what went right? Was it family, environment, social conditions, self-motivation, or external influences? And when we dig a little deeper and listen to people's stories, we may be surprised.

In this case, actually, it was nothing AND it was everything. The two young ladies are actually the same person, and the story is true, both in terms of circumstances and of outcome. This is my story. This is my narrative.

I am the "smart" student who graduated at 17, as the youngest of my peers, having been passed up a grade in school. Yet, I am also the so-called "dumb" girl who got pregnant at 16. I am the "smart" student who gave the valedictory address for the Edcouch-Elsa graduating class of 1998; yet, I am that "dumb" girl who walked across the stage to accept my diploma almost 5 months pregnant. I am the "smart" student who got accepted to Stanford. Yet, if you didn't take the time to get to know me, you might assume, I am the "dumb" teen mom who made poor choices.

When I begin to think about how I could have been a statistic, and I try to understand what helped me be successful, I realize that there are many reasons—family, community, expectations, work ethic, determination, and resiliency.

I proceed to share with the students the rest of my story – how I worked hard to successfully complete two degrees from Stanford in five years and how important it was for me to be back home, doing what I could to help more students go to college because I believe in them and their abilities. I share this story because it is the impetus to my dissertation.

I open my dissertation with an awareness, a critical consciousness, of who I am as an individual in the shared spaces of my life—as a daughter, a sister, a mother, a student, a researcher, a teacher, a learner, a partner, a lover, a leader, and a work in progress—and an acute desire to be an agent of change, in accordance with the Community Learning Exchange (CLE) theory of change (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). In the spirit of an Indigenous research methodology and creating a relationship with the reader (Wilson, 2008) and in recognition of the CLE *way of life* that celebrates "the power of place and the wisdom of people" (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 3), I choose to share my story, my journey, and my experiences about how I got to where I am and the relationships that have shaped who I am. Doing so makes me vulnerable, but I value the process and the power of the *testimonio* and the CLE theory of change, "formative work focused on building the self, building relationships, and building trust with each other" (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 18). My dissertation is organized in both a traditional and non-traditional approach, much how I have lived my life—the chapters represent a standard structure while the content takes on a more organic format. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction and includes a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and research questions; Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature, theories, and frameworks that have influenced my life and by extension, my research and my dissertation; and Chapter 3 describes the methodology utilized and the reason why it was selected. Chapters 4 and 5 serve as the data findings and conclusion, respectively. I share my personal, academic, and professional story through *testimonio* because it aligns with my epistemological, ontological, axiological, and methodological consciousness or as Anzaldúa (2007) aptly defines, my *mestiza* consciousness: "though…a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm" (p. 80).

My academic journey in higher education begins during the summer after my high school graduation. I vividly recall my first experience taking a college-level English course at the local university and being told by my professor to never use the word "I" in our writing and research compositions. I was 17 years old, and as I sat in a college classroom, I wondered if I would ever be able to achieve the goal of attaining a college degree, surprised to learn that in order to do so, I would have to learn to remove myself and my voice from my work. If we did include the word "I" in our writing, we would receive a crippling "F" as our grade. While the reasoning behind my professor's instructions were unclear at the time, what is clear to me now, after many years of studying and living research and pedagogy, is that her approach was my introduction to the traditional, positivistic scientific method of research, one Delgado Bernal (2002) refers to as a dominant, Eurocentric approach to research and writing, one devoid of the human experience. Smith (1999) reminds us that research, writing, and the "pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices" (p. 2), many which value the individual over the collective, and quantitative, empirical evidence over qualitative research.

Being an obedient student, I did not have the tools to question the directive at the time, so I spent much of my early undergraduate career learning how to remove myself, my voice, and my experiences from my writings because I was taught that was the most accepted method of producing research. I was intent on learning and utilizing an "unbiased" approach for my assignments, and that followed me into my Master's degree program as I chose to conduct a quantitative study on transfer students for my thesis. Like many other young budding researchers, I thought by removing my voice and attempting to be objective rather than subjective, I was conducting true, valid research by utilizing empirical methods. Wall (2006) shared a similar sentiment when she wrote, "I have been socialized to believe that 'real' science

is quantitative, experimental, and understood by only a select and elite few (my earlier conception being that I might never become competent in such a difficult field)" (p. 2). I, too, felt like achieving an expert status in any field (that is, attaining the highest terminal degree, a doctorate) would require years of what I envisioned of isolation, experimentation, and detachment from life, feeling, emotion, and spirituality. It felt too far removed an achievement to attain. As I sat in this English class during my most formidable years, I was not sure what was in store for me in the world of higher education since I felt an immediate disconnect. Wilson (2008) provides context to what I was encountering: "the notion that empirical evidence is sounder than cultural knowledge permeates Western thought but alienates many Indigenous scholars" (p. 58). Indeed, alienation was definitely what I experienced, as my entire existence had been based in relationship with others – amongst family, with people, and in community. Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello (2016) describe community as "a process as much as it is a physical, tangible place…a state of mind…and a way of life" (p. 5). This was the norm for a small-town girl growing up in South Texas.

While I vaguely remember being given the opportunity to explore my voice during some of my undergraduate classes, the courses of which I have the fondest and most distinct memories are those that allowed me to express myself as an individual and relate my personal experiences to my academic life. It was also in these classes where the literature spoke to me. Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to this type of teaching as culturally-relevant pedagogy which ties culture to teaching, where students are successful in their academic experience because they are able to develop a critical consciousness while maintaining their cultural ties in an effort to challenge the status quo. Upon reflection, most courses which brought me to life entailed cultural, ethnic topics, valuing my experiences, my struggles, and my triumphs in relation to my educational

pursuits, in sharp contrast to the way I began my educational journey. Even as I conduct research now, I am sometimes moved physically and emotionally, as I have caught myself smiling, laughing, or nodding in agreement with some of the experiences relayed in the articles I read; I have also been moved to tears by some of the testaments that have touched my heart. In either situation, I revel in my ability to feel like a whole person, as Delgado Bernal (2002) relates, acknowledging the link between my personal life and my educational and career pursuits and appreciating my culture and my heritage. In some of my college classes, I felt like I was able to provide a different perspective regarding some of the topics we were discussing because of my experience, my family, and my value system (Wilson, 2008), even if I did not always have the agency I needed to speak up in class. Building off of Freire's (1997) explanation of critical consciousness, Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter (2016) proffer critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action as pertinent components of critical consciousness. Still, there was something foreign about submitting an academic paper containing experiences of my personal life and perspective, especially after having been originally trained in a positivist frame of mind (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Like many who have come before me and experienced rejection, it felt like my work would be deemed invalid in the stringent world of academia (Delgado Bernal, 2002; González, 2001; Smith, 1999; Wall, 2006).

It took me well deep into my doctoral work and an exposure to a different set of robust, published body of theories, perspectives, and paradigms to be able to appreciate a different type of research and the exploration of my voice in an academic setting. I learned to question the role of the researcher in traditional research, the bias with which I had lived regarding valid research, and what I would gain from completing doctoral work. I also came to realize how unique my undergraduate educational situation was, how my personal testimony could inspire others in

higher education, and how critical my leadership position was at an institution of higher education. Until this point, while I had been given opportunities to define myself as an individual, I had never taken advantage of the opportunity to explore what kind of leader I wanted to become, and more importantly, I had never felt complete in the various roles that I played. Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Militello (2016) construed that the three ecologies of knowing—the self, the organization, and the community—are not isolated but "the self is the basis of the world of knowing" (p. 28). Hence, my life's journey begins with my individual, personal experience and getting to know myself in order to impact my organizations and my community.

Around the same time period as I was beginning my dissertation, I faced a deep introspection and a need to regain a sense of who "I" was because for so long, I shrouded behind the important societal roles of a budding professional, a tireless student, and an overwhelmed mom. Since a young age, I found enjoyment in my involvement in academic, athletic, and extracurricular activities, and I prided myself on my ability to "do it all." As a high school student, I immersed myself in my community and managed to balance my studies, extracurricular activities, church, and family, and even fun, all while maintaining exemplary grades. All of my hard work culminated with me graduating as the valedictorian of the Edcouch-Elsa High School Class of 1998. However, unbeknownst to many in the crowd that day and to my parents in particular, I recited my prepared valedictory address and anxiously crossed the stage to accept my diploma nearly five months pregnant. I hid my pregnancy for so long that I almost convinced my naïve self I was not pregnant, as I did not want to face the consequences. It was not until after graduation that reality finally sunk in, and I had to admit to my family my situation. I had accepted my admission to Stanford University and was

heartbroken to realize I would likely have to give up my acceptance offer. My parents encouraged me to stay at home and attend the local university so they could help me raise my son. I was mortified, for my dreams of leaving this small town in which I grew up, expanding my worldview, and moving up in the world to attend a top-tier college were slipping away, but deep down, it felt like the right thing to do.

After discussing my options with a few close family members and friends, I was devastated, but committed to giving up my dreams of attending Stanford University, a school with which I had fallen in love when I was invited to visit during Admit Weekend, the spring after I received my acceptance. The University had even paid for my trip, as I would learn as an enticement to get low-income students familiar and acquainted with campus. One of my mentors, who attended Stanford himself and taught at my high school, however, encouraged me to call the school and inquire about the possibility to defer my enrollment for a year. I had no idea what "deferred enrollment" meant, but I later learned that a few students take a year off after high school to explore the world—backpacking trips to Latin America, excursions to Europe, missions to third-world countries. At least, I was told, that is what some traditionally more privileged Stanford students did when they deferred a year. I was humbled and indebted to the University when they agreed to defer my enrollment and grant me the opportunity to raise my son. A year later, I made my second trek to California. This time, I was not just a recent high school graduate, as most students beginning their undergraduate careers are; I was a new college student, a new mom, and a new wife.

When I left to study at Stanford, I left with the mindset that I wanted to experience something different, educationally but also culturally. I wanted to get away from my immersion in the Mexican American culture of South Texas and be exposed and enlightened by other

cultures, an experience that Stanford readily provided. I had, after all, been raised in a community that was over 90% Hispanic and growing. However, by my junior year in college, I realized that I yearned for a sense of belonging, a belonging not unlike what I felt when I lived back home in rural South Texas, a belonging that Block (2008) defined as membership in and ownership of a community. Fortunately, Stanford was also able to provide that sense of belonging for me. The ownership of community was a bit more challenging. As a "non-traditional student" at Stanford, as we were labeled, I found it difficult to fit in, but Stanford allowed me and the very few others with similar circumstances (either married or also with a child) to establish a student organization and create our own community; in elite-college fashion, Stanford made available the resources to achieve our goals. Most importantly, the organization helped us to encourage each other during stressful times, whether educational, financial, or personal. Furthermore, the Chicano/Latino community at Stanford embraced me when I finally was able to come to terms with my identity and realize how proud I was to be a Mexican American or Chicana/Latina student and joined the campus organization. In defining who I was and to which community I belonged, I had come full circle. Circles have become symbolic for me in my journey, as Wilson (2008) describes as an Indigenous way of thinking.

Throughout the course of my doctoral program, I have been afforded the opportunity to reimagine my political self (Guajardo, Guajardo, Valadez, & Oliver, 2012)—personally, academically, and professionally. And much like one tenet of the research spectrum tells us that the personal cannot be separated from work and school (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010), so I experienced it in real life—through some fortunate and some unfortunate situations. I used to think I was part superhuman—super employee, super student, and super mom, in that particular priority order at the time. Even though I was always "too busy" to have much fun with

the kids (a "bad" mom, always stuck in front of a computer, as I had been told repeatedly by their father), I tried to be there for them when they needed me most and hoped they would learn by the example I was setting. I managed to work diligently to keep my worlds separate, and so who I was at home was different than who I was at work and who I was as a student. However, like many situations in life, my life spectrums converged and helped solidify my belief that the individual, the student, and the professional are all one soul (Wilson, 2008). Being able to reflect critically on my experiences as a Latina in higher education (Chávez, 2012) and in the many roles that I played also helped solidify my decision to conduct this dissertation as a *testimonio* (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). Three defining moments in my personal, academic, and professional life contributed to this decision.

Personally, a defining moment came as I was going through a tumultuous divorce. My tongue-in-cheek jokes of being a "bad parent" were coming back to haunt me, as my (soon to be ex) husband tried to make a case for sole custody of our two boys given that I was too busy at work and at school to be a good mother to them. I felt, as a female, that I was being held to a different standard than I would have been as a hard-working father. The fact that I worked extremely hard to an exemplar employee was being used against me. We ended up coming to terms through a settlement, but I was scarred for life; my motherhood had been questioned. I could not help but believe that my husband expected a more traditional Mexican wife, a role his own mother played phenomenally.

The following summer, I was afforded the opportunity to take part in a Community Learning Exchange (CLE) at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa as part of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development team. I was even more fortunate to be able to experience the trip of a lifetime with my son, Gabriel, who was now a high school sophomore. The

experience proved to be life-changing, as many CLEs are. Together, we were invited to "go to [our] source, to go to that place that is the pool of knowledge that defines "how" we walk, learn, and lie in this world" (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. xi). We were challenged to get to know ourselves better by realizing our histories, honoring our ancestors, and thinking twice about our futures. With Gabriel by my side, the once tiny baby nestled in my womb as I nervously crossed both a literal and figurative stage in my life—my high school graduation—I took a deep, hard look at my life and my priorities, reflected upon my decisions, and decided to make some significant changes, personally, academically, and professionally.

Academically, a definitive moment occurred in a Community Leadership course in which I enrolled as part of my doctoral coursework requirements. Three distinct doctoral classes came together to put legs to the concept of our institution being an engaged university. While numerous classes at the University already participated in community-based concepts through service-learning projects, community-based curriculum, and collaborations with community non-profits, this class would take me back to my hometown of Edcouch-Elsa to participate in a research project, in part through the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development. The class would also give me an opportunity to implement the work that I learned to appreciate at the CLE. The goal of the Community Leadership course was to engage in an ethnographic study of the communities of Edcouch and Elsa, understanding their desires, challenges, and hopes and dreams, along with proposing policy recommendations to the new school board. What drew me to this project was not only the collaborative, collective, and innovative aspect it offered, but it also gave me an excuse to return "home" and conduct research in a community that had provided so much for me as a young girl. Given that my work in higher education had been driven by both my personal experiences and my professional ambitions, I was excited that I would be

combining my roles as a doctoral student, as a university administrator, and as a proud graduate of the district. I felt my worlds were coming together nicely, in a circular way.

As a teenager, I was first introduced to the teachings of Dr. Francisco Guajardo, founder of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004), in his history class at Edcouch-Elsa High School. Consistent with the pedagogy evoked through Asset-Based Community Development (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003), the political imagination (Guajardo, Guajardo, Valadez, & Oliver, 2012) and critical pedagogy, participatory action research, and service learning (Calderón, 2004), the Llano Grande Center was founded as a vehicle for empowering youth from the Delta Area (which includes the cities of Edcouch, Elsa, La Villa, and Monte Alto), a rural region in deep South Texas with a rich, agricultural history that lost its economic fervor in the freezes of early 1949 and 1951. What started as a project in the classroom at the Edcouch-Elsa High School became an established non-profit organization, focused on "work that included community history, and people's stories" (Guajardo, Guajardo, & Casaperalta, 2008, p. 6). The Center "operates on the understanding that when students learn their own reality through a process of critical self-reflection, they can use that realization as a source of strength and as an advantage to gain access to higher education" (Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, & Militello, 2016, p. 17). The original focus of the Center related primarily to college attainment and community work, teaching students through a culturally-relevant pedagogy to value the history of the region, the wisdom of the elders, and the assets of the people in the community. At the epicenter of the work was the power of the story (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010), providing tools for students to interview community elders to learn more about the history of the area in an effort to understand the issues and find innovative, cross-generational solutions. Story and storytelling became a vital conduit for the work of the Center, as did

Community Learning Exchanges and gracious space *platicas* (Ruder, 2010; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). These methods were used widely during the CLE experience, and I had numerous opportunities to learn from and realize their value.

I would not truly appreciate what I learned through the pedagogical practices utilized at the Center until I realized that in part, my critical thinking skills and asset-based approaches to learning evoked through the Center is what aided me in the opportunity to study and succeed at a prestigious institution and guided my work. Even then, I would not fully comprehend my role as a practitioner until I was able to learn from and build upon these research foundations. I now understand and believe wholeheartedly in the work that the Llano Grande Center performs in building community, valuing individuals, and helping tell the counter-narrative, and through my experiences, I have learned to appreciate, implement, and share these practices. Taking the Community Leadership doctoral course brought me back to my roots—again, in full circle.

Professionally, I feel like am currently living in my defining moment. I had been serving as the chief of staff to the president, Robert S. Nelsen, at The University of Texas-Pan American for four years when our professional careers were sadly forever changed. Two summers into my career, President Nelsen asked me to take on the role of governmental relations for the institution. We had a person assigned to the position for only 30 percent of his job, and given the Texas legislative session we were about to face, the President wanted someone who could devote more time to policy issues. Merely months after I accepted, we learned of an entirely different fate for our institution. That December, the University of Texas System Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa announced that the UT System would offer a bill during the 83rd legislative session to effectively abolish the University of Texas-Pan American and our sister border institution, the

University of Texas at Brownsville, and establish a new university to span the four-county region—the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). By establishing a new university, we would have access to the Permanent University Fund (PUF), an abundant wealth fund that drew monies from Texas oil rights revenue. Furthermore, a medical school would be established to serve the region. All these efforts would rely on a successful campaign to have the Texas Legislature approve the creation of a new university.

After months of conversations and negotiations and through the tireless efforts of many, Senate Bill 24, which created the new university and established a medical school, passed both chambers unanimously. The wheels were set in motion quickly, and there was much work to be done. Unfortunately, Robert Nelsen had effectively worked himself out of a job, as he was not selected to become the founding president of UTRGV, which also left the future of my career in limbo. I was fortunate to have established myself at the University that I was selected to serve as the Associate Vice President of Governmental Relations, but I realized early on that this role was not a career path for me. When the opportunity arose to rejoin Robert Nelsen, who had been chosen to serve as the next president of California State University, Sacramento, I applied for the position of Chief of Staff. I figured I needed a change and again, a chance to do something for myself. I find myself here today in northern California, now with my younger son, Diego, having circled back to a place that helped define myself as a student.

My divorce, my CLE experience, my participation in the Community Leadership course, and my career trajectory have been pivotal instances where my personal, cultural, professional, academic, and political selves converged and have left me critically examining my role as a student and a leader (Pérez Huber, 2009). Conversely, my upbringing, my family values, and my relational experiences have helped me gain a better understanding of what Wilson (2008)

referred to as research as ceremony and how I would like to conduct my life's research work. Wilson (2008) iterated "[r]esearch by and for Indigenous people is a ceremony that brings relationship together," (p. 8) where relationality and relational accountability serve as the overarching concepts for the Indigenous research paradigm. Relationships have and will always be at the core of our human existence. It is these relationships that have carried me through my educational and life pursuits, relationships which I appreciate wholeheartedly and which serve their purpose in making me whole. In acknowledging and valuing relationships, it follows that questioning and analyzing these relationships via an instrument for learning, growth, and leadership is the logical next step, for "if research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (Wilson, 2008, p. 135).

I begin my dissertation by openly sharing my state of mind, as a way to allow you, the reader, to gain a better understanding of who I am, what my values are as an individual, a student, and a practitioner, and more importantly, in honor of Indigenous research methods and the CLE theory of change, where relationality and relational accountability are of utmost criticality. In reflecting on the various roles I play, as a parent of two future college students of color, as a student in an educational leadership doctoral program, and as a leader in higher education, I have come to realize the importance of reflecting on and sharing my situation, my challenges, my resiliency, and my successes in the realm of higher education (González, 2010) through the support of many others. I am living proof that a rural Latina faced with a challenging situation can defy the stereotype and statistics and successfully graduate from a prominent, private university, with an acute sense of self and a deep obligation to pay it forward to a community that provided so much (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016; Rendón, 1992). I am not alone nor did I do it alone. This epistemological acknowledgement, along with

Wilson's (2008) Indigenous ceremonial research methods, captures the reason why I write my dissertation.

Statement of the Problem

Our lives are defined by people, relationships, moments, occasions, situations, and stories that inform us of our history, our culture, and our values. Research is about "unanswered questions but also reveals our unquestioned answers" (Wilson, 2008, p. 6). Too many researchers and educational leaders are not given the opportunity to reflect critically on these defining moments nor are they provided the space to share their personal stories. Sharing of personal stories invites a certain vulnerability, but also offers an opportunity for open and honest dialogue, trustful relationships, and rich and thoughtful meaning-making (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). These notions are vital for an indigenous research methodology approach (Wilson, 2008) and in the spirit of the Community Learning Exchange theory of change (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016).

Furthermore, there is a need for women, particularly Chicanas/Latinas, to be comfortable in sharing their story of triumph, sacrifice, and success in the educational and professional fields of higher education and for the field of educational research and academia to value alternative research methods as rigorous research (Turner & Thompson, 1993). For too long, students have been taught that research should be the study of the "other" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), particularly when delving into qualitative methods, which provide for some subjectivity in their practices. There remains a need to hear different voices in the field regarding identity formation, including the role that the community and relationships play in shaping individuals, and support others in their quest for leadership roles (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). This research is important for future students and leaders in the field.

Purpose of the Study

While I am still defining myself as a leader, I feel obligated to share my story and the journey of who I am as an individual, a student, a researcher, and as a Latina in higher education (Rendón, 1992). I initially struggled to determine the purpose of this dissertation—whether it was significant enough to add to the research body of literature (Calabrese, 2006) or whether this dissertation was actually a tool for critical self-reflection as a leader in order to impact change in my organization and community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). I decided that it would be both. The purpose of this dissertation is to do what all doctoral candidates aspire to do—study a topic of interest, delve deep into the body of literature on this topic, and become an "expert" at the topic at hand. In a traditional way, it is precisely intended to add to the body of literature on Latina women in leadership positions in higher education, as well as serve as a catalyst for Latina women who have faced obstacles in their life, whatever they may be, who have the determination and resolve to be resilient, and who seek to gain knowledge from a leader in higher education.

In addition, this research will add to the paucity of research that exists on Chicana/Latina women in leadership roles, specifically in higher education (Pérez Huber, 2009; Rendón, 1992; Turner & Thompson, 1993; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). The purpose of this dissertation is very personal for me, and in a nontraditional sense, it is meant to help me continue to find my voice as a Chicana/Latina student, an academic, and a leader in higher education. It has provided me the opportunity to be thoughtful and critical of myself, my history, my story, and my journey, with the self being one of the prime ecologies of knowing (Guajardo, et al., 2016) in order to become an agent of change and have a positive impact on my organization and my community.

Research Questions

It was not long ago that qualitative research was not readily accepted as a legitimate research method (Creswell, 2007). In the last 15 years that I have been involved in research in higher education, I have noted a considerable change in methodology, practice, and even publications on research methods. In qualitative research, traditional methods that follow conventional positivist tenets hold that the researcher must remain objective and distant from the research at hand (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This was how I was introduced to research by my first college professor. Yet, Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang (2010) contend that "[a]lthough most social scientists have been taught to guard against subjectivity and to separate self from research activities, it is an impossible task" (p. 2). The recognition, acknowledgement, and valuation of the researcher's role and bias in recent academic studies has been rewarding and emancipating. Much like the classes that made me feel alive when I was an undergraduate, I share the sentiment by reading research articles and books that speak to discoveries and journeys that are subjective in nature. It has made my dissertation journey much more remarkable, and it is important that the discovery be shared.

The research questions posed for this study are based around the purpose of the study and are appropriate for the research topic (Calabrese, 2006) to satisfy traditional dissertation approach. Furthermore, they honor research as a relational process "that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world" (Wilson, 2008, p. 11).

1. How does my story, my autoethnography, my *testimonio,* empower the self, the researcher, and the leader, particularly in the realm of higher education?
2. How do relationships, community, place, and circumstance impact a personal narrative and enact agency?

Research Method

In deciding which methodology to employ, I discovered my desire to partake in a study that mattered to me and in a manner which aligned with my values (Wilson, 2008). I always prided myself on being a numbers person and pegged myself early on to continue the quantitative study I conducted on transfer students as my Master's thesis at Stanford University, attempting to identify variables that contributed to student success. I realized that throughout my coursework, again, I was sparked by the research papers that made me be reflective, introspective, and forced me to "go deep," as a professor would always encourage us to do during class. Throughout my research methods courses, I learned that traditional methods of qualitative research that follow conventional positivist and postpositivist tenets hold that the researcher must remain objective and distant from the research at hand (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). This aligned with the reason my first professor insisted that we not use the word "I" in our papers for it would devalue the work per dominant, Eurocentric standards.

As I contemplated my topic, I reviewed the various qualitative research methods that I had studied during my doctoral work. For example, in one study, Smith (2012) provided cultural conduct guidelines based on the values of the Maori communities, which include respect for people, being physically present (seen), look, listen, speak, be generous, be cautious, do not trample over the mana of people, and do not flaunt knowledge (p. 120). Above all, ensuring that the researcher is aware and sensitive to cultural influence is a priority. This was very similar to what I had learned from the CLE in Hawai'i and experienced during the semester I took my Community Leadership course, as we respectfully took our research into a community to listen, observe, and help the participants devise solutions. Yet, even though the ethnography allowed the researcher to be an active participant, it was still primarily a study of the "other;" it

represented an outsider/researcher studying a group or culture to learn more about a particular trait or custom and to help find a solution to an issue at hand. It still did not allow for a methodology that would help me accomplish my goal.

Calderón's (2004) perspective on how "connections can be made between teaching, research, and action" (p. 81) helped me understand the connection I had felt in my Community Leadership class. Using critical pedagogy, participatory action research, and service learning in his "Restructuring Communities" course, Calderón proudly defined his role as both participant and researcher. His students worked with participants to organize a protest against a city ordinance being proposed and instead helped advocate for a day-labor center and provide training programs at the Center with which he was involved. The action-based research discussed in the article enthralled me, as I had always envisioned that I would accomplish something similar with my research work which would lead to further advance my professional vocation.

In the Community Leadership course, we explored alternative methods of research inquiry, including *platicas* (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010), where oral histories and storytelling are invoked to explore the voices and narratives of those individuals being studied. The Guajardo brothers practiced this methodology in their research. Storytelling and circle time created safe environments that elicit trust and allow community members to speak honestly about issues impacting their families and their community (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010). It also allowed community to draw strength from one another, acknowledging the resources that are available to them and discussing possible options for solutions or ways to ameliorate the issue. As a student researcher, I experienced this methodology first-hand in my class. As a professional

in education, I experienced similar listening circles and safe sharing spaces during some extremely difficult conversations on our campus.

When I was introduced to autoethnography, I felt that my research interests clearly matched who I was—a Chicana/Latina leader in a higher educational setting who was interested in studying women, particularly minority women, in leadership positions in higher educational settings. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define the autoethnography as autobiographical and ethnographical, "connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739) with "vary[ing] emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" (p. 740). Chang (2007) offered that the autoethnography should be "ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (Chang, 2007, p. 3-4). In terms of intersectionalities, I was a teen mom who had to sacrifice a great deal just to keep my goals in reach. A study of my life would provide introspection and would take me on a journey of self-discovery; I was eager to find myself and my voice.

It was a presentation by Dolores Delgado Bernal that solidified my approach and my resolve to write my story. At a conference at the University of Texas-Pan American, Delgado Bernal introduced *testimonios* and the power attributed in sharing one's story for social and political awareness. "Adopting a Chicana feminist epistemology will expose human relationships and experiences that are probably not visible from a Eurocentric epistemological orientation" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 113). In her work on students of color, Delgado Bernal (2002) argued that "a critical raced-gendered epistemology recognizes students of color as holders and creators of knowledge who have much to offer in transforming education research and practice" (p. 108). Having spent time in front of small crowds of students and teachers alike, sharing my story was common – never easy, but always worth it. I knew my story had more to

offer, and I needed to find the appropriate platform to share it. González (2001) defined a methodological approach she termed "*trenzas y mestizaje*—the braiding of theory, qualitative research strategies, and a sociopolitical consciousness" (p. 116). I valued these perspectives. Similarly, Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) described "the compelling power of story to replace old narratives and create counter narratives to support new directions for community" (p. 87). Relationships, community, family—these terms are not commonly discussed throughout the traditional research methods, but are important to understanding identity, life, and successes. Wilson's (2008) Indigenous research paradigm, research as ceremony, provided for me the structural framework that captured the concepts which I valued and aligned closely with my ideology. Knowing what the dominant narrative indicated about teen mothers and college-going and success rates, I knew that I needed to share my counter-story. I decided that I would engage in a qualitative, autoethnographic *testimonio* for my research, in the spirit of ceremony.

Summary

It took me a while to be convinced that pursuing an autoethnographic research, a *testimonio*, was a worthy cause for my dissertation work. It is not in my humble disposition to believe that I have much to contribute to the research body of literature, as is the case for many scholars of color; after all, I was almost a statistic. Deep inside, I felt compelled to let the world know more about me, who I am, and who I have become. Fortunately, the more I shared my personal journey, the more encouragement I received to have my story told and heard and read. I also realized that I had been steered a certain way early on in my educational career path, one that did not value my upbringing, my history, my story, and it took me a while to learn how to use the tools that I had been given growing up and through my life experiences to challenge that perspective. Intent on getting the work done, I decided to give it a chance. I sat down to begin

my dissertation, couched in a body of rich literature that would allow me to learn about different ways of doing research. I became eager to find out what I was about to discover as I took on this challenge.

The decision to share my story is personal, educational, and professional. As a leader in an institution of higher education, I am more than what I have always believed. I represent a stereotypical, poor Mexican American girl who got pregnant as a teenager and whose life could have taken on a very different direction. Yet, I persevered through many challenges that I faced (Barajas & Pierre, 2001; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). I write this *testimonio* to provide self-reflection and offer lessons learned for other aspiring students and leaders in higher education. Delgado Bernal (2002) argued, "This epistemological orientation challenges the historical and ideological representation of Chicanas and is grounded in the sociohistorical experiences of Chicanas and their communities. Chicana feminist ways of knowing and understanding are partially shaped by collective experiences and community memory" (p. 113). My story is not just about me; it entails the community in which I was raised and molded, the family that taught me so much, and the people with whom my interactions have taught me about life and understanding each other. I reflected that my entire existence was not based solely on me and my thoughts but was filled with individuals in my life who loved me, influenced me, and who should have a voice within my own. I wanted to share my story through their eyes, as well as my own. This dissertation attempts to do so.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

I choose to share my story through an autoethnographic *testimonio* approach, a non-traditional though rigorous research methodology. In doing so, I must adhere to some of the traditional tenets of the dissertation. According to the American Psychological Association (2010), literature reviews are "critical evaluations of material that has already been published" (p. 10). My chapter 2 will serve this purpose, interspersed with my personal story, as research is both process and product (Wilson, 2008). This section will explore the theories and frameworks that guide my epistemological consciousness, my ontological perspectives, my axiological influences, and the methodological constructs that honor my research topic.

My decision to conduct an autoethnographic *testimonio* stems from a myriad of conversations and reflections I have had during my personal, educational, and professional experiences that have informed the meaning and purpose of my life, my role, and my research, particularly in relation to others and as I have experienced life on the margins (Hurtado, Hurtado & Hurtado, 2003; Anzaldúa, 2007; hooks, 1990; Torres, 2004; Peréz-Huber, 2010). Being a student of color, a teen mother, and a young, Chicana/Latina professional has afforded me the opportunity to view the world and my journey of self-discovery and reflexivity through a unique lens (Davies, 1999; Degaldo Bernal & Elenes, 2011; Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001; Pérez Huber, 2010; Russel y Rodríguez, 2007) and to influence my work at institutions of higher education from a nontraditional, culturally-respectful approach (Rendón,

1992; Valenzuela, 1999). Many individuals embark on an identity excursion, particularly in their educational pursuits, but seldom realize the importance of reflection and introspection into lived experiences and relatable stories as possible research inquiries (Davies, 1999; Sykes, 2014; Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, & Villenas, 2001). Fortunately, I have been provided the space to explore and research my individuality (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011) and challenge the master narratives and negative impressions (Valenzuela, 1999) that permeate society regarding teen parents and Chicano/Latino students. It was with this intentionality that I began to explore my lived experiences as a potential research topic (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2013).

I did not arrive at a point of being comfortable sharing my story overnight nor on my own. I did it with the encouragement of others, through a personal journey toward *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa, 2007) and a realization that my story could serve as impetus for other students in a similar situation, a decision-maker who can begin to see Latinas in a different light, but more importantly, for myself—a leader and researcher in higher education. Through the exploration of various perspectives, theories, frameworks, and pedagogies, I have learned about the importance of sharing our scarred stories of struggle and resistance for the methodological, pedagogical, and political value (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). I have also embraced an Indigenous "research is ceremony" approach (Wilson, 2008), which honors relationality in its ontological and epistemological paradigms and relational accountability in its axiological and methodological approaches.

Having been initially told early in my scholarly career that the word "I" was not allowed in my academic writings defined what research meant to me and framed my "academic consciousness" (Pizarro, 1998, p. 61). The experience left me feeling like I had to remove myself as an individual to be assimilated into mainstream's institution of higher learning, much like

Rodriguez (1983) recounted in his memoir, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez.* Rodriguez (1983) described how being a "scholarship boy" forced him to separate his cultural self from his academic self, in order to find success both in academia and in life. Valenzuela (1999) denounced this approach as "subtractive schooling" that "divests…youth of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to academic failure" (p. 3). This approach most closely aligned with a positivist framework that dominated academia during the time when I was first introduced to research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Not knowing differently, I, like many other students facing the daunting task of earning a coveted college degree, worked diligently to obey my instructor and acclimate into a mainstream educational environment, for we had always been taught that the person standing at the front of the room is the sole knowledge bearer (Pizarro, 1998). However, unlike Rodriguez (1983), whose autobiography was sharply criticized by Saldívar (1990) for writing a "persistently uncritical" (p. 160) piece, I was able to regain my sense of self throughout my educational journey and immersed in culturally-responsive and authentic research and mentorship.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been able to study at a university like Stanford, but even then, it took me a long while to gain enough confidence in my work as a scholar and to begin to critically question what was considered valid research, who defined it as such, why there was a perceived need to distance the researcher from the research, and how the dominant research construct has been and continues to be challenged. Ironically, I learned near the end of my academic career that it starts at the beginning, namely how a researcher believes knowledge is created and reality is experienced, or epistemological and ontological beliefs (Atwood & López, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Scheurich & Young, 1997). It has been a

long, continuous journey, but I have found my epistemological consciousness (Pérez Huber, 2010) and am now confident in presenting my research from this Chicana/o epistemological paradigm "based on love, family, and the need for justice" (Pizarro, 1998, p. 72). With my newfound critical *mestiza* consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2007; Freire, 1997), I have come to understand how I view the world, my ontological framework, and how my ethics and values shape my work, my axiological influences (Pizarro, 2012). This paradigm has been enlightening, not just for me in my journey of self-discovery, but for me as a researcher, a leader, and a political agent, and it has helped frame my dissertation analysis and writing and inspired my chosen autoethnographic research methodology—the *testimonio.*

Critical Race Theory scholars identify storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and counter-storytelling (López, 2003) as critical methods to challenge the dominant narratives. In line with these arguments, I shamelessly, though with humility, intersperse my personal thoughts and experiences into this literature review to help define my goals, honor the process, and finally, give life to my research product—the dissertation. I share a story of hardship, triumph, success, resiliency, tenacity, and a continued struggle to define my *self* and my work as a way to have my voice heard, in the academy, in the schools, in the institutions with which I am involved, but not just for me—for every teenager or young mother with ambitious goals, for every young Chicana/Latina professionals eager to defy the odds, and for every minority student who has ever been made to doubt their acceptance or inclusion in an educational or professional setting (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011; Alvarez, 2013; Freire, 1997). It remains a constant process and critical processing of experiences.

Spindler and Spindler (1988) emphasized the importance of "elicit[ing] materials concerning a person's special cultural knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes concerning the people

and the world around him or her" (p. 256) as a method of giving voice to students who are typically left out of research (Trueba, 1989; Anzaldúa, 2007; Pérez-Huber, 2010). Through *testimonio*, hailed as both a process and a product of research (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2010), there is a purpose to sharing my story as research and in sharing my experience with the process of writing a dissertation. *Testimonios* "function to (1) validate and honor the knowledge and lived experiences of oppressed groups by becoming a part of the research process; (2) challenge dominant ideologies that shape traditional forms of epistemology and methodology; (3) operate within a collective memory that transcends a single experience to that of multiple communities; and (4) move toward racial justice by offering a space within the academy for the stories of People of Color to be heard" (Pérez Huber, 2010, p. 841). The Latina Feminist Group describe *testimonio* as a "powerful method for feminist research praxis (p. 3). In preparing for the task of writing a dissertation, I have had to think critically about the purpose and goal of my educational endeavor. I have found that the *testimonio* aligns aptly with my epistemological, ontological, and axiological philosophies of life, learning, and leadership.

Epistemological Consciousness

Epistemology is "the study of how we know or of what the rules for knowing are" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 29), for how we see determines what we see. Also referred to as a "system of knowing" (Ladson-Billings, 2000) in which knowledge is shaped by the experiences lived, relations learned, and perspectives achieved by individuals, it is an attempt to understand our world and make sense of behaviors (Freire, 1997). Defining epistemological principles is crucial to understanding research and the legitimacy of knowledge, particularly in academia (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009). Scheurich and Young (1997) argued that

epistemology is relative, in terms of historical, social, sociological, cultural and political, and even ethical, realities. Since the time of Descartes, it was believed that the mind and body existed separately, promoting objectivity as an ideal to achieve, particularly in the natural sciences but also infiltrated into the social sciences (Roth, 2005). Smith (1999) linked research to European imperialism and colonialism. Dominant Eurocentric epistemologies, according to Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002), created a racial division or "apartheid of knowledge" between mainstream academic research and other ways of knowing, as one of the important ways in which human knowledge is validated is through educational research and applied to academic scholarship. Pérez Huber (2009) concurred in her experience that "[s]cholarship which draws from epistemological, theoretical, and methodological perspectives which honor sources of knowledge that exist outside of the academy and within Communities of Color, is devalued, delegitimized, and marginalized" (p. 641).

Disrupting the "apartheid of knowledge" and moving toward a more balanced approach of acceptable creation of knowledge (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009) remains a goal of researchers who find themselves on the margins (Pérez Huber, 2009). In an autobiographical article describing her public service profession, Hurtado (2008) reflected, "I was taught that we are citizens of the world and that knowledge is not only found in books but also in conversation, touch, taste, dialogue, and exploration" (Hurtado, Hurtado, & Hurtado, 2008, p. 44). Francisco and Miguel Guajardo (2007) postulated the concept of "*La Universidad de la Vida,"* the University of Life, as an example of an academically marginal source of true knowledge. Defined by their father's role in teaching them about life, *La Universidad de la Vida* more importantly taught them how to serve as culturally-sensitive, respectful, and responsive educators. Valdés (1996) described how *educación* "has a much broader meaning and includes

both manners and moral values," (p. 125) as well as formal schooling or book learning. In her doctoral dissertation, Pérez Huber (2010) examined "through the lens of community cultural wealth…the ways that the women drew from multiple skills, abilities, resources, and knowledge within their families and communities to survive, navigate, thrive and resist in higher education" (p. 844). According to Yosso (2006), "recognizing these stories and knowledges [of Communities of Color] as valid and valuable data, counterstorytellers challenge majoritarian stories that omit and distort the histories and realities of oppressed communities" (p. 10). These sources of "non-traditional" knowledge, previously chastised by educators and academicians as not considered rigorous or scientific, continue to gain momentum and respect in educational academic research (Atwood & López, 2014; Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Wilson, 2008).

Throughout my educational experience, I have been exposed to various approaches to research, teaching, and learning—from traditional to cultural to critical to problem-solving to participatory action to experiential (Freire, 1997; Calderón, 2004; Atwood & López, 2014). In reflecting critically on my educational experiences and taking a firm stance regarding my academic and epistemological consciousness (Pizarro, 1998; Pérez Huber, 2010), I use this autoethnography to explore my understanding of knowledge, knowledge creation, and research and affirm my epistemological conviction that my family, my community, and I am bearers of knowledge and that my story has power in the academy. In better understanding my role as a leader and political participant, it is imperative for me to understand my role as a researcher and the epistemological journey to conscientization (Scheurich, 1997; Freire, 1997). Furthermore, in understanding my role as a researcher, it is crucial for me recognize the theoretical connections that have shaped my consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2007; Pérez Huber, 2010).

Ontological Perspectives

Ontology is the nature of our existence or how we view the world; our beliefs about where knowledge is created then influences how we see the world (Wilson, 2008). Freire's (1997) basic assumption is that a person's ontological vocation is to be a subject of the world and transform it, to make it better for the individual and the collective (p. 14). Aligning the sociopolitical and epistemological beliefs with ontological perspectives can be accomplished by defining the theories that influence these perspectives. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define relativist ontology as "multiple constructed realities" (p. 22), or as Scheurich (1997) further explains, "the unabashed recognition that all epistemology, ontology, and the ways of thinking…are socially conditioned and historically relative or contextual" (p. 33).

As academics, we must recognize and validate that knowledge does not necessarily have to be published in the pages of traditional journals, but valued from the sources and perspectives that can be found all around us, including our students (Delgado Bernal, 2002), our family (Wilson, 2008), and our community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). Yet, as academics, it also remains our duty to ensure that our voices and perspectives are accepted into journals in order to legitimatize in academia what we know to be true. In organizing the ontological perspectives that influence my academic work, theoretical foundations are imperative to understand. Theories are developed as a way to make sense of the world in which we live, the behaviors of people with whom we come in contact, and the manner in which we think. When current theoretical fields of thoughts cannot justly explain a way of thinking, scholars begin to imagine a new explanation. This can be said of the following progression of theories that have informed my epistemological and ontological framework and are used as the underlying structure in my work.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that disrupts and challenges the universally-accepted mindset and conversations that dominate mainstream ideology, beliefs, and practices. According to Pérez Huber (2010), the CRT framework offers "a lens…to examine how multiple forms of oppression can intersect within the lives of People of Color and how those intersections manifest in our daily experiences to mediate our education" (p. 77). Tate (1997) defined CRT as "a product of and response to one of the most politically active and successful eras of social change in the United States" (p. 197), referring to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The civil rights movement was revolutionary for its social and educational influences, but also for its influence in the legal field. As Julia Alvarez reflects, "[t]he Civil Rights movement gave us hope" (Anzaldúa, 2007, *intro*). Alvarez recalled coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s and being empowered to write as a method of having minority voices heard.

The origins and goals of Critical Race Theory in the legal field are vital to understanding the impact CRT has had on epistemological understanding and educational research, policy, and practice. CRT stems from educational and philosophical research that had roots in law studies, described as "both an outgrowth of and a separate entity from…critical legal studies" (CLS) (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 10). However, there were two major shortcomings of critical legal study (CLS), as it did not allow for a space for the discussion of race, which many scholars understood as being necessary to address social injustices, and furthermore, it was not action-oriented and did not create a sense of urgency demanding change (Yosso, 2005). In response, CRT in legal studies brought to the forefront the concepts of race and racism as theoretical discourse in law and provided a basis on which to expand the use of CRT in the field of education (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT made its way into the field of education as a way to

bring awareness to the institutional structures in place in schooling and the impact it had on students, particularly minority students, as discussions of race and race relations in education are almost non-existent in the classroom (López, 1998).

Critical Race Theory scholars have two overarching purposes in common: 1) they understand racism and the need to have open, honest conversations about race relations, and 2) they identify ways to change it (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate 1997). The fundamental notion of CRT is that racism exists and is an everyday reality in our society and a normal part of our existence (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). The racism to which CRT refers is not racism displayed in a blatant, explicit manner, but rather, as López (2003) described, "modern-day racism is more subtle, invisible, and insidious" (p. 82). The first part is to be aware, awakening the consciousness, and then be critical and honest about it (Ladson-Billings, 1998; López, 2003; Atwood & López, 2014). The second, action-oriented notion is to aim to provide a more just and equitable society (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Hence, CRT established a cross-discipline approach to disrupting race and racism discourse in dominant research, arguments, and social discourses.

Similar to what was happening in other disciplines such as the social sciences, the actual experiences of marginalized people became clearly important for the CRT discipline. Tate (1997) highlighted the concept of providing participants an opportunity to voice their story or share their narrative as a method of data collection in legal studies. A major concept attributed to CRT is the method of storytelling (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and counterstorytelling (López, 2003; Valenzuela, 2005). "Critical race scholars need not ask permission – nor seek forgiveness – for their counterstories, but hold themselves accountable to communicate stories and narratives that are not only honestly critical, but critically honest (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1134). Delgado (1990) justified using stories and allowing the voice of minority participants to be incorporated

into scholarship because "reality is socially constructed, stories are a powerful means for destroying and changing mind-sets, stories have a community-building function, and stories provide members of out-groups mental self preservation" (p. 219). Delgado brought into question how voice is constructed and heard in legal discourse. He provided an argument for structural determinism, claiming that systems created by the majority race are inherently made to maintain the status quo, especially the legal system. He claimed that these practices also infiltrate the education system and the way educational policies are created. He theorized the fact that society cannot realize what is happening at the time that it is happening because of "tunnel vision" (Tate, 1997, p. 223). Similarly, Pizarro (1998) reminded us that every institution in the United States was developed under the influence of racism, including educational institutions but also politics, economy, health care, and media. In the field of education, dominant ideologies of meritocracy, individualism, and color-blindness can mask the complex struggles of students of color and the systems of oppression that create the conditions for those struggles (Pérez Huber, 2009). Freire (1997) described a "culture of silence" in economic, social, political, and educational systems maintained by paternalism.

In the field of education research, CRT provided a framework for students whose experiences were lived in the margins—ethnic minorities, lower and working class students, and females, as well as the intersectionality of such experiences. In an effort to tie CRT to educational models, Solórzano (1997, 1998) expanded on the original two tenets and highlighted five tenets of CRT that include: 1) that race and racism are at the center of the debate, but CRT recognizes other forms of subordination, 2) the challenge to dominant, Eurocentric ideology, 3) action-oriented response and commitment to social justice, 4) that experiential knowledge, particularly of marginalized people is central to the foundation of CRT, and 5) that CRT

demands a transdisciplinary, multi-faceted perspective. CRT in educational leadership is necessary but not always brought to the forefront (López, 2003). López (2003) believes that if we do not expose racism and racist practices embedded in education, we allow it to exist and that as leaders, we must push for social justice. Delgado (1990), through his writings, provided a theory of social change that supposes that change is created when there is conflict. Freire (1997) promoted the concept of conscientização, critical consciousness, or the learning to perceive social, political, economic contradictions and take action (p. 17). He also emphasized the role of dialogue as reflection and action as crucial as part of the problem-posing educational praxis, where the student versus teacher dialectic is broken and they become teacher-student and student-teacher, each possessing knowledge to teach the other and each learning from the other.

Crenshaw (1991) called for an "intersectional framework" to include race and gender (p. 230). The intersectionality framework included structural framework, or the multiple layers of discrimination in which women of color exist; political intersectionality, and how political arenas fail to take into consideration the realities of women of color; and representational intersectionality, in terms of how women of color are represented. Intersectionality affirmed the reason why multiple lenses, voices, and perspectives are important for research and in practice, including but not limited to race, class, and gender theory.

Latino and Latina Critical Theory

While Critical Race Theory became an integral tool for discussion on race and race relations, the binary white/black paradigm that seemed to define CRT often failed to take into consideration the plight of all minorities (Stefancic, 1997). Hence emerged Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit). Stefancic (1997) credited Acuña's (1972) *Occupied America* as the likely originator of LatCrit (p. 423). In creating a LatCrit annotated bibliography, Stefancic (1997)

identified several themes that were constant and emerging in LatCrit, which included: 1) a critique of liberalism for not addressing Latino circumstances and their unreasonable attempts at remaining race neutral; 2) storytelling/counterstorytelling where individuals are allowed to share powerful stories, that can attempt to change the mindset of the majority; 3) "revisionist interpretations of U.S. civil rights law and progress, to bring to light Latino needs in a black/white paradigm that typically defines reparational civil rights laws" (p. 426); 4) critical social science and exploring the concepts of mestizaje and multiple identities; 5) structural determinism that represents institutional racism and the majority's desire to maintain the status quo; 6) systems of oppression of "intersectionalities of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation" (p. 426) experienced particularly by Latina feminists; 7) gender discrimination and in particular machismo, or Mexican male chauvinism; 8) Latino/a essentialism that questions the essentialist expectations of being Latino; 9) language and bilingualism as the language of Latino communities and the debates surrounding bilingual education programs; 10) separatism and nationalism that LatCrit scholars have began to revive, but focused on the benefits of diversity; 11) immigration and citizenship and where Latinos fit into the laws that govern such, including jobs and benefits; 12) educational issues and different approaches to teaching and learning; 13) critical international and human rights law which is grounded in European ideology or colonized models; 14) Black/brown tensions that have arisen after the civil rights movement as the ideologies of the groups have created some tensions; 15) assimilation and the colonized mind to address the influenced of colonization, even to recent times; 16) Latino/a stereotypes which perpetuate media and popular culture; and 17) criticism and response to the Latino/a ethnic consciousness (pp. 425-428). These examples of themes identified as unique to the LatCrit

movement are telling of the multitude of experiences and issues facing the Latina/o population and the many nuances and intersectionalities that our community faces.

In Eurocentric America and in our educational system, where the dominant race has for centuries determined what subjects are taught in schools and what histories are included in textbooks (Pérez, 1999), it is telling how and why stories about minorities are excluded. As a result, when students do not read or learn about their culture, history, language in an academic setting, it sends the message that they are not valued (Valenzuela, 1999). There exists a tension between having to learn the dominant history, conform to dominant ideals, and assimilate into dominate culture or to be able to embrace the land, history, culture, and language of their ancestors (Pérez, 1999). Building off of the racial issues addressed through CRT, LatCrit provides further dimensions to incorporate "language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 108) into the conversations. In order to ameliorate the situation, particularly in educational settings, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) "give credence to critical raced-gendered epistemologies that recognize students of color as holders and creators of knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107). As Alvarez (2013) aptly put it, "We must recognize, understand, and accept that subtractive schooling of U.S. Latin@s is a direct attack on the legitimacy and value of their language and culture" (p. 137).

Chicana/Latina/Mexicana Feminist Theories

Chicana/Latina/Mexicana Feminist Theories are an amalgamation of methodologies, pedagogies, and practices that value Chicana/Latina/Mexicana production of knowledge, lived experiences, and conceptual tools (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011). Chicana/Mexicana/Latina feminist theories emerged from feminist school of thought because feminism critique did not

address the multitude of oppressions of which female minorities, in this case, Latinas, in particular, are subjugated (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011). Elenes, González, Delgado Bernal and Villenas (2001) identified "Chicana and Mexicana and Latina feminist pedagogies of *consejos, respeto,* and *educación* in everyday life" (p. 595). Fittingly, their conversations and idea sharing was done around a table "while cooking dinner and minding the children" (p. 595).

Anzaldúa (1987/2007) theorized a *path of conocimiento,* in which a person journeys through seven stages of awareness before reaching consciousness. The first stage is a sense of a jolt or an eye-opening experience that causes one to question the comfort of the familiar. The second stage is *nepantla,* or chaos, is an in-between space, where the ideas jolted in the first are questioned and new ideas are generally accepted. The third stage, *Coatlicue,* mirrors a stage of shock and despair, which then leads to a call for action, the fourth stage. The fifth stage allows the individual to imagine a new reality, a new path, while the sixth stage involves the implementation of that new map. Finally, stage seven is attained when the individual can negotiate conflict and evoke a sense of spiritual activism. Anzaldúa described a process that can be compared to a college student's journey to find oneself. However, she added a cultural component, which values the diverse and complex ways of experiencing the world. Cantú (2011) credits Anzaldúa with providing an epistemological and ontological framework shift through her work and spiritual activism.

In her work with students of color, Delgado Bernal (2002) proffered that "a critical raced-gendered epistemology recognizes students of color as holders and creators of knowledge who have much to offer in transforming education research and practice" (p. 108). Similarly, González (2001) used the term *pensadoras*, "active thinkers who build on their cultural foundations to form identities and integrity, as well as attain academic achievement" (p. 641), to

describe young Mexicanas *haciendo que hacer*. This "theory emerg[es] from the flesh illuminating teaching and learning" and makes meaning of "gendered cultural socializiation, *educación,* and success as cultural epistemologies and pedagogies/knowledge and practices" (p. 643). Taking the theory a step further, González (2001) designed a qualitative research methodology drawing on cultural-relevancy, "*trenzas y mestizaje*, from forms of identities, theories, and practices" (p. 645).

In describing how Eurocentric epistemologies, ideologies, and perspectives perpetuate the American societal and educational belief system, Delgado Bernal (2002) cited how Mexican children were considered inferior and even less clean than White students: "[A] case in point is how prohibiting Spanish-language use among Mexican school children was a social philosophy and a political tool used by local and state official to justify school segregation and to maintain a colonized relationship between Mexicans and the dominant society" (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 112). Drawing on experience, Alvarez (2013) argued that regarding the Spanish language, even Spanish departments on college campuses are "complicit in the 'de-tonguing' and deculturalization of Latin@ students" (p. 132). Utilizing her theory of decolonial imaginary, Pérez (1999) transformed "history" into "herstory" by including women in historical accounts. Pérez (1999/2003) related the "decolonial imaginary" as a space "where we uphold and maintain system of domination while we negotiate within them, in order to rupture them, change them, and start writing new narratives for our lives" (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011, p. 108). Barajas and Pierce (2001) identified safe spaces created by Latinas "in relationship with friend friends, family, and community" in a college setting (p. 869). Delgado Bernal (2002) felt that "[a]dopting a Chicana feminist epistemology will expose human relationships and experiences that are probably not visible from a Eurocentric epistemological orientation" (p. 113).

Axiological Influences

Building on the argument of knowledge creation and reality assumptions based on culturally rich experiences, the ethics and values that influence our being are equally as important to explore. Cultural capital is considered as having wealth or knowledge in certain arenas (social, cultural, linguistic, etc. capital) as compared to a cultural deficit, or not having the right cultural know-hows to succeed in certain instances (Bourdieu, 1986). How society views, acknowledges, and affirms that such capital influences privilege and power. Yosso (2005) redefined cultural capital to honor and value traditionally marginalized sources of knowledge, including home, family, community—as a means of identifying cultural wealth. Just as the Critical Race Theory model expanded on critical theory, adding a number of elements to the discussion, so did Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth, adopted from Oliver and Shapiro (1995), expanding the concept of cultural capital to include other forms of capital, such as aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic (p. 78). Yosso (2005) challenged us to look beyond the knowledge at the forefront and dig into the margins to find knowledge, sometimes referred to as "'Outsider' knowledges (Hill Collins, 1986), mestiza knowledges (Anzaldúa, 1987), and transgressive knowledges (hooks, 1994)" (as cited in Yosso, 2005, p. 70).

Educational institutions shaped by the dominant culture would lead one to believe that the assets students bring to the classroom should mirror those of the average, middle-class, White student. The experiences of minority students, in contrast, are very different (Valenzuela, 1999). Yosso (2005) found relevance and "wealth" in student experiences from the inherited assets that they bring into the classroom, in comparison to that which is only learned through formalized schooling. Furthermore, the concept of wealth in Yosso's argument is defined as "the total

extent of an individual's accumulated assets and resources" (p. 77) and not just income wealth, assets found in their communities and families.

RASPPA Theory

Aligned with an asset-based model of cultural and community wealth, Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Militello (2016) introduced a theory of change grounded in relationships, assets, stories, place, politic, and action (RASPPA). Based off the tenets that a Community Learning Exchange provides for its participants, the RASPPA theory of change incorporated "our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, and our organizations" (pg. 4) into a collective effort for community leadership and change. In Spanish, a *raspa* is a snow cone, a simple yet refreshing treat on a hot summer's day, and in South Texas, *raspa*-makers have made the treat unique by adding toppings that are local favorites to the area, such pickles slices, ice cream, Kool-aid powder, and even gummy bears. The RASPPA theory, similarly, serves as a refreshing concept to enable change in the community while honoring the local flavor.

Relationships and stories are at the core of the theory of change because "storytelling begets trust; trust begets healthy relationships; healthy relationships beget effective organizations; and effective organizations beget strong communities" (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 33). Identifying and capitalizing on assets in the community are critical to enacting change, particularly for enduring transformations. Stories become the focal point for establishing trust, as "[s]tories matter because they serve as our primary way of making sense of our world (Guajardo, et al., 2016, p. 33). As communities come together to find solutions, sharing stories gives people the opportunities to learn. Place is critical because it incorporates history, location, community, and values and serves as a point of pride. The politic becomes an individual impetus that leads to action, which when brought together as one, creates change.

Methodological Constructs

Understanding the connection and influence between methodological research and its tie to epistemological beliefs is critical for education leaders. Pizarro (2012) provided a concise analysis of research and teaching and honoring students' knowledge after reflecting on the discussions surrounding a Chicano studies program. He used the example of the Oaxaqueño community and their treatment of corn as a spirit, an elder, and a prized resource as a source of knowledge and our duty as researchers and teachers to honor their student cultural and attributes (Pizarro, 2012). Pizarro (1998) strongly critiqued positivist foundations as having "created a significant obstacle to innovative methodological shifts in the research community" (p. 71). He argued for a methodological and epistemological research approach that incorporates and integrates empowerment and social justice as a method, process, and outcome. Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2005) contended that "[e]very researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community that configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 21).

Educational Research

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) defined educational research as "the formal, systematic application of the scientific method of inquiry to the study of educational problems" (p. 6). Even in my first doctoral class, Research Methods, we were taught that, much as I had been taught in many of my undergraduate and graduate courses, research entailed a prescribed set of steps to attempt to "solve" a problem or at minimum, gain a better understanding of the data at our disposal. Krathwohl (1998) identified three goals of research, including describing a phenomenon using numerical or narrative variables, explaining those variables, and validating the relationship or association between or among variables. The methodology deployed in

research depends on the nature of the research questions and how best to formalize a description of an "answer" to those questions. Hence, the methods used to achieve these research goals become an important piece of the literature review that will be further explored in the methodology section of this dissertation, Chapter 3.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1997) described "problem-solving education" as praxis for "liberation…the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 60). The image portrayed in his description is in sharp contrast to the concept of research to which I had been exposed early on—research as a singular, individual act that took place in a room, behind a desk and a big pile of books (Pérez Huber, 2010). For example, Pizarro (1998) asserted that interactive educational research must include participants in the process and in the interpretation of results. Furthermore, Pizarro (1998) pushed the concept further, claiming that "authentic thinking…does not take place in ivory tower isolation but only in communication" (p. 58). It must be conducted through "the correct method…in dialogue" (Freire, 1997, p. 49). This type of educational praxis and research calls for interacting with others, dialoguing, discovering, and even acting.

Research Paradigms

Basic research has been categorized into two major paradigms, positivism and postpositivism, comprised of the constructs of epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). These concepts are complex ideas to define but align closely to the researcher's "basic set of beliefs that guide action" and "implies an ethical-moral stance toward the world and the self of the researcher" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 183). Epistemology, as defined above, is how we know reality and the relationship that exists between what is known and the inquirer, while ontology defines the nature of said reality. Axiology is the

basic belief and values of the research paradigm, while the methodology defines the methods that are used to implement the paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Linking the research paradigms with these constructs is important to understand the epistemological underpinnings that influence the investigative methodologies employed. In processing these terms, I realized that traditional research was not the type of research in which I wanted to engage, and I knew it was important to understand the concepts of research before venturing out into a branch of research that aligned more closely with my nontraditional reality.

Positivism represents the dominant paradigm in the social sciences and holds the epistemological view that the subject under study contains knowledge, and the researcher should limit interaction to conduct a valid, neutral research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). The ontological approach follows deductive reasoning that reality exists to be studied and understood. Researchers take a sample of a population, study a phenomenon or conduct an experiment, and then deduce a conclusion from the study. The axiological assumption provides that a researcher must remove oneself and one's values to produce an unbiased report. The methodologies associated with a positivistic paradigm are quantitative in nature and include description, correlation, causal comparative and experimental approaches. While this paradigm is considered objective and generalizable to the greater population (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009), it represents "Eurocentric ideologies in meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality" that dominate scholarship to the disadvantage of people of color (Pérez Huber, 2009, p. 641).

This positivistic paradigm aligns closely with the research to which I had been exposed to early on in my educational career and the one that I most valued, given my disposition at the time and influenced by my master's program. I had chosen to research community college transfer students and how they performed at a four-year institution after transfer in comparison to

students who started their college career at the university, as a continuation of my thesis. The literature with which I became familiar during my thesis project typically had the same results—Hispanics were always at the bottom of most academic achievement levels (Turner & Thompson, 1993). My graduate thesis project left me yearning for additional research experience, for the "answers" I discovered after conducting the research left me unsatisfied. At the time, I felt it was attributed to needing a richer data set to find the "real reason" why Hispanic students and Hispanic transfer students, in particular, still fared poorly, even in a predominantly Hispanic institution. I knew that we could be and were being successful, as my personal experience had provided positive role models for me, and it was with this mindset that I set out to elicit the success stories and have those permeate the research waves. I knew I needed to follow my doctoral path to find an acceptable method of doing so, and I knew I needed to start with me.

Scheurich (1997) acknowledged that "the separation of epistemology and ontology is artificial. In practice and in theory, my epistemology cannot be separated from my ontology. What I see and how I see are intimately interwoven" (p. 50). Based on the epistemological view that knowledge originates in various ways and is limited by our own investigative biases, postpositivism attempts to uncover meaning and understanding in a constructivist manner, where the researcher becomes an instrument of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Ontologically, reality is subjective depending on people's experiences and can exist in multiple forms. The axiological assumption acknowledges that researcher bias exists in all instances because research is based on subjectivity, from the manner in which the topic is selected to the conclusions that are drawn, even in quantitative research. What is unique and important about the assumption is that it values awareness of predisposition and candor in making the readers aware (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Ethnographic Research

It was not long ago that qualitative research methods were not readily accepted as legitimate research methodologies (Creswell, 2007). In the last 15 years that I have been involved in higher education and research, I have noticed a considerable change in research methodology, practice, and even publications on research methods, as have other researchers (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In qualitative research, traditional methods that follow conventional positivist tenets hold that the researcher must remain objective and distant from the research at hand (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). Yet, there are some who strongly believe otherwise. "Although most social scientists have been taught to guard against subjectivity and to separate self from research activities, it is an impossible task" (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010, p. 2). The recent recognition, acknowledgement, and valuation of the researcher's role and biases in academic studies has been rewarding and fulfilling.

"Research provides the foundation for reports about and representations of 'the Other.' In the colonial context, research becomes an objective way of representing the dark-skinned Other to the white world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). As we have learned from Critical Race theorists and LatCrit literature, it is important to provide a voice for the researched (Pizarro, 1998). Ethnographic research is a type of qualitative research method that has varying degrees of researcher participation, an approach that better aligns with the epistemological and ontological stances that frame my research. Spindler and Spindler (1988) defined ethnography as the "study of human behavior in social contexts" (p. 248) and ethnographers as attempting to "record…how natives behave and how they explain their behavior" (p. 247). Just as our lives are impacted by our everyday interactions with others, so too is our research and research experience informed by the subject(s) of study. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) described a spectrum of

ethnographies, where various forms and approaches are used to conduct an ethnography. Depending on how much introspection is conducted in the research versus how much reaction to the subjects of study it is obvious which type of ethnography the researchers are conducting, from indigenous/native ethnographies to narrative ethnographies to reflexive ethnographies that reinforce the process of the research in detail (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

Spindler and Spindler (1988) laid out ten criteria to conduct a good ethnography, which serve as a guide for researchers in the field. The ten criteria included: 1) contextualized observations, 2) emerging hypotheses in situ, 3) prolonged and repeated observation, 4) inferences from observation of the native view of reality, 5) eliciting sociocultural knowledge from participants, 6) data collection should be in situ, 7) cultural variation, 8) implicit sociocultural knowledge, 9) must not ask questions to elicit predetermined responses, and 10) utilize technical devices to collect live data. These standards served as minimum requirements for researchers, as ethnographic research has expanded and morphed to include other ethical and cultural considerations of which researchers must be aware. Thomas (1993) captured the broad approaches to ethnography in the following statement: "Conventional ethnographers study culture for the purpose of describing it; critical ethnographers do so to change it" (as cited in Calderón, 2004, p. 90).

In some of my more memorable and captivating classes, I realized that attempting to understand the world around us and charting out ways to improve society was exactly what we were trying to do as educational leaders. Furthermore, we analyzed and interpreted stories and experiences to gain insight into what is going on in the field of education today and how we, as leaders, can enhance learning, teaching, and leading, all part of the qualitative research process (Gay, Mills, and Airasian, 2009). I find value in identifying those relationships, studying them,

analyzing them, and then sharing them with a drawn conclusion or need for further research. This was what research meant to me, and I had a strong inclination to attempt an ethnographic research for my dissertation, but I had more to learn.

Autoethnography

As an educational leader and now in my role as a researcher, I realize that I have a certain privilege to share my voice in an academic setting. By doing so, I am aligning my epistemological beliefs, my ontological realizations, and my axiological choices with a method that honors those traditions (Wilson, 2008). Autoethnography as a method was solidified in its existence only about 50 years ago, stemming from ethnographic work in anthropology (Spindler, 1963; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). Growing up, history was my least favorite subject because I believed that anything that happened before I was born was not important, but the more I studied, the more stories I heard, and the more I was able to place historical events in time and perspective. I fully realize that 50 years ago was not long at all and actual experiences live in the memories of many who are still alive.

Autoethnography puts the researcher in the center of the research "as a site of cultural inquiry within a cultural context" (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 210) and a "venue for marginalized voices" (Hayano, 1979). Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined the autoethnography as autobiographical and ethnographical, "connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739) with "vary[ing] emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" (p. 740). They further believed that the autoethnography is "both process and product" when used as a method of analysis (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 273).

When I was first introduced to the autoethnography, I felt that my research interests clearly matched who I was interested in studying—a Mexican American leader in a higher

educational setting who was interested in studying women, particularly minority women, in leadership positions in higher educational settings. An autoethnography allows the researcher to look deep into lived experiences and share personal, touching, moving, and defining moments in her/his life that impacts personal and cultural identity formation. Chang (2007) offered that the autoethnography should be "ethnographical in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation, and autobiographical in its content orientation" (p. 3-4). In relation or comparison to traditional research, autoethnography creates a broader spectrum of views about the world, about research, and about the researcher (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

There are several examples of autoethnographies that capture the value in conducting self-reflective research. For example, Roth (2000) described how his own experience in education, having failed fifth grade, gave him a different perspective in life regarding how he taught in a high school classroom as a teacher. He described how he was "increasingly focused on children's view of the curricular maze rather than that of the all-knowing observer who watches children run the maze" (p. 5). Having an introspective moment during a research project with a fellow teacher, he made the realization that because of their cultural and historical backgrounds, they "came to different understandings based on what appeared to be the same data" (p. 5). Roth (2000) reflected on this situation, "I began to understand our interpretive horizons as culturally…and historically constituted so that, to understand our respective interpretations, we needed to understand aspects of our respective biographies" (p. 6). Hence, using autoethnography and autobiography as a critical research tool became an important finding for him as a teacher. In his autoethnography about the teaching of mathematics, Winograd (2002) described his purpose as "not the creation of any new claims to knowledge but, rather…using a

form of autoethnography, my goal is to encourage compassion" (p. 349) (cited in Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 214).

In response to the critiques surrounding autoethnographies as a science or an art, Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) concluded that the argument is a fallacy, as "autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena" (p. 283). Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) acknowledge, "Though still facing some challenges of legitimacy, social science autoethnographers are beginning to respond to epistemological criticism and methodological rigor in ways that seem to be gaining some traction, when considering recent evidence of the dissemination of autoethnographic scholarship" (p. 211). A study of my life would provide introspection and would take me on a journey of self-discovery. I was eager to find myself, not just for me personally but to be able to learn from my experiences in my quest for successes and share with others. Defining myself and my role as a Latina leader in higher education has been an arduous, gratifying, and continuous journey. I decided that I would conduct a qualitative, autoethnographic *testimonio* for my research. Autoethnographers, by sharing stories, are attempting to legitimize the story, the research through story, and the knowledge gained, bringing "voice" to those who have been silenced and empowerment along the way (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1998) declared that "failure to make it into the canons of literature or research does not make the stories of ordinary people less important" (p. 13). As a research method, "[a]utoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 274).

Testimonio

Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona (2012) shared that *testimonios* are "an approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one's life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising" (p. 364), and method that Moraga (2002) called "theory in the flesh" (p. 367). It is a genre with a political purpose, but a multidimensional approach, much like autoethnography, because it is both process and product. *Testimonio* is "process (methodology), product (inclusive of text, video, performance, or audio), and a way of teaching and learning (pedagogy)" (ibid, p. 364). Pérez Huber (2009) relayed an experience in which a colleague cautions her about using *testimonio* as a method in her dissertation, clearly imparting "the academy's perspective on work that challenges traditional research paradigms and the ideologies that these paradigms produce" or reproduce (p. 640). I felt it would be liberating to use the word "I" in my research. I wanted to write a counter-narrative (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010) to tell my life story. The next chapter details further the chosen methodology.

CHAPTER III

LIVING THE METHODOLOGY

> As researchers and as teachers, if we are going to be engaged in…methods of research or teaching, it has to be based on our understanding of the ontology, the axiology, and the epistemology so that the methodology honors that [understanding]. We know from our past that researchers and teachers have both come into communities and not honored that. That's part of the problem, part of why our kids are unsuccessful. They come in with something and that something isn't honored, and when it is honored, their graduation rates go up…it's not rocket science; it's Chicano Studies. (Pizarro, 2012)

I attended a retreat for The University of Texas-Pan American's Mexican American Studies (MAS) Program, hosted at the Llano Grande House in my hometown of Elsa, Texas, when I was first introduced to Marcos Pizarro, Professor and Chair of Mexican American Studies Department at San Jose State University. He spoke about the role of Chicano Studies programs in institutions of higher education (Pizarro, 2012). The University was undergoing an intense look at the MAS program, as it had been identified as a low-producing program per the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's standards and was on the verge of being shut down. I was taking an internship course through my doctoral program to assist the MAS program define its goals and needs in an effort to become a thriving program again. Even before I knew that my dissertation would take on the life form it has, Pizarro's words and the explanation he provided in his interview led me to want to further explore their meaning, as I found it extremely relevant to the work I was undertaking. As a student, I felt that I understood what it meant to engage in culturally-relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and how I

benefited from courses and projects that embraced my culture (Yosso, 2005). I had, after all, been exposed to the teachings of the Guajardo brothers (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007) and taught to live by the RASPPA theory of change (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016). I realized that I thrived in the classes that helped me define who I was as an individual and that meant exploring my individual, cultural, and academic being. However, as a researcher, an administrator, and a leader, I felt that I was not as knowledgeable as I should be or adept in the practice and art of living the methodology. Furthermore, I had been changed as an individual by my cultural and academic experiences, and I wanted to continue to work to become an agent of change for the communities that I served. As a result, I decided to use my dissertation to help me explore my academic, political, *mestiza* and cultural consciousness (Anzaldúa, 2007; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012; Pizarro, 1998).

During deliberations about my dissertation topic and about selecting the appropriate methodology, I engaged in conversation with others about conducting an ethnographic research and in the spirit of phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007), interviewing other Chicana doctoral scholars who had a shared experience, either with being a teen mom, being raised in a socioeconomically poor, rural area, and having attended a prestigious university, or being a female leader of color in higher education and studying the nuances and microaggressions experienced by some educators in the field (Alvarez, 2013). I wanted to share a story that was personal, impactful, and allowed me to become an agent of change or for "doing the public good" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007). I strongly considered sharing the story of the six Cardoza sisters and the challenges and successes in our pursuits of higher education, similar to the manner in which Aída Hurtado and her sisters shared their story (Hurtado, Hurtado, & Hurtado, 2008). Connie, the eldest sister in the family, had started at the state's flagship university but did not

finish. Her story of being the first in the family to move away to pursue a higher education deserves to be heard. Karina, the second daughter, was the first of the sisters to leave the state to attend an Ivy League university. She attended Columbia University and served a number of years in public service before deciding to venture into the consulting world as a self-employed entrepreneur; she recently graduated with a Master's in Clinical Psychology. I am the third daughter. Sara, number four, attended Yale University and studied architecture and is currently an Associate Professor at the local community college, bringing innovative paradigms to her classes that include community projects, and she recently earned her Master's degree in higher education administration. Selina attended Stanford University and earned her degree in Engineering – Product Design and works for an educational organization, and Rebecca, the youngest who shares a story much like mine, had a son while she was a senior in high school, married young, finished her undergraduate degree in three years, and graduated May 2015 with a doctorate in Physical Therapy. For a number of years, we, and others, have encouraged my parents to write a book about how they raised their daughters to be academically successful and socially responsible. Thus, in honor of writing this dissertation for my family and completing my degree for them, I chose to begin by writing my story.

Through my doctoral studies and work experience, I was drawn to the methodological approach of autoethnographic *testimonio* research for various reasons. I have been asked to speak and share my story at numerous events. When I do, and typically when it is the first time I share my story with an audience, namely with high school students aspiring to go to college, I share the story with which I opened my dissertation. I set it up to juxtapose the lives of two young girls—one who works hard in school and takes advantage of opportunities afforded to her and the other who makes less than wise choices at times and gets pregnant in high school. After

I share the two seemingly different stories, I ask the students to discuss each girl's future, in terms of college attendance and imminent success. As shared before, most students are quick to assume that the first young girl completes her college degree and becomes a successful professional but that the second young girl does not even attend college and becomes a burden to society. Their reactions are incredible when I divulge that the two stories are the not only the story of the same person but it is the story of the girl standing before them—it is my story. Watching the shock in their faces as the realization sets in further cements my conviction around what critical race theorists purport as counterstorytelling as a method to shift the dominant narrative and a tool for healing (Delgado, 1990; Solórzano, 1997; Stefancic, 1997). Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Militello (2016) propose that storytelling serves as a pedagogical tool for discovering the ecologies of knowing—the self, organization, and community. By telling my story, I am also sharing the story of my upbringing, my community, my religion, my faith, my family, my influences, my relationships, my values, and my reverences.

Storytelling has not necessarily been a familial strength or trait that I learned at home, unlike many Mexican American families that have passed down stories through *dichos* or *platicas.* However, building relationships by being a good listener and being a conscientious member of society has always been reinforced in our home. My parents taught us the value of authentic relationship building and valuing people's histories, heritages, and stories. Coming from a family of six girls, sharing was the norm. In reflecting on my own story and being equipped with robust academic research on the power of story (Ladson-Billing, 1998; Delgado, 1990), I realized how important it is that counterstories be written to permeate academia (Valenzuela, 2005; López, 2003) as a demonstration of legitimate forms of knowledge (Pérez Huber, 2009). Like Torres (2004), my goal is "to help in clearing up negative images by

showing an authentic Latino identity constructed by Latinos" (p. 29-130). However, honoring a relational and narrative approach is not a widely accepted methodology in educational research or for dissertation writing (Wilson, 2008). Thus, it is with a conscious and deliberate mind that I write to honor my familial and epistemological convictions, while attempting to stay within the confines of a traditional dissertation approach in an effort to complete the requirements for my doctoral degree program.

"Research is Ceremony"

Research, as I understood it early in my academic career, was a very objective, desensitizing, hegemonic academic process, virtually removing emotion and the human element from the topic and analysis, and exhibiting a positivistic ethos (Scheurich, 1997). Critical race theorists, including Pérez Huber (2009), Delgado Bernal (2002), and Solórzano & Yosso (2002), questioned the authenticity and influence of positivistic research. Scheurich (1997) offered that "[c]ritical theorists…who contend that positivism is politically questionable cannot ethically or politically choose a positivist perspective from which to conduct their research no matter what the purpose of the research is" (p. 49). I took these words to heart as I was making a decision as to which research methodology to pursue. As Smith (1999) related, "Research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions" (p. 5). Acknowledging my political and social conditions, as well as my current personal, academic, and professional situation, I remained conscious that my dissertation would speak volumes.

Influenced by and in agreement with critical race theorist researchers, I chose to abandon my master's thesis, a quantitative research project on transfer students upon which I intended to expand for my doctoral work, and to explore the authenticity and validity of my story in

educational research. I focused on studying paradigms that contrasted with the traditional way of thinking, learning, and acknowledging knowledge creation, but aligned closer to my epistemological, ontological, and axiological philosophies. In studying critical race theorists and their approaches to research, I found myself fascinated with the stories that spoke to me and resonated with my life, and I realized that I was a much more involved reader when the topics and the stories were relatable. Much like the classes that made me feel alive when I was an undergraduate, I shared the sentiment by reading qualitative research articles and books that speak to discoveries and journeys and are subjective in nature. It has made my dissertation journey much more valuable.

Wilson's (2008) *Research is Ceremony* proposed an Indigenous research paradigm that honors and values relationship through story and responsibility. I found that I related closely to its theoretical and epistemological underpinnings, and the relational approach aligned closely to my ontological and axiological upbringing and approach in life. Wilson (2008) allowed me to discover a methodology that honors a different way of thinking about research and celebrates a shared ontology and epistemology that caters to relationality and relational accountability between the researcher and the researched. The research paradigm is "put into practice through choice of research topic, method of data collection, form of analysis and presentation of information" (p. 7).

In response, I relied on the personal narrative process, used to "understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives" (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 279-280). Narratives "add necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of positivist

perspectives" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Torres (2004) invoked a critical personal narrative by weaving "the telling of [her] story into an analysis of the social structures and relations of power that generate and determine the struggles that a person like [herself], a Latina-Columbian, has to endure and overcome…" (p. 123-124). Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) referred to it as a study of social problems by "utilizing the self as a central foundation for inquiry" (p. 212). By situating the self in the research process, the "Indigenous epistemology is all about ideas developing throughout the formation of relationships" (Wilson, 2008, p. 8).

As Wilson (2008) described it, Indigenous knowledge is holistic, which includes emotion, senses, intuition, art, religion, and a relationship with the cosmos, to name a few, whereas dominant knowledge indicates that knowledge is based on science. Wilson (2008) had a difficult time finding a research paradigm that matched his Indigenous roots, values, and belief systems when working on his own dissertation. He felt that the research methodology he used in his writing "need[ed] to incorporate [his] cosmology, worldview, epistemology, and ethical beliefs" (Wilson, 2008, p. 15). He approached his research using the tools that were native to his way of life, which incorporate story and relationships. Furthermore, Wilson countered the need to be critical of other researchers and theories because "knowledge is not individual but relational" (Wilson, 2008, p. 177). He related it to a winner/loser mentality that dominates Western culture, and instead, he provided a ceremonious explanation for research that involves a process of relationality and connectedness. Instead of attempting to prove a research finding is flawed or missing, Wilson built upon research practices that speak to him while staying true to his values. As an example, Wilson's research paradigm makes use of real names, which goes against dominant ethical research policies but remains true to his approach. Because Wilson has taken the care to build deep relationships with those individuals whom he used in his research, he

placed the relational accountability on himself to ensure that they are accurately and respectfully represented. Thus, there was no need for pseudonyms for people, places, or experiences that are used in the research.

After exploring various methodological paradigms, I felt that Wilson's (2008) Indigenous research paradigm most closely aligned with the intentionality of my goals for my research and my life. Knowing my upbringing was centered on the relationships that we formed with individuals in our school, our church, and our community, I was able to relate to the epistemological and axiological value of Shawn Wilson's description. As Wilson (2008) described and believes, "Indigenous research is a life-changing ceremony" (p. 61). I intend for the research work in which I engage to be life changing, not only for me but also for future scholars. Moreover, an Indigenous research paradigm complements feminist theory, relational theory, participatory action and similar critical frameworks that value experience and use story to share traditionally marginalized viewpoints. Just as life is lived in a holistic and organic manner, influenced by a number of agencies that surround us daily, so too must our research. Through this research journey, I have drawn from many theoretical paradigms and frameworks to create a work in progress that is my dissertation and is a reflection of my life in progress as a researcher and a leader.

Autoethnographic *Testimonio* Research

When I decided to pursue my doctoral degree, it was intentional on two fronts—the first was to become a researcher and a valued member of an "elite" academic society, but also to defy the statistics that indicated that very few from my community would attain the coveted degree; I wanted to help change that narrative. The second reason was a personal goal to attain a terminal degree, the highest degree an educational institution offered, for I love learning and am inspired

by the quest for knowledge. Similar to how we live our lives, in order to achieve my goals, it became abundantly clear to me that I needed to have a firm grasp on who I was as an individual and what I chose to study, for this was a defining moment not only in my personal endeavors but also in my career. Throughout the course of this writing process, I describe how I chose my topic and which methodological approach I selected because I see research as both process and product. There has been a paucity of research conducted on actually going through a doctoral program and writing a dissertation. Autoethnographic *testimonio* research provided the platform for me to share my research and my experience as I lived it.

In selecting a topic, once I had convinced myself that the autoethnography was the type of research I valued most to conduct, the next step was how best to achieve that goal. How would I select a methodology that honors my individuality, my commitment, and my research and epistemological consciousness? I had to learn how to do it well because research needs to be rigorous, meaningful, and accepted in my field. I would have to learn from those who have come before me and read as much as I could about the methodology that aligned closely with my ontology and axiology.

Wilson (2008) identified storytelling as an imperative piece of the Indigenous research methodology. In fact, he used it as a method of counseling during the time that he spent working with Indigenous persons in need of counseling. Guajardo and Guajardo (2007) related storytelling to *platicas* that are shared whether between individuals, with families, or in circle time. The power of story is not merely in the act of sharing. Rather, sharing one's personal story allows the researcher to experience a critical introspection. In identifying the role of the researcher, their power and politics, and how their voice is construed through the research, Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) agreed that an "[a]utoethnography responds…by calling

attention to the researcher as critically reflexive participant, thereby forcing a critical examination of the act of conducting research of the self in relation to one's community" (p. 210). It is through self-awareness and identity formation that a person searching for a research agenda can be true and honest to oneself. To provide a better sense of myself, I have unabashedly interspersed personal struggles of storytelling and honing the research process into my dissertation (Chang, 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Torres, 2004; Wilson, 2008).

As I previously described, I knew I wanted to share my story and aspired to do so in a culturally and academically respectful way. I had been moved by a *testimonio* by Dolores Delgado Bernal and began to explore autoethnography and *testimonio* as methodologies. Peréz-Huber (2010) captured my sentiment adequately when she described her research journey, "Through *testimonio* positioned within a Chicana feminist epistemology, guided by a LatCrit framework, we have learned to trust ourselves in the ways we know, understand, and interpret the world and recognize this knowledge as valid and valuable to the research process" (p. 848).

In a strange comparison to the way I was living my life, I was willing to push the margins a bit while staying within the boundaries of the prescribed research arena. Pushing the boundaries of an autoethnography, the *testimonio* is a methodology used to "counter traditional research paradigms and lead to a more complete understand of the experiences of People of Color within and beyond educational institutions" (Peréz-Huber, 2010, p. 640). Taking part in another doctoral student's study, Peréz-Huber (2010) shared, "I was immediately drawn to the process of *testimonio* through this experience"…as "[d]uring her study, I felt she was *really* listening to what I was saying, and not simply recording data" (p. 846). Peréz-Huber (2010) further explained how she used this methodology in her own dissertation and "through this

work…realized the power of *testimonio* to document and theorize experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance to oppression" (p. 847).

Research Design

As part of the rigorous research process, having your research accepted into a peer-reviewed scientific research journal is prime validation in academia, as a publication is one component of knowledge creation and formal distribution "of the accumulated knowledge of a field" (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 9). Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) provide a translational model for researchers to employ autoethnography across American Educational Research Association (AERA) standards, highlighting "what autoethnography *can do* rather than what autoethnography *must do*" (p. 211). AERA is "a national research society…concerned with improving the educational process by encouraging scholarly inquiry related to education and evaluation and by promoting the dissemination and practical application of research results" (AERA online).

American Educational Research Association Standards

Translating the discussion based on four focus areas from an AERA task force's report on research and publication standards, Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) recreated an evaluative checklist or rubric for researchers that included: 1) formulating social scientific problems, 2) facilitating critical, careful, and thoughtful discussion of methodological choices and claims, 3) offering multiple levels of critique, naming privilege, penalty, units of study, and classifications and criteria for selected units and classifications, and 4) credible analysis and interpretation of evidence from narratives and connecting them to researcher-self via triangulation, member-checks, and related ethical issues (2012, p. 216). Even though utilizing the AERA standards may be considered a more traditional, positivistic research approach, the

goal of my work is not to challenge the structure of academia just yet, but rather to push the boundaries of commonly accepted research work. Because the autoethnography is a fairly new methodological approach in educational leadership, scholars utilizing it have had to overcompensate to demonstrate its credibility in the field. I remain critical of the dominant research paradigms and as a novice researcher, this dissertation commits to honor my personal experience through critical analysis within the confines of prescriptive academia.

Focus Area 1: Formulates social scientific problems. Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) draw on the autoethnography's ability to clarify "the purpose, question, problem, context, or issue being addressed by utilizing the self as a central foundation for inquiry" (p. 212) as being able to fulfill the first focus area of the AREA standards. While it is definitely the case that the autoethnography addresses social scientific conditions, even the terminology used—"problems"—has a very negative connotation aligned with traditional, positivistic research perspectives. Utilizing the term "problems" implies that there is a "solution" which research attempts to identify. Rather the providing a solution, I believe that the autoethnography provides a perspective, an analysis, and a critique of social scientific conditions in an effort to bring about discussion to promote change. The autoethnography is as much about the process, following a "logic of inquiry" (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 212) in its design, as it is about the end product, as "[a]utoethnographers reframe and refocus their inquiry in order to draw conclusions and establish further questions. In this process, one continually reflects, resolves, evolves, and redefines the issue at hand" (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 212).

Focus Area 2: Facilitates critical, careful, and thoughtful discussion of methodological choices and claims. The second focus area relates to the choice of methodology, design, and data collection and being able to triangulate data using "defensible

data sources" common to other qualitative research (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 213). Introspection and reflexivity are crucial for autoethnographic inquiry but other data collection methods should be explored, such as interviews, surveys, journals, observations. Wilson (2008) agreed that acceptable methods of Indigenous research include participant observation, relations building, interviews-talking, and focus groups. Even these seemingly traditional methods to data collection can retain an authentic focus. For example, observation should be intent on watching and learning; relations building calls for reciprocal relational accountability and thus member checking becomes an important piece of data reporting; and focus groups, which are referred to as talking circles in the Indigenous approach that is built on the ideal of respect (Wilson, 2008). Smith (1999) provided cultural conduct guidelines based on the values of the Maori communities, which include respect for people, being physically present (seen), look, listen, speak, be generous, be cautious, do not trample over the mana of people, and don't flaunt knowledge. Consistent with the Indigenous research methods, "[a]utoethnography also recognizes the role of the researcher, the relationship between the researcher and participants, and how this relationship can influence data collection" (Hughes, Pennington, and Makris, 2012, p. 213).

In an autoethnography, the data that is collected are reflexive stories, *cuentos*, and experiences that are analyzed and used to tell a story. Scheurich (1997) believed that these stories are meant to vivify instances rather than prove the impact of such experiences. Scheurich (1997) continued to make the point that the use of certain terms and language "draw their meaning from the epistemology in which they exist" (p. 47). Hence, data is a positivistic term. When considering the epistemological assumption in which this dissertation is written, the data collected is my reflection, my memory, and a critical analysis of my experiences. In addition,

facts that are presented as "evidence" for certain claims also vary in their interpretations, depending on a person's viewpoint. Accordingly, which "facts" are collected is dependent on the person's "truth story" (Sheurich, 1997, p. 47).

Focus Area 3: Offers multiple level of critical analysis, naming privilege, penalty, units of study, and classifications. It must be understood that in an autoethnography, data collection and analysis blend into one, as Wilson (2008) described, "as I was listening I was learning, and as I was learning, I was sharing" (p. 131). In addition, Spindler and Spindler (1988) reinforced that "[a]nalysis…is directed toward goals that are usually shaped by both theoretical and practical concerns. For social scientists the former may be most important. For educators in school systems and classroom, the latter goals may dominate" (p. 260). The AERA standards under Focus Area 3 attempt to fit the autoethnographic data into a positivistic framework, including classification of data, coding, and categorizing.

Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) do make the case that autoethnography is justified as empirical through its "rigorous endeavor into naming one's subjectivity and being explicit about one's research design, data, and intentions" (p. 214). In an effort to abide by the AERA standards, researchers must "apply autoethnography with a critically reflexive lens toward the nuances of individuals within groups with empirical methods that support the notion of critical self-identification in terms of racial, ethnic, cultural, social class, gender, sexual, and religious orientation" (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 214).

Focus Area 4: Opportunities for credible analysis and interpretation of evidence from narratives and connecting them to researcher-self via triangulation, member-checks, and related ethical issues. Generalizability and transferability, important criteria for traditional research results (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009), vary for autoethnography. Rather, credibility is

"reliant on the connections that readers make to link the autoethnographic text to their own experiences" (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 214). Concerning the generalization of research findings, Hughes, Pennington, and Makris (2012) acknowledged that the "autoethnographer like her or his qualitative counterparts can convey the kind and degree of evidence to readers that invites them to compare their own lived experiences and contexts of interest to those conveyed by the author(s)" (p. 215).

AERA standards suggest that researchers acknowledge "disconfirming evidence, alternative interpretations of evidence, and limitations due to insufficient or conflicting evidence" (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 215). However, Wilson (2008) insisted that the Indigenous approach to research is to allow people to come to their own conclusions. It is incumbent upon researchers to authentically and honestly lay out their story and relational dependency, and then allow a heuristic process of analysis to take place. In addition, ethical concerns regarding individuals who may be part of the research, whether by choice or by contact, are considered prevalent in autoethnography and using pseudonyms, member checking, and coauthorship are methods in which these concerns are addressed (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012, p. 217). Yet again, Wilson (2008) argued against dominant ethical research policies by citing that "accuracy is more important in describing the set of relationships" (p. 122) and the use of real names and places becomes part of the relational accountability the researcher shares with those involved in the research. An "externally imposed code of ethics did not fit within the axiology of an Indigenous research paradigm" (Wilson, 2008, p. 130).

Criticism

Hayano (1979) credited a 1962 book by Kenyatta, the first president of independent Kenya and a scholar of Kikuyu customs, with being the first to have a published

autoethnography (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). Since that time, the critique of the autoethnography focused on "limited triangulation of sources, limited disconfirming sources of evidence, and irresponsible interweaving of narrative and scientific inquiry" (p. 210). The criticisms of the methodology are not entirely different today. In response, Ellis, et al. (2011) described three critical areas that autoethnographers must address through the research process, including 1) juxtaposing personal reflexive critiques with current research findings to support a claim, 2) including interviews with cultural members who can relay similar experiences, and 3) examining cultural artifacts that can be used to help explain a phenomenon or feeling.

Research published under the positivistic influence has allowed the distribution of knowledge that proposes a metanarrative or truth, which determines power. "Truth is a social, historical, and, therefore, a political struggle. Truth is not power-free; it is power-laden" (Scheurich, 1997, p 34). Positivism, in its guise of objectivity, has claimed to be "value-free and apolitical" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 34). According to Roth (1995), "[t]he idea of an independence of the observer (and therefore his/her knowledge) and the world observed has been seriously questioned both in the natural and the social sciences" (p. 7). Wilson's Indigenous research paradigm continues to challenge the positivistic notion of truth and knowledge creation by claiming that "knowledge cannot be owned or discovered but is merely a set of relationships that may be given a visible form" (p. 127).

Summary

I see my life as being influenced by numerous people, thoughts, ideas, places—messy, conflicting, and chaotic (Russel & Rodríguez, 2007)—but it makes me who I am. This research process has helped me understand the holistic nature of our being (Wilson, 2008). Our lives and our relationships with others in our world are important to understand, and until individuals have

the opportunity to question thoughts, beliefs, practices, policies, histories, and stories, I do not think they are challenged to think critically. This research, my *testimonio*, is a critical reflection of me as a researcher, as a student, and as an aspiring leader in higher education. I do not attempt to replicate a prior study, nor to fill in a gap of a previous research, as traditional, positivistic research claims to do. Rather, I allow my research to organically be defined by what I have learned through previous research, most notably research that speaks to me, as well as incorporate my learned and lived experiences. In this manner, I provide a voice that has traditionally been marginalized in research and a contribution to the body of research on educational leadership.

I also purposefully have not included some traditional subheadings into the methodology section, not because they are not worth addressing, but because I feel they have already been addressed previously or throughout the paper. It is abundantly clear that the validity of my paper may be questioned by research traditionalists. Because this is not a traditional, positivistic research paper, perceived limitations abound. A counter-argument to these positivistic terms is that I have been very honest, open, and explicit with the reader throughout my paper (Wilson, 2008). I have shared my thought process—the why and how—I got to where I did in terms of my decisions for my research, from the topic to the research questions to the methods and methodology chosen. Hence, in the spirit of Wilson's (2008) relationality concept, I have established a relationship worth pursuing if this dissertation deserves merit, not based on what I have not addressed but rather on what I have.

Furthermore, the relational accountability I have with my research assures me that I have respectfully and critically engaged my senses and my abilities to provide a holistic review of my stories (Wilson, 2008). I am learning who I am as a student, as a researcher, and as a leader

because this will influence my future work and future research. I want to be as ethical and valuable in my future research projects as I explore my role in higher education. Spindler and Spindler (1985) describe a "receptive student, sensitized by this process" as "not only an ethnographer of human behavior, but a better teacher, administrator, counselor, or supervisor" (p. 262) and should be experienced by any type of professional who deals with people daily.

Attempting to abide by the AERA standards of research and publication guidelines, but staying true to the values and ethics of my being, I have produced a strong, non-traditional doctoral dissertation. Taking a holistic approach, I draw strength from a number of sources and previous research. Hence, this paper does not follow a traditional framework but rather allows an organic nature of a review of the literature influence how the dissertation will be accomplished. There is a valid reason as to why I have included my personal thought process in this chapter—because I truly and wholeheartedly believe that research is as much the process as it is the product. Furthermore, I hope to be able to influence other scholars who are struggling to find their voice and explore more holistically their philosophies by sharing their story.

CHAPTER IV

TESTIMONIO

I offer chapter four of my dissertation in the spirit of research as ceremony and part of the relational accountability process (Wilson, 2008), in a nontraditional qualitative research method, as well as in the traditional sense, the data collection or findings of my research (Calabrese, 2006). The conventional tenets of research propose that the data section be the fieldwork, "spending considerable time in the setting under study, immersing oneself in this setting, and collecting as much relevant information as possible and unobtrusively as possible" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009, p. 365). In alignment with these goals, my fieldwork is a collection of information about the topic of the study—my life. Critical Race Theory (CRT) researchers assert that the traditional model of data collection and distancing the self from the research does not allow the research process and product to feel authentic or valued; thus, the autoethnography is used to "disrupt forms of knowledge that render the author's identity inconsequential" (Chávez, 2012, p. 335), giving voice and validating the experiences of people living in the margins, like me. Metaphorically, I see this chapter as the bridge between my life and my research, as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (2015) eloquently introduce the numerous authors' work in *This Bridge Called My Back*—I am a first-generation writer who identifies in multiple ways, draws from the culture in which I was raised (p. liv), and uses it in my academic work. I am a firm believe that my ancestors, my family, my friends, and my community, are all bearers of knowledge that has been passed down for generations.

Jones (2005) explains that in autoethnographic works "emotions are important to understanding and theorizing the relationship among self, power, and culture" (p. 767). Wilson (2008) expands on this concept, identifying Indigenous Knowledge as "holistic" (p. 55), and includes spiritual, cultural, entire systems of knowing and relationships (p. 74). Smith (1999) describes how "survival as peoples has come from our knowledge of our contexts, our environments…We had to know to survive" (p. 12-13). I am critically aware that my most unforgettable pieces are memories and stories elicited from emotional experiences I have endured and sympathetic reactions I have had when reading other research, as well as instances that have allowed for critical thinking and reflection about my own thoughts and my own actions. In her autoethnography, Chávez (2012) endorses the "unconcealed and unapologetic use of emotion utilized by the researcher," (p. 341) describing the role of the Chicana protagonist. Jones (2005) encourages researchers to "write your stories as they are constructed in and through the stories of others" (p. 784), and in alignment with these techniques, I solicited memories from my sisters and my family, through prompts, photos, and lived experiences. Additionally, Chávez (2012) conveys that "while stories are many times fragmented bits and pieces of our own collective memory, their instances serve to deepen our understanding of the ways in which social relations are embedded within existing hegemonic structures – in this case, educational institutions" (p. 345).

My memories stem from moments and stories in relation to others. The data in this chapter were collected via numerous means. While researching for my dissertation, I actively read, reacted to the literature, remembered experiences, and wrote stories from my childhood, my college days, and my work experiences in an exploration of who I am as individual, a researcher, and a leader. I have shared defining moments of my life a number of times in

speeches and presentations, and I have used variations of what I have written to share my story here. In the spirit of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), I have shared my drafts with my family and colleagues and asked for their feedback. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) refer to this strategy as "member checks" (p. 376); Shawn Wilson (2008) describes it as the indigenous methodology. I consider this methodology as being authentic and collaborative and valuing respect, reciprocity, and responsibility (Wilson, 2008) in my role as researcher. Smith (1999) acknowledges the "long-term relationships which are established and extend beyond a research relationship to one involving families, communities, organizations, and network" (p.15).

In an autoethnography, the shared relational stories will serve as the data to answer my research questions, which are based on the purpose of the study and are appropriate for the research topic (Calabrese, 2006) to satisfy the traditional dissertation approach. Above all, they honor research as a relational process "that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world" (Wilson, 2008, p. 11). Reiterated from Chapter 2, the research questions are as follows:

1. How does my story, my autoethnography, my *testimonio* empower the individual, the researcher, and the leader, particularly in the realm of higher education?
2. How do relationships, community, place, and circumstance impact a personal narrative and enact agency?

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as autobiographical and ethnographical, "connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739) with "vary[ing] emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)" (p. 740). The autoethnography serves as a method of "weaving theory and narrative together" (Chávez, 2012, p. 344), and as such, my *testimonio* represents self-reflective research into a student who has experienced life, particularly

in the realm of education, while in the margins, and has found a voice for herself. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) legitimize storytelling as a critical race methodology for oppressed people, for "they become empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others, listening to how arguments against them are framed, and learning to make the arguments to defend themselves" (p. 27). I do not consider myself a great storyteller, and I admittedly struggled to find the courage to decide to share and find the manner in which to effectively convey some of my stories. However, growing up in a family of six girls, I have learned to share—to share toys, to share meals, and to share lives with my siblings. I share my story to serve as a model for others who are faced with adversity and who can find encouragement in reading my story. The stories here are not always presented in chronological order, as Wilson (2008) reminds us that the thought process is not linear. Instead, this dissertation is structured by life-defining moments, stories that have shaped who I am, who I have become, and who I hope to be. I share about my parents and my upbringing to provide for you, the reader, the opportunity to get to know me, to learn from my experiences, and to offer a different perspective on what research means.

In *This Bridge Called my Back*, Anzaldúa (2015) poetically writes "…you don't build bridges by storming walls—that only puts people's backs up….It is the responsibility of some of us who tap the vast source of spiritual/political energies to help heal others, to put down a drawbridge" (p. xxviii). The metaphor of the bridge is important for the work that I am doing, in unifying my work as an individual, as a researcher, and as a practitioner. It is also to serve as a resource for other nascent researchers and leaders in higher education to acknowledge, embrace, and honor the ecologies of knowing – the self, the organization and the community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2015).

Mi Familia

In Mexican culture, *la familia* is incredibly significant, and particularly from the small, rural community in which I was raised, *familia* is everything. It is important for the reader to understand *mi familia* in order to understand my upbringing, my culture, and the core of my existence, so I choose to introduce the reader to them. Sofia Villenas and Donna Deyhle (1999) adequately describe the Mexican *familia* as "household-centered rather than child-centered" (p. 424) in contrast to mainstream, middle-class White families. Guadalupe Valdés (1996) describe children as contributors to the family rather than the focus of them. Many of my early memories focus on the entirety of my family.

In order to honor those individuals who have shaped me and inspire me every day, I share what I have learned and what I remember about each of them so that my stories are read in context, but equally as importantly, to create a relationship with the reader and *mi familia y mi communidad.* As a means to "give voice to [the] struggles to contest power relations inside and outside of schools" (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011, p. 99), I write about my lived experiences, incorporating, where relevant, the voices of my sisters, my parents, and my community.

Mis Padres

My parents are humble, proud people. They raised their six daughters to be brave, strong, and resilient individuals. As people of few words, my parents epitomized the adage that actions speak louder than words. They were, and continue to be, model citizens: attending church on a regular basis, living a very traditional, valued lifestyle, volunteering their time in the community, and being vocal but not overburdening in their political views. I learned my values and morals through the Catholic Church in which I was raised and via my family's religious

tenets. While I did not always agree with the rules and structures that governed my religion, I was an obedient child and did not question many teachings.

My parents owned a video store and restaurant, *Casa Video & Munchies Snack Bar,* and at a very young age, we were involved in the many day to day decisions and duties of running a complex business entity. Laughably, we also were never allowed to watch many movies, so to this day, I struggle to comprehend many cultural or classic references. My parents were very strict. We didn't own a television set at home when we were very young, whether we could afford one or not, and my parents attribute not owning one to our academic success. My dad, always a good storyteller, also jokes that it may also be the reason why they had six girls. My parents taught us an unbelievable work ethic. There was always an errand to run, a new technology to try, or a money decision to be made in running the store. We were given duties and responsibilities according to our age but always involved in helping the store run. It was not uncommon to see mattresses in the back office where the little ones would take naps or a stool by the kitchen to learn *Miquito's* (Mike's) special way of making burgers. When we were old enough, we were tasked with watching the chip and candy stand to make sure the customers, sometimes our own classmates, didn't get away with slipping a treat without paying for it. As we grew, we were taught to manage the cash register, serve as waitresses, and even help our mom with payroll. That was my favorite. Writing and cutting checks signed by my mom or dad to pay our employees. I learned so much about finances that I thought I wanted to be an accountant when I grew up.

My daddy. My father, Osvaldo Gonzalez Cardoza, is a kind, devoted, entrepreneurial spirit. Born in deep South Texas the second-eldest son, but fourth-eldest child in a family of four boys and two girls, he was part of the first generation in his family to go to college, where he met

my mother. His first job was at a Social Security Administration office in Brownsville, Texas. They quickly started a family, and soon after daughter number five, Selina, was born, he ventured into an entrepreneurial opportunity, a video rental store business with his older brother. After a brief partnership, my dad ended up taking over the business and moved us from Brownsville to the small community in which he was raised, Edcouch-Elsa.

The lessons I have learned from my father are plentiful. One thing he loved about living and working in a small town is that everyone knew each other. Many popular country songs depict growing up in a small town as negative and as a young teen, I was particularly perturbed by the fact that my parents found out about practically everything that we did; yet, it actually was a very positive reality. When we were young, the entire community cherished our young family of eight that took up an entire pew in the church, congratulated my parents on our frequent childhood accomplishments, and reveled in the entertainment and neighborhood hangout that our small business provided. My dad loved catching up on the latest news with fellow churchgoers, helping nourish them at his video store/restaurant, running into them at the local grocery store, and being able to share stories. Later, the sharing turned into bragging about his daughters, where they had gone off to college, and all about our accomplishments as we each found our individual successes and career paths.

Consciously or unconsciously, my father helped rewrite the narrative of growing up in a large, Hispanic family in a small, rural town. Having earned his bachelor's degrees in sociology and psychology, I like to think that we were his social experiments. He also very loyally listened to self-help, positive motivational videos and tapes the likes of Dale Carnegie and Norman Vincent Peale, and by osmosis, it infiltrated into our very being, our design, and our core values. The one in particular which my sisters and I recall vividly was a business motivational speaker

named James E. Tolleson. His favorite line was "James E. Tolleson says yes, yes, yes!" And in accordance with what was drilled in our head, we lived our life in a very positive, optimistic manner. We came to believe in ourselves and in our abilities and the axiom that we could do anything we set our minds to do. And we did. Even through some of the roughest times, all of his daughters have become successful individuals in their own way.

My dad also taught us the value of caring for others and treating everyone with the utmost respect. No matter what kind of day he was having, everyone who walked into his store was important and deserved to be greeted with a wide, gentle smile and a kind "Hello!" He taught me that we all exist in the world together, and the manner in which we treat strangers, friends, and community members should be no different than how we treat family. This still rings true to this day. Recently, my older sister, Karina, shared that she was remarking on the increase in homeless peddlers in her hometown. She mentioned that my father had taken note of a directive from the church that one should give freely to a person in need, whether or not the giver felt they would use the donation to feed an addiction. The message was, if you had the means to give, you should, without judgment. Whenever we asked my dad what he wanted for his birthday or a holiday, his response was always "world peace." And he continues to live his life with the expectation that one day we will achieve world peace.

My father is very proud of all of his daughters. I gather that it comes from the pride he has in our community. The manner in which he shares stories about the people he knows, the way he talks about our students and our athletes, and the positivity that he exudes in the sharing his knowledge is eminent, and I know he lights up when he talks about us. Edcouch and Elsa are two small, rural communities that make up the Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District. When I was still in school, the smaller, neighboring community to our north, Monte Alto, also

made up part of the district. Monte Alto now has its own school district. The community prides itself on its strong athletics program, specifically football. The football team is known as *La Maquina Amarilla*, or the Yellow Machine, but the true mascot of the school is the Yellow Jacket. As such, even in instances today, people who are from Edcouch-Elsa carry an inimitable sense of pride stemming from that community, growing up in that environment, and persevering after some pretty incredible experiences, including undocumented status and poverty. My dad always had something to share about us with the community, and so many people enjoyed hearing about all of his daughters. Even when he began working at the local university, he bragged about his six girls, how and where they went off to college—Connie to the University of Texas at Austin, Karina to Columbia, Lisa to Stanford, Sara to Yale, Selina to Stanford, and the baby of the family, Rebecca, graduated from The University of Texas-Pan American in three years and completed her doctorate of physical therapy in the same number of years. I knew this firsthand when I started working at the local university, as I heard from others who affectionately had "heard" all about me. By sharing our stories, my dad began to help us rewrite the narrative of Latinas from rural South Texas forging their paths through education.

Counter to the master narrative on Latinos who are identified as *machismo* (inherent toughness that usually connotes sexist), my dad was probably the first feminist whom I encountered. Hurtado (2016) challenges the dominant social narrative that all Latinos are homogenously *machismo,* given their education and life experiences. While Hurtado focuses on young Latino men, I imagine my father's love and devotion to our mother and his education played a role in helping shape our young Latina feminine lives. The knowledge and skills he embedded into our everyday dealings in life taught us how to stand up for ourselves and our beliefs and always put our best foot forward. He was not shy about making us speak for

ourselves whether it was ordering food or sharing our experiences. “Speak up,” he admonished if we got shy, especially when talking to teachers and community members. His constant encouragement and him standing by our side, literally when he could and figuratively when he couldn’t, made the task easier to do and gave us incredible confidence when we were left to face life on our own. There have been many instances or circumstances in life when I can practically hear my father’s voice inside my head, helping me make a decision.

My mommy. My mother epitomizes knowledge of the home (Delgado Bernal 2001, 2002) and the role of *la madre* in *la familia*. Bianca Guzman (2012) argues that “the home is an extension of the classroom in that it is a learning environment that can be utilized to promote agency and positive self-image for Latin@ children” (p. 45). She is the ultimate teacher and it’s no wonder she chose teaching as a profession. She is a quiet, inspiring figure, truly the glue that holds the family together. My parents together, but my mother especially, taught me unconditional love. No matter what situations we, her daughters, presented to her and my father, she smiled, and sometimes cried, but usually kept quiet; it was her demeanor that helped us feel loved. She was always doing things for us and never asked for anything in return. She was the first one up in the mornings, always offered to give up her portions so others could have, and always put herself last. She would give every last article of clothing off her back or food in her possession to ensure that her daughters, and frankly anyone, did not go without.

My mother also taught us many important lessons in life through song. I still can remember almost every word from a tape we used to listen to called “The Magic of Love,” with song titles such as “Try it; you just might like it,” “Helping Hands,” and “Do it Right Now.” These titles and song lyrics were really words by which we lived. Much as my dad’s self-help tapes taught us about positive thinking, my mom’s songs which we sang regularly taught us

about responsibility and love. As a teacher, her love for education and knowledge emanated through her actions every day.

My mother was also the brave and accepting partner to my father's many entrepreneurial ideas—some more successful than others. By watching her navigate the many instances my daddy surprised her with a new idea, I learned patience and discretion. At a young age, my daddy decided we should be taught responsibility and management by running our own *raspa* stand. A *raspa* is Spanish term for a snow cone, and he set up a Kids' Stand, a little shack with a drive-up window, in front of his business. My sisters and I made many memories and made a little extra cash those summer, but what I remember most was how my mom kept us organized and excited, always the steady hand at all of our endeavors.

Mi Comunidad

We grew up in deep South Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, as the four contiguous counties are known, or the "Valley" to those who grew up there. The "Valley" is home to predominantly Mexican American families only miles from the United States-Mexico border. Anzaldúa, who also grew up in the Rio Grande Valley, poetically describes the region as "*una herida abierta* 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. 25). Edcouch and Elsa make up a unique community in the Valley; the two towns, as well as the neighboring northern small town of Monte Alto, made up Edcouch-Elsa Independent School District, or "E-E" as it was more affectionately known. E-E is "a region [that] had earned the dubious distinction as the most economically impoverished area in the country" (Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello, 2016, p. 14), a fate that was generations in the making. Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, & Militello (2016) describe candidly a two-tiered

economic and social structure that existed in these small South Texas towns in the late 1960s and early 1970s:

> It was a narrative of power, where the landowners and farmers wielded the power and manual workers followed the orders of the powerful. The power dynamic was also largely informed by race, as Anglos (Whites) constituted the vast majority of the ruling class, while the Mexicans and Mexican Americans populated the working class. Social structures and life similarly reflected the two-tiered system in ways that starkly resembled the social and political rules of the Jim Crow American South, where segregation reigned supreme (p. 14).

However, growing up in Edcouch-Elsa and not being exposed to the benefits and challenges of life outside rural America, it wasn't obvious that we were missing anything in particular. We never knew we were economically poor, for we had everything we needed to survive and flourish, and our parents never let us into the clue that we were without. There was a lot of pride in being from these small towns which served an as untapped resource, one that local brothers and educators Francisco and Miguel Guajardo (2016) "built on the strengths and wisdom of local people, both young and old, and affirmatively position[ed] those who have been historically marginalized at the center of constructing new meaning" (p. 16). This was my community, one that watched my sisters and me grow, and provided us with the love and assets we needed to be complete.

My community provided an abundance of love, knowledge, and hope for my family and me in traditional and non-traditional ways. As is common in Texas on Friday nights, the entire business community would shut down and all members would attend the local high school football games to cheer on *la Maquina Amarilla.* In non-traditional ways, the community would band together to help raise funds for those in need, whether it was students participating in events such as athletics trips, college visits, or cheerleading competitions, or for helping community members defray the cost of healthcare or even funeral expenses for family members.

During my senior year, our competitive cheerleading squad made it to nationals' competition in Orlando, Florida. It was our fourth year in a row that we advanced, but the first time we made it to the finals and appeared on national television, ESPN2. It was also where the commentator shared with the world that our squad had raised funds to make the trip by selling enchilada plates. At the time, I found it rather embarrassing, but as I'm able to look back on the situation now, I am proud that the entire community showed their support by buying enchilada plates from us, the cheerleaders who made them. Plate sales were, and continue to be, a very common way to help fundraise in my community.

Haciendo que Hacer

As one of six girls, sharing was not only the norm, it was a necessity. We shared clothes, toys, secrets, and even survived sharing the one telephone we had in the home during our adolescent years. Having a routine was important for my parents, as it had to be in order to convince six girls to wake up, get dressed, brush our hair and teeth, pack up homework and prepare for our after-school activities. We also had to learn how to be flexible because we shared everything—one restroom growing up, one shower for six girls. And everything was simple and basic—no fancy shampoos or hair styling products and minimal accessories. I don't know how our parents managed to squeeze that many girls into using only one bathroom, but we did it. Every Sunday, my parents made it a point to attend our local Catholic church, Sacred Heart. We filed out of our white station wagon or the latest "party" van, as we aptly nicknamed our vehicles, and filed neatly into an entire pew, so it was always a priority to try to get there early. For if we were late, most of the pews in the back were already taken, and we were forced to sit up front and behave, which many of us dreaded.

The most enjoyable part for me was after church ended. As we made our way outdoors, it was a quick catch-up with friends, as my mom and dad exchanged hugs and updates with community members. This was partly from where the strong bond of community came; it never felt like gossip but rather a sharing of sorts—who was ill, who needed prayer, what Friday night's game was like, etc. After church, my dad typically stopped by the local *panadería* and allowed whichever one of us was the lucky one chosen to get down that day to select our favorite piece of *pan dulce*. There always was a piece of cake, donuts, and the *marranito*, my dad's favorite. I think my father believed it was the healthiest of the sweet bread treats that were available. The smell of freshly-baked bread topped with tons of sugar was heaven on any given Sunday and a real treat after having successfully and quietly sat through Mass. As soon as we got home, we were usually famished but had to wait until my mom cut each of the pieces of selected *pan dulce* in half. We were able to choose two halves to complete one whole piece, but we had to ensure our siblings got to choose their halves as well. Hence, this experience taught me the wisdom of my parents. We didn't have a lot but we were never exposed to how economically poor we really were because never felt like we were living in poverty or were economically poor. There had to be times where even purchasing *pan* was financially tough, but it was a ritual that my parents never let us miss. On good weeks (or months), we were even treated to a full breakfast at *La Alameda* restaurant, where the entire family of eight ordered our favorite tacos and my dad gave us quarters to put into the jukebox and listen to a variety of pop, country, and Tejano music, an eclectic mix that we all enjoyed.

My parents were geniuses; their simple and efficient lifestyle taught us that a little can go a long way, especially when shared with love. Delgado Bernal (2001) identifies this knowledge as pedagogy of the home. We were used to breaking bread and sharing amongst ourselves and

ensuring that everyone had enough, even if that meant everyone got just a little bit. For many families, this not only means the gracious sharing of food but other provisions, such as clothing, housing, and when necessary, money. Being part of a large family had its benefits. My parents both also come from large families—my mother is the third child (second daughter) in a family of seven kids (also six girls), and my father is the fourth oldest child in a family of six (two girls and four boys). We grew up very close to all of our cousins, though closer on my mother's than my father's side.

Another benefit of coming from large families is the multitude of hand-me-down clothing that was always available. My mother was a masterful seamstress. She didn't sew for a living, but inherited the skill from my grandmother and my namesake, Daria Ramirez. My Grandma *Nena*, as we called her, sewed primarily out of necessity, as did my mother, sewing most of our clothing as young girls. My mother soon became very accomplished and ended up sewing intricate garments for *quinceañeras*, weddings, and other special occasions. When we were young, my mom made identical clothing for the little ones in our family in different sizes. As we grew, those carefully crafted suits were passed down from daughter to daughter. In fact, much of our clothing was gently worn or handed down from sister to sister, or even cousin to cousin. The only time we got new clothes was at the beginning of the school year when we selected limited new articles of clothing and new shoes; Christmas, which typically involved a new dress; and always on Easter. Still, we never felt as if we were missing much, as our parents ensured that any material thing they could not provide for us was abundantly provided in hugs and love. We never went to bed without saying "I love you" to our parents and to each other. We learned how to make the most of every situation we faced, and those small actions of sustenance proved to be of use in the manner in which we faced the world later in life.

My parents raised us to be very appreciative for the blessings in our lives. They did so with such grace and humility that we never realized we lived in statistical poverty. For a family of eight, it was challenging to feed us all on an income of a little over $20,000 a year, much less nurture growing young women. My parents not only managed but did so incredibly well. Knowing what I know now about our institutional (government) systems, I am aware that they did not do it alone. Our school district met the federal levels of students living in poverty to provide free meals (breakfast and lunch) for all students in the district. Hence, during the school year, we were provided meals at school, and could not be picky about what we ate. During the summers, the school across from my dad's business also provided free lunch so we ate together, usually all of the siblings. I know my mom also took advantage of the food supplements that were available through the WIC (Women, Infant, Children) program for mothers with young children, a special supplemental nutritional program from the United States Department of Agriculture, so we had cereal, vegetables, juices, and peanut butter, as well.I vaguely remember my mom making reference to our abuelas, *Mama Fela* and *Buela Lucinda,* standing in line to pick up "government cheese." It was with this American cheese that my mom learned to make our delicious family recipe for *enchiladas.* To this day, whenever we get together as a family, our favorite dish to cook together are *enchiladas.*

Las Hermanas

As a family exercise and as an attempt to share with the reader my family, I invited my sisters to share their favorite memories of our childhood and what lessons those memories, particularly of our parents, have taught us as adults, via our chat group messaging, which we lovingly titled "Mama Chat." Below are a few of their responses and an analysis of my interpretation of their memories and stories. [Note: These conversations took place over a text

messaging, Hangouts, that consists of all the siblings and our mother. The messages have been left in their original form, so there are quite a few shortened word uses and casual language terminology as well as emoticon (emotional icons).] I reflect on their stories in the following paragraphs and analyze the data in the next chapter.

> *Selina: Lisa, my memory or memories involved renting a room at the beach and cramming as many people as we could. And eating ham and cheese sandwiches and Doritos and being surrounded by laughter. I take away the value of "the more, the merrier," prioritizing family, and enjoying simple pleasures.*

As a large family, it has already been mentioned that sharing really is part of everyday life. It happens not only in our immediate family, but with our extended family, as well. My mom learned quite a bit from her family, and we learned to relish in the immediacy of our close interactions wherever we were. Renting a condo at the beach was a favorite pastime of my family, usually taken care of by my aunt Elia who always knew someone from whom we could rent. Typically, in a tight two-bedroom condo, we managed to squeeze in our large family (of 8), my aunt Elia's family (5), my grandparents, and anyone and everyone else who could come. We also learned to manage to make the most of our resources, buying bread, ham, and cheese to make sandwiches, and eating only what we had available which included boiled eggs and potatoes. I thought it was something everyone did and can recall when I first realized that not everyone took boiled eggs and potatoes on road trips; I was embarrassed at first when I realized the reason why we had to do so, but then realized how fortunate we were to even be on such a trip. We rarely ate at fast food restaurants because we could not afford it. Somehow, we were always treated at the end of our trips to the beach, making a stop at the Dairy Queen drive-thru window for ice cream. What a refreshing way to end a typically scorching south Texas weekend

with a dipped cone or a blizzard shared with another sister—my favorites were Oreo and Heath bar, but usually no one wanted to share with me the Heath bar, so I ended up with a chocolate dipped cone.

Connie: I think mine would be the goat event... I learned ur bff pet can be a delicious meal for others even if it's not u 🤭

Growing up, there are photos of us with a pet goat, Billy, according to my older sister, Connie. While I do not have vivid memories of playing with the goat in our backyard, my sisters do (and we have photos to prove it). What I do recall is learning the fate of our beloved pet when we asked about it. We were much older by the time we were told the truth. We were going through old photos and ran across the photo with a goat, when someone had the courage to ask what happened to our beloved pet. My father, who has always had a sense of humor, responded, "He was delicious," followed with, "You girls thought so, too." I have known that my father's favorite meal is *cabrito,* but as a child was never able to put the two together, until this fateful afternoon when I learned all about how no one wanted to slaughter the animal when it came time, so my dad took him to the back of my grandparent's ranch, tied him to a tree, and slit his throat. They then proceeded to skin him and cook his meat which he fed to his daughters. I have never been able to eat *cabrito* again, and to this day refuse to do so. Though in hindsight, I am grateful that our pet provided for our family. I do not know or understand the circumstances surrounding our financial situation and if raising a goat and eating it was a relatively decent investment to feed a large and growing family, but I'm sure it wasn't easy for our parents to have made that decision, even if my father chooses to remember it differently. I also note how the killing of our pet goat became a family affair. When my dad shared the story of who didn't want

to kill the poor animal, he recalled being with my mother's brother and father at their family ranch, so even a dramatic event was always a family affair.

Karina: Me, definitely the power of positive thinking. James E. Tolleson says, "Yes, yes, yes!" And even Magic of Love. Very profound subliminal messages

Connie: That definitely stuck with me, the power of positive thinking! And so throughout my life as I met or came across different types of ppl mostly cynical or negative…I always rmbr that, and have always held onto that positivity... there's been a few times that it doesn't always shine thru but once the fog settles (on like any situation) I have always come to realize with anything it's all about perspective... u can find positivity anywhere!! It's better than focusing on the bad things all the time 😅

There are certain overt messages that remain with you while growing up which influence almost every decision that we make, but it is also the covert messages—daily actions or subliminal reminders—that you do not realize have an impact in your life. As was shared earlier, my dad used to listen to a motivational speaker named James E. Tolleson, and his positive money-making strategies. Whether purposefully or not, James E. Tolleson's message of "Yes! Yes! Yes!" instilled in his daughters a subliminal message that anything can be done. Cesar Chavez shared a similar message of *¡Si, Se Puede!* This saying became a rallying cry for many of us in education, to indicate that yes, college dreams were attainable. I sometimes ponder why we weren't taught more about Cesar Chavez and the political Chicano movements at home, but South Texas was a very complacent, subdued area, and I liken my parents teaching us by their individual actions rather than by someone else's. Also, we never learned about Cesar Chavez in school, either. My dad watched video messages of Tolleson's speeches, listened to audio cassette tapes in the car as we drove to run errands for our store, *Casa Video.* And again, in his

enlightened sense of humor, reiterated those words to us whenever we questioned our ability to do something—even if it was cleaning the house, doing laundry or being asked to do something we despised. Eventually, the phrase became so engrained in our mind that we seemed able to approach life in such a manner. Yes, everything we tried was possible.

> *Sara: I agree with all of you, beach trips w sandwiches and Doritos, making the most of what we had and never feeling like we lacked or needed anything, positive thinking FO SHO!!! It came out as one of my "strengths"... But also, giving back, not judging.. Wait maybe those are things mom and dad taught us, not necessarily memories lol*
>
> *I seem to have more memories of when I was in charge of Selina and Rebecca and I would treat them like my kids! I loved to cook (Mac and cheese, tuna, grilled cheese, cereal! Haha) and clean (yes, I'm the weirdo!)...*

Growing up with many siblings, we didn't have enough time to choose a syndrome—first born, middle child, baby—for we played all and any roles at a given time. Sara recalled a memory from when she was left "in charge" of her younger siblings. Sara was the fourth child, so by no means was the eldest, but loved to play that role when needed. As the third child, I was very much a middle child, but it never bothered me. I liked flying under my parent's radar, trying to not gain attention and staying out of trouble. We all were given specific chores around the house, but I never remember our home being clean and spotless; it was very much lived in. After dinner, we each had a stack of dishes to clean; everyone despised having to clean the pots and pans. I still do to this day. In some way, this has impacted my approach in life, as the roles I have pursued in my career are important, but I choose to play a support role and remain outside of the spotlight.

Playing school was a very common pastime for us girls. I hated being the student because whoever was the teacher acted like she knew it all, but it was probably true that she knew more than us, and there was always something we could learn from her. We used this as a teaching and learning moment. My mom even had little desks for us to use and pretend to play school. We had an abundance of books, all used, but they made for important teaching tools. We didn't have a slew of other materials but that allowed us to be more creative in our learning excursions.

> *Sara: Also, one very positive memory I have that has always stayed w me is how religious/spiritual mom and dad are and how they showed us to give praise to God. I'm pretty sure Selina and Rebecca and I were the only ones around when we started going to adoration on Wednesday or Thursday mornings at 5:30am. I remember not liking waking up so early, but once we were at church, we would pray the rosary in Spanish. This must've been my junior or senior year. And I have never forgotten that, the importance of putting God first and the dedication to my faith. Thanks Mom and Dad!* 💞

My parents were and still remain staunch Catholics. While their daughters have varying degrees of loyalty to the church, I do believe that the manner in which they chose to raise us was necessary and had a positive, lasting influence on our lives. The Catholic Church, as is the case with any religion, provided a strong foundation for a large Mexican American family. We learned core values and commandments by which to live. Cherríe Moraga (2015) shares a story when her mom's faith helped her overcome a difficult moment:

> Once at a very critical point in my work on this book, everything I loved—the people, the writing, the city—all began to cave in on me, feeling such utter despair and self-doubt, I received in the mail a card from my mother. A holy card of St. Anthony de Padua, her patron saint, her "special" saint, wrapped in a plastic cover. She wrote in it: "Dear Cherríe, I am sending you this prayer of St. Anthony. Pray to God to help you with this book." And a cry came up from inside me that I had been sitting on for months, cleaning me out—a faith healer. Her faith in this saint did actually once save her life. That day, it helped me continue the labor of this book (p. xl).

This example epitomizes the faith that my parents and grandparents carry strongly, something that I waver and wonder about to this day. I know my parents and my grandparents have said numerous prayers to various saints for all of us girls, for our educational endeavors, for our many travels, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

The Catholic Church did something else to us—it instilled fear in us. Whenever we were tempted to break the rules my parents had made for us, we were always reminded that there was someone else watching over us, and if my parents didn't catch us, "He" would, and one way or another, we would be punished for our sins. While my belief in God has teetered a bit, there are times in my experiences where I have believed that there is a higher being who has a hand in my life. My issue remains with the church itself and the decisions and influences that the people of the church have enforced on others.

I have thought about and analyzed my relationship with religion and faith. I have often thought critically about how my life choices would have been different had my life taken a different path. I have also shared with my older son the complicated path of faith that I have traversed. I firmly believe had I followed the sacraments of the Church and done things "the right way," I would have been more faithfully committed to following the ways of the church. In retrospect, however, I was raising him at the same time that I was trying to make meaning of life, at a time where I was questioning my religion and my faith. I was also married to his father, who was raised a Jehovah's Witness, though a non-practicing one. Furthermore, I was studying different religions of the world in college, and this new knowledge made me question my religious beliefs. Thus, my faith was in flux which influenced my son's beliefs, as he is agnostic. In his desire to make his own decisions about his faith, he sometimes tries to argue that I should have exposed him to a variety of religious tenets and allowed him to make the choice about his

beliefs. I remind him that I know very little about other religions and likely if I had been older and had processed my religious beliefs before having him, he likely would have been raised with a strict, Catholic upbringing.

¡Sí, Se Puede!

I was sitting in front of one of the old, tan computers that lined the walls in our classroom, making final edits to my graduation speech. Had I remembered to thank everyone who had helped me make it this far? I couldn't thank everyone by name or I might go on forever, and I had been given a time limit, but there were so many important people to whom I needed to express my gratitude. Was it appropriate to thank my boyfriend? I had included him in my speech because I thought that was what you did for people you loved, and our love was real in my head. Earning the title of "Mr. and Mrs. Edcouch-Elsa" seemed apt at the time. Would I stay on time? I had not had a chance to practice or time my speech because I procrastinated and was still here, mere hours before the start of the ceremony when I had to take the stage, trying to finalize my speech. Would I be able to read my script and not blunder in front of all my classmates, family, and friends? As a cheerleader since middle school, I was used to cheering in front of large crowds and loved it, but I had never had to speak individually in front of an audience the size of our home-side football stadium. Plus, having to impart words of wisdom to my classmates was daunting. I felt a flutter in my stomach, and what should have just been nerves was actually a reminder of the reality that I found myself in – a reality I had yet to fully acknowledge; I was pregnant. I was seventeen years young and almost five months along, preparing to graduate as the valedictorian of my senior class, and nervous about what was to come. But I didn't have time to think about it at the moment. I was preparing to cross a big stage in my life. I was about to graduate from this poor, rural Edcouch-Elsa High School and jet off

into the real world, attending the college of my dreams on the west coast, Stanford University. At least, that is what my naïve mind was preparing to do.

As the third child of six girls in my family, and the third child to aspire to leave home and go away to college, I was anxious and eager to pursue my dreams of a higher education. I worked incredibly hard to beat out probably the smartest boy in our class, but barely, likely by tenths of a point and at the very last minute, when our final semester grades were handed out. We were sitting in the same class, as we took most of our classes together, when we were handed our final report cards which would be calculated into our Grade Point Average (GPA) to officially rank us. I scored one point higher in one of my classes than he did, but he was ahead of me at the end of our junior year rankings, so we had to wait for it to be official. I was proud of my accomplishments, building off of Connie and Karina's success. The Cardoza girls had earned the reputation of being *pensadoras* (González, 2001). As Francisca González (2001) describes, "To think of young Mexicanas as *pensadoras* is to think about education excellence" (p. 641). Connie had graduated from high school in the top 10 percent; Karina had graduated in the top 10, as the number seven graduate. I had my eyes set on being in the top 10, but never imagined finishing number one. After all, being the youngest in the class and earning the status of valedictorian would be a difficult feat.

My love for education and, in turn, my academic success, started early. As referenced above, my mother was my first teacher; she instilled in her daughters a love for reading and the power of an education. The photos of us kids sitting in a pile of books around her demonstrated her unparalleled patience in teaching us all how to read and how to write. She started her career as a school teacher, and her love of education rubbed off on her daughters. We were always "playing school" at home, taking turns as to who played the pupil and who played the teacher.

She was always just an earshot away to ensure that we were playing fairly. Our days of playing school at home, the time my mom spent teaching us how to read, and our strict upbringing teaching us how to be obedient paid off.

Right before the Christmas holiday break during first grade, I was called into the principal's office and was so scared because I could not understand what I had done. In my mind, the principal's office was only where "bad" kids went. Apparently, they had also asked my parents to come in as the principal wanted to talk about options for me. In first grade, I was academically far ahead of my peers in reading and in mathematics, according to our test scores. Our classroom was split into two sections—the front of the class with the traditional rows and a smaller partitioned part of the class toward the back. It was split by a portable green chalkboard. Because I typically finished my work early, my teacher asked me to lead a group of students who needed some additional help at the back of the class. I loved being "in charge" and being able to use the chalkboard to teach my fellow classmates how to solve problems. I soon learned that the reason I was summoned to the principal's office was to decide my future – the principal had offered to pass me up a grade so that I would not be held behind academically in a school with limited resources, and my parents and I had to decide whether to move me from first grade into a second-grade classroom when I returned from the winter break. I don't know if I was more thrilled or frightened by the prospect, but with my parent's support and encouragement, I obviously chose to be moved up a grade. My older sister, Karina, had also been passed up a grade (from kindergarten to first grade), so even though she and Connie were two years apart in age, they were one year apart in grade level.

By the time I started high school, college was an expectation, not a choice, but where I would go became the next big question. Even though both of my parents had earned their

bachelor's degrees from the local university as first-generation college students, "going away" to college was a foreign concept to me. I didn't fully understand what it meant to go to college, however, until I had the opportunity to sit in a classroom on a college campus. The closest experience that I came to being in a college setting was participating in a couple of sessions with the Mother Daughter Program at the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) campus. It was a very enlightening experience to have been invited to not only be part of the program, along with some of my siblings and my mother, of course, but to be hosted on the campus and get to sit in real college classrooms. I wish I recalled the names of many of our influential guest speakers, but I do know that we always had a Latina role model speak to us about her successes in life and career. I always envisioned myself "coming back" one day, and it became a dream to be able to share my success story with a group of young women. Little did I know that my life's path would afford me the opportunity to do so, only I never imagined my story in the way it would play out.

It was my junior year in high school when the concept of attending college became a tangible outcome of my goals to further my education. My sister, Connie, was attending the University of Texas at Austin, and Karina was enrolled at Columbia University. Many students from our high school had never even left "the Valley" much less the state, but like Anzaldúa (2007), I knew "I had to leave home so I could find myself (p. 38). During our respective junior years, Karina and I were extremely fortunate to take part in our school's East Coast Trip. The East Coast Trip was the brainchild of our high school teacher, Francisco Guajardo, who wanted his students to aspire to attend Ivy League universities, even though the likelihood of students from small, rural communities being accepted was slim. We fundraised and received generous donations in order to plan an educational and cultural trip to the East Coast. The trip was not

only fascinating, but it was enlightening. At a couple of the colleges, we were hosted by former students from the Rio Grande Valley, but there were many more schools where there were no alumni from our area to host us. This was a wake-up call for me, as I realized that very few graduates from Edcouch-Elsa ever left to study at college, much less attend Ivy League schools. We met with admissions counselors at each of the universities who gave us advice on how to "stand out" from the rest of the applicants, but it became clear to me that this experience and this conversation was a privilege not many students who lived where I did or came from a school like mine were able to have. Though I did have to wonder how many other aspiring Ivy League students did have the privilege of doing so. As part of the trip, we also were able to experience cultural activities, some to which we could relate like a Latino fraternity celebration, and others to which we could not, like attending two Broadway musicals – *Les Misérable* and *Stomp*. Both experiences were incredible, but I felt more proud to be a part of and thrilled to experience the Latino group celebration and completely out of place while watching the musical. I had never been exposed to a Broadway musical or even understood what a significant occurrence it was to be able to attend this classic, iconic performance. Still, I felt more alive and enriched by attending the Latino celebration as the members of the fraternity honored our culture. It felt like the Latinos attending Ivy League universities could be my "cultural translators" (de Anda, 1984) and teach me what I needed to know to navigate my way through college.

The best part of my East Coast trip was being able to visit and stay with my sister, Karina, at Columbia University. I had always looked up to Karina, and it was thrilling to see her living on her own, making grown up decisions, right in the middle of New York. Unbeknownst to our chaperones, likely, she took us to a party and even to a club downtown. She knew the bouncer who let us in and even though we were underage and couldn't drink, just being there

made us feel like adults. I couldn't wait to get to college. I couldn't believe my sister who grew up in the same, strict household I had, was living life in the big city and thriving.

After this trip, my college goals were set. I wanted to be a college student. As scary and intimidating as the work sounded, I could not wait to be on my own, away from the rules of my parents, the confines of my rural town, and the complacency of my people. I wanted to live life and live it large. So, I applied to as many universities as I could—ten in all, mostly Ivy League schools, plus back-up schools in Texas, University of Texas at Austin and the University of Texas-Pan American. I was eager to get out of the Valley and from the prodding by one of our Teach for America teachers, I even applied to a school about which I had no clue, Stanford University in California. My heart was set on going to Brown University, as that was the school that appealed to me the most and with which I had felt most comfortable, but I had been relegated to the dreaded waiting list. The agony of waiting for the mail during the week we were expected to hear about our decisions was excruciating; it was very different than being able to log on and automatically see a decision as is available online now. We had to wait until we got home or our parents came home from work, after visiting our local post office, with a bulk of mail. I learned quickly that a small letter meant I was rejected and a large packet meant the school wanted me. Given the pace of physical mail, our denial letters arrived sooner than our acceptance letters, and each day, the group of us who went on the East Coast trip stood by our home phones to either celebrate, mourn, or comfort each other. It was nothing like I had experienced before. I was denied admission at Harvard, but accepted to Columbia, Yale, and Stanford, which became my top choices in that order as I was contemplating where my next steps would take me. I hadn't realized what the feat of being accepted to these universities meant; I was pleased that I had a choice. It turns out that so did all of my other friends who

participated in the East Coast Trip. It was a fitting way to celebrate all of our work – we had done this together; we had gone through this experience together – written our essays, discussed in class, reflected on our experiences on the trip, and now, we were finally able to take the next steps, although this time we would not be able to go through this experience together. We would have to do this alone.

My decision came down to how I wanted to find myself and my independence. I could follow in Karina's footsteps and join her at Columbia. She and I could share friends much as we did in high school, be on our own but together in the crazy world that she had learned to navigate. Our parents could find comfort knowing that we had each other, and we could celebrate together at least all of the holidays that she missed coming home because the flights were too expensive, and my parents couldn't afford it. In fact, during the days of limited cell phone affordability, my parents ended up paying for a 1-800 number so that she could call home at least once a week, usually on Sunday evening. Sometimes we didn't hear from her in days. Having experienced now what it is like to have a kid to college, I can't imagine, as a parent, what that was like for them–sending their 17-year-old child off into the big world (New York City!) and not being able to be there for her at every turn or know anyone near who could assist.

In considering my postsecondary options, I had lived in Karina's shadow for much of my life. I was always "Karina's (or Connie's) little sister." That is how all of our teachers knew me until they could remember my name; our family even referred to us as "the Cardoza girls." I knew that I appreciated being at the same school with her and continuing to learn from her, and had I fully comprehended the emotional and support needed to succeed in college, I may have made a different decision. In the end, I felt that this was my opportunity to find my unique identity and make a name for myself. Yale was my second option. Yale was far enough away

from Columbia that I could indeed find my own path, yet close enough that Karina and I could spend those holidays together, and we could visit each other on weekends. Yale had provided for me a slightly better financial aid package than Columbia had, but I was still leaning toward Columbia. The financial decision was also one that was high on my list of priorities because I knew it burdened my parents, who now had three children in college.

Stanford had surprisingly provided me with the best financial aid package of the three universities, but I had no idea what this university was like. At my counselor's recommendation, I called up the Columbia financial aid office and asked if they could match Stanford's offer or at a minimum what Yale had submitted. Their response, which caught me off guard and left me in shock, was that Columbia "didn't play the matching game." For a young, poor girl from a tiny, rural town whose parents now had three daughters in college, any bit of extra financial assistance made a huge difference. It was the same for any bit of kindness. The coldness in the lady's voice left me feeling like Columbia didn't want me after all and those words still stick with me today. Because of my low-income background, Stanford had also granted me an all-expense-paid trip to visit the campus for Admit Weekend, and that trip made all of the difference in the world. Not only was Stanford in sunny California (which appealed to me because I loved being outdoors at the time and was very active), but the warmth that I felt from the people who welcomed me to campus was unparalleled. From the moment I stepped on campus to the moment I was able to take it all in on my flight home, Stanford felt like the right place to be, no matter how hard a decision it was to make.

By the time my Stanford Admit Weekend trip came about, I knew that I was expecting, but I was not ready to acknowledge the reality of what that meant. I hadn't told anyone other than my boyfriend and my dearest friend about the predicament in which I found myself. She

and I had gone to Target together to purchase the pregnancy tests since both of our cycles were late. In our teenage minds, we had decided that the Target restroom was the best place to discover our fate. It was on my birthday, March 30, and my extremely strict parents had allowed me to go out on a double-date only to celebrate this day by watching a movie. My friend and I were on the same flight back from Stanford Admit Weekend when I got sick on the plane. Reality was sinking in. As the plane landed and my weekend dreaming of endless possibilities in sunny California came to an end, I was sick to my stomach – literally and figuratively. Literally, the effects of flying while pregnant made it difficult to breath and I felt nauseated. Figuratively, I could not believe the situation in which I found myself. This was not how I was raised. This was not supposed to have happened. This was not supposed to be the ending to my story. I had fallen in love with the possibility of attending Stanford University, but I was facing the reality that I might never be able to attend. I accepted my admittance to Stanford on May 1, but as I crossed the stage to accept my high school diploma, I knew that this dream may not become a reality.

My decision about where I would go to college would not only affect me, but my entire family, and now, my new growing family. For many Latino families, college definitely is a family choice, not so much an individual one (Barajas & Pierce, 2001), but this was different. My family, who I was supposed to make proud and who had provided me with so much support in my endeavors, was about to be horrendously disappointed in their daughter. I had shamed them, and I was embarrassed for I was raised in a community that "view[s] youth as assets and families as pillars of support," (p. 54) as Guajardo, Guajardo, and Oliver (2016) clearly describe in their article about growing up in this South Texas region. I would have to channel my inner *guerrera* spirit, "a warrior spirit that invokes resistance and resilience…to courageously disrupt

the deficit discourses in a decolonizing counter-narrative" (Guzmán, 2012, p. 45), in order to prove my worth.

At the recommendation of a dear teacher-mentor, Mr. Charles Moody, who had attended Stanford University, I wrote to the Admissions Office and asked if I could defer my enrollment. I had no idea what deferment even meant, nor that it was even an option, but I soon learned that several other students deferred their enrollment to conduct study missions, go on backpacking excursions, or just take a year off before starting the rigors of university study. It was a concept foreign to me, but when I received a call from the Admissions Office, informing me that they had approved my deferment, I was unbelievably grateful, and knew I would not disappoint.

Gabrielito

That September, my son, Hilario Gabriel Prieto came into the world much the way he took on life – a little early and unexpectedly, but very defiantly. I had been bedridden in the hospital for three weeks with a pre-ruptured membrane and required constant monitoring. My doctor had predicted with 80% certainty that I was having a girl, so my hospital room had been decorated in pink and the few gifts I received were for a baby girl. Gabriel seemed to be shy and hiding from the camera. Once he hit a milestone of weighing five full pounds in my womb, the doctor felt it was safe for him to be born. On September 19, 1998, the doctor began the inducement at 10 a.m., certain it would take a minimum of 24 hours before I gave birth. At 3 p.m., he checked on me one last time before being called into emergency surgery. By 8 p.m., after having several nurses try to get me to wait for my regular doctor, they had to call in an emergency room doctor to practically catch Gabriel as he made his grand entrance into the world at 8:01 p.m. The first time I held my 4-pound, 13-ounce baby boy (whom the doctor hadn't

confirmed until a few minutes after he was born), I knew that my world would forever be changed.

That spring, my high school sweetheart and I decided that we would head to Stanford, California in a few months the "right" way. We got married in June. Having passed on the traditional coming-of-age celebration at 15 years, *la quinceañera*, here I was at 17 years old, walking down the aisle in a dress my talented mother had hand sewn for me. It was a nice, traditional Mexican ceremony, as all of our high school friends and practically most of the community came out to celebrate.

And almost a year after my world changed with a baby in my life, I was about to embark on another tremendous journey – trekking to Stanford as a new mom and a new wife in order to begin my studies as a new college student. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I knew that I had a *guerrera* spirit (Guzman, 2012) and a resilient mindset, and I would do everything in my power to be successful.

Attending Stanford University proved to be a challenge on numerous levels, but specifically—academically, culturally, and personally. Academically, it was a humbling experience to be accepted and able to learn from and be amongst some of the greatest minds from across the nation and even the world. Sometimes, I joke that the only reason I was admitted was due to Affirmative Action which some can argue provided an unfair advantage, but for which Solórzano & Yosso (2002) make a compelling case and the need of affirmative action policies. In the end, I was able to successfully navigate through and graduate. Culturally, I wanted to expand my horizons beyond the Mexican American culture in which I had been immersed growing up in South Texas and experience worldly conversations, traditions, and customs (Rendón, 1992). Personally, being a new mom, a new wife, and a new college student,

proved to be the toughest hurdle; yet, it proved to be the most rewarding and defining one for this young Latina (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Pobresita

Very consciously, I donned my new, bright cardinal sweater with the words "Stanford" emblazoned in large font across the front. Even though I could not afford this purchase, I had decided to use the credit card for which I had easily been approved, the same one I was using to purchase our expensive airline tickets back home to Texas (and the same one I spent years trying to pay off), to buy this sweatshirt because it was important to me. I walked into the Department of Human Services office for a second time, intent on making this experience better than the first. After all, proudly displaying where I went to school would help the workers there understand that I was in college and trying hard to make life better for my young family. But deep inside, I was ashamed because I knew the stigma that came with being "on food stamps." I knew what strangers were thinking about me being a teen mom, and I knew that no article of clothing would change the fact that this young Latina was feeding into the stereotype.

Dressing differently didn't quite work. After filling out mountains of paperwork, I received the same stares and disregard for what I thought I was doing right. Being a financially poor student in college is difficult for a myriad of reasons; being a poor student at Stanford with a small family to feed is even more so. Even though my husband at the time was working and I had a fairly decent financial aid package, it was a challenge to keep food on the table, let alone healthy food. I figured being able to supplement our limited income with some funding for food was a good idea. After all, I fit the exact profile of a person who should benefit from receiving governmental welfare assistance—someone who was facing a challenging circumstance but was doing everything she could to climb her way out of it. My first visit to the welfare office was

nightmarish. Between the employees who looked upon you with disdain, the long waits at every stop, and the mountain of paperwork that needed to be filled out, the process was embarrassing and exhausting. It is a miracle anyone ever receives aid because of everything you have to undergo. Still, the manner in which those individuals who were supposedly there to help me spoke to me hurt my feelings and my pride. I explained my situation, and some gave me a sarcastic wish of luck. I knew that this was temporary, but I also knew that I wanted to prove such to others, and I thought wearing the limited Stanford clothing that I had would help send that message. I used my Stanford email address in much the same way—I wanted it to define me before the color of my skin did or the fact that I had a child at such a young age.

Because I had chosen to study economics, the state of our welfare system was a topic at hand. I rarely had enough courage to speak up in class; even though I did most of the readings, I was never quite sure of my interpretation of it and never confident enough to even ask a question. José Saldívar (2014), who also graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School and attended Stanford University, shares a similar story when recalling his college experience, "Sometimes the material seemed more advanced than anything I had ever been exposed to, other times I felt as though I was outclassed by my peers" (p.148). So, when our lecture covered the topic of welfare, I was not prepared for what I was about to experience. We were asked to provide feedback on the current state of our welfare programs, including supplemental funding for food. I do not recall the specifics of the class, the professor, or even the article we read, but I do recall how I felt that day. In my mind, the reading had not elicited the type of responses I heard in class. The ignorance and stereotyping that was verbalized from students who were supposed to be my peers was unbelievable. A couple of students who spoke up marginalized families who were on welfare and expressed stereotypical judgments. I slumped in my seat and vowed from

that day forward to never be reliant on assistance from any entity. I did not want to be associated with "those people" whom my classmates were talking about in class. It didn't occur to me at the time to speak up and challenge their mindset or share my story to defend myself or my situation or anyone else's, for that matter. I had not found my voice as an advocate for myself because I didn't know myself, and I found myself still buying into the master narrative.

Even though I grew up financially poor, I didn't know just how poor until my older sister Karina went off to college when my family was forced to admit in writing that we were needy. The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) asked for detailed information about earned income and assets. Karina later found a letter that my dad had written to her college's financial aid office to inquire about additional help to pay for her tuition because his business was going under (Cardoza, unpublished). A video store chain had moved into the neighborhood and they were able to offer cheaper rental rates and more movie titles than my parents' store was able to, basically putting them out of business. Around the same time, the school had become a closed campus, so students who would frequent the snack area/restaurant part of the store weren't coming around as often during lunch nor after school. Business was declining, and my parents found themselves in financial distress. My father penned a letter to Columbia University's financial aid office asking for additional aid for Karina. Knowing what I know about my father and his pride, this appeal was likely a last, desperate resort. Working in higher education, it is also pretty incredible that we were successful in college while facing the financial difficulties we did.

Lenguaje/Idioma

I heard the chant in the girls' bathroom loud and clear, "Diarrhea…cha, cha, cha! Diarrhea…cha, cha, cha!" Giggles ensued. I was in there with them, in a stall, for crying out

loud. Although that was probably why they were doing it, so that I could hear. I was four years old, had just started pre-kindergarten, and was not prepared for what I was experiencing. My family didn't even call me by my first name, unless I was in trouble, but even then, it was my full name that my parents shouted: "*Daria Lisa*!" Still, on all of my educational records, I was listed as Daria Cardoza. So, when my teacher attempted to pronounce my first name, Daria, as she was taking attendance, it went as badly as possible, and something very closely sounding like diarrhea came out: "Dair-ee-uh." Then giggles from the entire class. She was Mexican American but had Anglicized my name for reasons I did not understand at the time. Delgado Bernal (2002) contributes such experiences to language deprivation and suppression to the dominant Eurocentric beliefs and practices in our educational system. Speaking Spanish was forbidden in many schools and many students were admonished or even physically punished for doing so, including my parents, I would later learn. This was my first real experience with language prejudices that would follow me throughout my life.

My sisters and I were not raised speaking Spanish in our home. It became evident to me that I really didn't know Spanish when I signed up to take a Spanish language class at my high school. I understood the language more than I spoke it or could write it because we were immersed in it – whether on the school playground, in church, or even with family. We visited my grandparents nearly every Sunday. They would speak to us in Spanish, but allowed us to respond in English; when they did speak English, I could tell they were slightly ashamed of their accents. I never knew how much I didn't know until I took a class. At first, not speaking Spanish was something of which I was not ashamed. In fact, speaking Spanish was seen as a deficit in my school, as the community in which we were raised suffered from generations of a two-tiered system, where English-speaking Anglos dominated the class in power (Guajardo, Guajardo,

Jansen, & Militello, 2016) and where language had been used as a tool for discrimination to justify school segregation (Delgado Bernal, 2012). It didn't take long before I had bought into the dominant principle, believing that the "smarter" kids in school spoke English clearly, and I wanted to be associated with those smart students even though I could not see at the time the way the educational system failed Spanish-speaking students (Saldivar, 2014; Valenzuela, 1999).

When my sisters and I finally had the courage to ask our parents why they did not teach us Spanish, they were firm in their response that they did not want us to be hit in school and endure the pain and embarrassment they had experienced as children whose first language was Spanish. As a result of them being humiliated at school, we were raised speaking English to the best of our abilities, as my parents believed that was the way to be successful in education and in life. Valenzuela (1999) attributes this misconception to the school systems. Anzaldúa (2007) recalls, "At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents" (p. 76). This is the same University from where my parents graduated, where I worked for a number of years, and from where I will earn my doctorate. In her *testimonio*, Minerva Chávez (2012) shares a poignant story about her experience in kindergarten. Minerva had studied, learned, and practiced her numbers from 1 through 100 in anticipation of the big day when she would have to stand in front of the classroom and recite them. "It was the big day…I had practiced counting to 100 all month and was eager to reap the rewards," she recalls (Chávez, 2012, p. 337). One by one, she heard her teacher admonish the other students with accents on their pronunciation of certain numbers, *tu* for two, for example. She knew every number by heart, but when it was her turn, she froze halfway through before pronouncing the number fifty because she knew with her accent, it would not come out the way her teacher wanted it to. Instead of being afforded the opportunity to display

all that she did know, Minerva was scolded for not studying enough and not knowing how to count to 100 in kinder. This experience not only impacted her in kinder but throughout her entire schooling. Chávez (2012) reflects:

> [T]he idea of using autoethnographic research in the Kinder Story calls attention to how dominant forms of assimilationist ideology function within educational institutions in shaping students' behaviors in schools. In my case, I felt silenced brought about by my feelings of shame in language use by a well-meaning teacher who engaged in practices of linguistic discrimination. (p. 339)

My sisters and I were the product of this type of discrimination, having lost our language to assimilation. The shame I felt was also apparent in other aspects of my life, particularly as I made my way through my profession.

Chávez's story and the nature of well-intentioned but discriminatory practices of education is not unfamiliar to me, even as a predominantly English speaker. In third grade, I was asked to serve as a peer mentor for a program called Help One Student to Succeed (HOSTS), given my above-average reading skills. I was assigned a student, who at the time I probably did not realize, but now can see it was likely a new immigrant or someone with limited English abilities. I was pulled out of class to sit in a small room, maybe a counselor's office, and help my peer read. At the time, I didn't realize the message that was being sent by the school, but the "other" Spanish-speaking kids were treated as kids who needed "help" instead of finding a way to make the experience mutually beneficial. The exchange made me feel in charge, while my peer who I was helping likely felt ashamed and disenfranchised, creating a clear social dynamic difference. Had our school been truly culturally and linguistically inclusive, there would have been a better way to have made this program work.

I was reminded of this story when I first learned that my son Gabriel was being placed into a "dual language" classroom in 3rd grade. I was appalled to learn this was the case at first

because I had not heard great things about the dual language programs at the school (which were more like English as a Second Language or ESL programs), but I also felt he was not being treated fairly. He was attending McAllen ISD, one of the more predominantly Anglo school districts, and I felt that because my son had a Mexican surname, he was being profiled by being put in a bilingual class. I made an appointment to talk to the principal, intent on moving him into a mainstream classroom. I was adamant that this was not the right learning environment for him, convinced that he might fall behind if he was in a "slow" classroom for that is how I perceived this bilingual class. After much reassurance from the principal, however, and hearing great things about his new teacher, I decided to let him begin the semester taking the class. I liked his teacher and felt a sense of comfort that she was fully capable of somehow mastering teaching two languages when for many, teaching in one language was challenging enough.

It didn't take me long to realize the multitude of benefits that came from having him in this classroom. Not only was his teacher a gem, but she saw something in Gabriel that she helped hone—a desire to help others. She used him as a tutor to help those students who did not grasp the concepts as quickly. He not only learned a bit of Spanish, which I as a Latina mother had failed to teach him, but he also developed a different kind of skillset—being able to "teach" and serve those in his classroom while shaping himself as a leader. By the end of the year, I was grateful that he had been placed in this classroom, and became critically self-reflective of my own initial reaction to the concept of a dual-language classroom. Gabriel has now even expressed a desire to be a teacher. What struck me most about the experience was how I was initially overcome with disdain for such a class because of all of the negative stereotypes that had been attributed to such a classroom learning environment.

I was deeply ashamed that I had allowed these negative thoughts to permeate my mind. Moraga (2015) shares a similar awakening about language realization and how she spent so much time being Anglicized that she ignored her core (p. 26). She was able to recover from it. As Smith (1999) makes clear, "the organization of school knowledge, the hidden curriculum and the representation of difference in texts and school practices all contain discourses which have serious implications for indigenous students as well as for other minority ethnic groups" (p. 11). It has taken me much longer and remains a constant battle to fight the colonization of my educational system, even with two degrees from Stanford and my doctorate in progress.

For me, it wasn't until college that I finally realized just how behind I was culturally, linguistically, and cognitively from my bilingual counterparts, and it made me considerably upset. I took a Spanish for Home Background Speakers series course at Stanford where there were other students who looked like me and who experienced situations like I had. I connected with these students because of our internal shame for not having a good grasp on the Spanish language. Many had experienced the same language and cultural barriers that I had growing up, not feeling Mexican enough. Through the study of our language and culture, this course reminded me to value my life, my background, my culture, and my semi-bilingual speaking abilities. We learned in class about music and food and personal experiences that helped define each one of us. This was one of the few times that I felt like my personal narrative, my experiences, and my family could be shared, studied, and valued in an actual classroom. Growing up, there were so many rules to follow, lessons to be learned, and ideas to regurgitate that school became a space where I left emotion and personal experience at the door.

As I am able to reflect on my reaction to Gabriel's situation and my own personal experience in education, I am more aware of the biases that have infiltrated my consciousness

regarding language, and I am in need of a constant reminder about countering the master narratives. In his autoethnography on decolonizing the first-year university experience, Saldívar (2014), a professor at a predominantly Hispanic institution, recounts how he fell back into the master narrative, placing blame on students not disengaging from home life and as soon as he made that conscious realization, he vowed not to let it happened again. "I no longer tried to get my students to fit into the framework of the master narrative and instead I returned to examining how my class could best serve the needs of the students" (p. 157). Similarly, for me, it has taken a constant, conscious awareness to ensure that I do not allow myself to be influenced by stereotyping.

Dime Con Quién Andas y Te Diré Quién Eres

Tap of the foot. Try to decipher what had been said. Type it out. Look up Spanish word I do know. Rewind. Forward. Repeat. This is how I spent my summer after I graduated from high school. Transcribing oral histories for a Llano Grande project was not a task I ever wanted to do for a living, much less transcribing in English and Spanish. Who were these people anyway? I knew they were people from the community, but I didn't really care to know what old people had to say. On top of the repetitious nature of the work, I was six months pregnant now and every inch of my body was uncomfortable. Trying to interpret what an elderly person on the other end of the tape recording was saying was agonizing, but it was a job, and I knew that I would need to find a way to support my newborn, and for that I was grateful. At my young age, I did not understand the significance of his story…until I did. Then, story and community and relationships changed me entirely (Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, Militello, 2016).

When I decided to accept my admission into Stanford University, I did so with the mindset that I wanted to get away from my small, homogenous town (with a population nearly

98% Mexican American) to experience new cultures, new traditions, and new people. I was so immersed in the culture and the people of my small town that I couldn't appreciate it to its fullest. Upon setting foot on campus, I learned about *El Centro Chicano*, but I wasn't drawn to engage in the community because I felt I could not relate. I had never identified as Chicano or Latino and those were the prominent terms used at Stanford. The students who did identify themselves as Chicano/Latino were much more politically informed and civically engaged than I was. While I knew of and celebrated many traditions of our Mexican heritage, I had never been challenged or allowed to deeply explore the meaning behind certain events nor had I ever thought to ask to learn more. Holidays such as *Dia de los Muertos, Charro Days, Cinco de Mayo,* and *Dieciseis de Septiembre* were days that I knew were celebrated, but had not learned the significance of. I did not even fully know the story of the renowned Cesar Chavez, and when a group of Stanford students decided to boycott grapes as a sign of solidarity with the farmworkers and the families who worked at Stanford, I was not fully aware or empowered to participate. Perhaps another part of my hesitancy to visit and be engaged in *El Centro* was that I was embarrassed by how little Spanish I knew and how poorly I spoke. Anzaldúa (2007) refers to it as "linguistic terrorism" (p. 80).

The longer I was away from home, the lonelier I became, and the more I yearned for acceptance into a familiar community and familiar traditions, even though I may not have been able to explain or even understand each one. I was in search of a sense of belonging and inclusion (Block, 2008). The first faculty member to whom I was drawn was a Latina. I signed up to take a freshmen seminar with Paula Moya on women in literature. I was also taking a Great Works course, a Calculus course, and an English/writing course. I recall all of my professors being so intelligent and any of the concepts that they discussed or the manner in which they

spoke and communicated were far above my comprehension level. My writing instructor offered to meet with me on a number of occasions but I never felt comfortable talking to him because I didn't think I could communicate on par with him. I preferred to submit many of my drafts and revisions via email rather than during his office hours and I hid behind the excuse that "my son is waiting for me at home." But it was different with Professor Moya. First, she was one of the few female professors I had at Stanford, and second, she looked like me. Research has shown that students from diverse backgrounds feel more comfortable or are able to relate closer to faculty who represent their diversity. In Hurtado, Hurtado, and Hurtado (2008), one of the sisters confides, "My professors at Berkeley became my surrogate parents; they gave birth to me intellectually and politically" (p. 55). Dania Garcia was another person with whom I connected; she was a doctoral student and our lecturer for the Spanish for Home Background Speakers courses, and she was familiar with the area of Texas where I grew up. She had a strict but caring demeanor about her, and she made it obvious that she wanted us to succeed. She served as a role model for me, so much so that I even mentally prepared to name my future daughter Dania (partially because it resembled my first name, Daria, but also because I was enamored with her intelligence.)

By my third year at Stanford, I was learning to become more comfortable with who I was and using the terms Chicana and Latina interchangeably. All throughout primary and secondary school, we were taught to check the "White" box when asked for our race and "Hispanic" for ethnicity. Being an obedient student, I never questioned why. Living close to the border between the United States and Mexico, I was acutely aware that my descendants were Mexican, my closer family was Mexican American, but I had at one point even called myself American Mexican as I was born in America, I had told myself. During my high school years, Jennifer Lopez had gained

notoriety after playing Selena Quintanilla, a rising bilingual Tejana star who born and raised in South Texas, but whose life was cut short when she was murdered by her manager. Selena was an icon, and Jennifer's performance depicting her, helped launch her very successful career, as Latino stars became the next "hot" thing in mainstream media. Still, it was difficult for me at the time to relate to the term Latina because I was not from Latin America. Contending with labels and identity became very real for me at Stanford, as Chicano and Latino were terms used more commonly in research articles. Aída Hurtado and Mrinal Sinha (2016) explains in an introduction to the book, *Beyond Machismo*, their decision to use the term "people of Color" to recognize "all racialized groups in US society" (p. 2). Furthermore, they discuss their choices in terminology as follows:

> In some cases, labels serve political functions and can be indicative of views regarding cultural assimilation. Examples of such labels include *Chicana/o* for those of Mexican descent and *Boricua* for Puerto Ricans. Both terms communicate cultural pride and awareness regarding the hybridity of cultural practices and language use in these US communities. Other labels, for example, *Latino/a*, emphasize the importance of expressing cultural and political solidarity with other Latin American national groups. History, however, is central to all of these choices (p. 3).

At the invitation of a friend who I met through my sister, I ended up becoming very engaged in the Chicano/Latino community. Edgar, who was originally from the Rio Grande Valley, interned one summer with our local congressman in Washington, D.C. My sister, Karina, had just graduated college and was working for our Congressman at the same time. She learned that Edgar attended Stanford, and she told him about me and vice versa. Running into Edgar one sunny day on the quad of campus, I was immediately drawn to his smile, *abrazo*, understanding, and shared experience of being from the Rio Grande Valley. We became (and to this day remain) close friends. He was very involved with El Centro Chicano, and I felt more comfortable attending events with my son and at times, even my husband, knowing at least one familiar face.

And I made so many more friends in the process—people who looked like me, people who didn't quite have a command of the language or their history, people who were also trying to find community and *familia* at Stanford. I even recognized a few from my Spanish class. I ended up finding my place with this group and even participated in the Chicano/Latino graduation for both my bachelor's degree and my master's degree ceremonies. I know it made my parents proud, and I felt I had come full circle in not only acknowledging but also celebrating my heritage. During my graduate year, I took on the role of Graduate Advisor in the Peer Advising Experience (PAE). I am now very aware and very comfortable using the terms interchangeably, but it took some soul-searching to get to that point.

A Regresar

Twice. For two years in a row, my parents drove up to Stanford, California to watch me cross a tremendous stage in my life. Twice, I was able to sneak Gabriel across the "stage" with me and have him "accept" my diploma handed from my dean. He had been through the entire ordeal with me, and I felt it only fitting for him to take part in this ceremonious event. I graduated with my master's degree with a yearning to continue my education because there was so much more for me to do. My master's thesis left me feeling like I had unfinished business, but I had been going to school for five years, and I knew I had to do my part to provide for my family, as my husband had worked while I went to school. Armed with my master's degree from a prestigious university, I felt I had to attain a good-paying job in order to give my child everything that I wasn't able to do while I was in school. I had decided to return home, if only for a short period. Having Gabriel grow up away from family was tough, and now he had little cousins to entertain. I wanted to do meaningful work; I wanted to give back to a community that

did so much for me, and coming back to help others achieve their college dreams seemed like the right thing to do.

As a young child growing up in a small town, my concept of a successful career was being a doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher. Even though we had several career day events where other career options were introduced to us, none of them were as appealing or as revered in our society as these three professions, and I was eager to pursue a degree in either one of them. In helping my father with his business, I also saw that being a businesswoman was an option, as I was drawn to the management and decision-making aspects of owning a business. I used my educational journey to explore various careers, and decided to major in economics because it was a nice compromise between being a techie (science, technology, engineering and math fields) and a fuzzy (liberal arts) major at Stanford. While I was interested in economics, what really helped me finalize my choice was that econ classes were five units, so I could take three courses a trimester to make up my 15 units, as compared to taking five three-unit courses in one trimester. Less class time meant less time spent away from my young son, and less time I had to pay someone else to watch him. Even though student success research tells us that this isn't the way to select a major course of study, it worked for me.

After graduate school, I was fortunate to find a job as the associate director of the Valley Outreach Center (VOC), a newly created program at The University of Texas-Pan American. The VOC would provide outreach services to local middle and high school in support of a newly launched statewide campaign to get more student to go to college. In Texas, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board had adopted a *College for all Texans* initiative, in support of their Closing the Gaps goals (College for All Texans). A major goal was to increase the percentage of Hispanic students who were entering college, which meant that UTPA needed to do its part to

ensure more students had access to the information they needed to make college a reality. It aligned perfectly with my passion and my desire to help more students not only go to college but also successfully complete their degree. In all of my time at Stanford, I realized that I did not achieve anything without the assistance of many individuals in my path, and I was indebted to pass that knowledge and tools along to students who had a desire to pursue higher education.

Being able to reflect on my work and the initial circumstances surrounding my job has helped me. As a 23-year-old, I was asked to ensure that a vision was implemented by managing all of the operations and program of a new center. I was in charge of hiring my team and building programs that were basically concepts, including supplementing my budget with revenue from grants and camps. I hired two individuals who were clearly older and more established than I was, but I served as professionally as I could as their supervisor. Given the reality of my situation, I did everything I could to keep my work and home worlds apart, so that my young motherhood did not define me. I would not bring Gabriel to campus, much less to any evening or weekend events, even at a critical times in his own educational path from which he would have benefitted tremendously. I was fortunate that his father, who was taking classes at the time to complete his baccalaureate degree, was able to watch him in the evenings and most of my family (and his) lived in the vicinity, so there was always someone available to help watch him. I worked many evenings and weekends, as the job required. I took a lot of work home, as applying for grants became the lifeline of my center's existence. I was working around the clock, but it was satisfying work. And I had become adjusted to staying up late to accomplish my tasks through school. The one thing that I was also successful at doing was keeping my work life and my home life separate. From a number of sources, particularly training from our human resources department, it was evident that you should not bring your personal issues from home

into the workplace, but it was never discussed how integrated your work and home life should be in order to have a healthy life. Since my career was in its infancy, I did not want to be judged by my youth or perceived inexperience, so I chose to not bring my son to events. As wrong as it felt internally, I was able to bury those emotions and focus on work. The harder I worked, the more successful I became, and it appeared to justify all of my actions.

Furthermore, life at home was on a downward spiral. As much as I knew my decision to return home was the right one, I never expected it to have had the impact it did on my marriage. Being back "home" allowed my husband to retreat into being an adolescent again, living life with no responsibility. Barajas and Pierce (2001) identify how Latino men, in particular, define success based on individuality, such as in athletics, and there were many of his friends who still defined themselves based on their high school athletic success. Drinking regularly and staying out late to relive their old glory days became the norm for him, and I unhealthily buried my world in my work. The success I achieved at such a young age helped catapult me into a workaholic.

Work was extremely rewarding. As part of the Valley Outreach Center, I was overseeing the Mother Daughter Program (MDP). Coincidentally, a few of my sisters, my mother, and I had participated in the MDP (though it was the Hispanic MDP at the time) when we were in secondary school. What I remembered most about the MDP was how inspired I was hearing from accomplished women who looked like me. We had several cultural experiences, in the RGV and in San Antonio, where we learned a great deal about Hispanic women who had come before us, their struggles and their triumphs. Given the history of the program and my personal affiliation with it, my program coordinator had the foresight to ask me to speak to a group of mothers and daughters during a session. While I had never thought that sharing my story—of

being a teen mother and going on to attain two degrees from a prestigious university, my coordinator thought that the young girls needed to hear how I had overcome adversity. She thought I was a role model for the young women and even the moms. So, I did, but I could not get through the speech without tears. It was the final session of the school year and around Mother's Day, so I had invited my mom to attend. Not knowing that I was going to share my story, she was moved to tears as well. Acknowledging all that she had done for me and continued to do for me was worth getting on stage and embarrassing myself (as I thought I was doing at the time). Never did I realize how much my words would have an impact on others. I shared my story that day to praise my mom, but the fact that I was able to put myself out there in front of all these women, young and old, and somehow have an impact on their lives was unexpected. Many moms come up to me after to thank me for sharing and for being a role model for their daughters. What I now wish I had done was to have also invited my son to be part of this important event. I wish I had had the foresight to have him engaged in an event where we celebrated mothers because I was his mother, and I was celebrating my mother, who without her, I would likely have never been able to raise my son in the manner which I did.

Sharing my story in front of a familiar group created a safe environment and gave me the courage to be vulnerable in front of a large crowd. It was partly my opportunity to share about my struggles to an audience who was appreciative of listening and learning, but it was also an opportunity to do something I had wanted to do through my doctoral studies – telling a different story than what the statistics may show. I had spent my master's year dissecting information on transfer students, attempting to demonstrate that transfer students in South Texas performed as well as native students who started at a four-year university because all of the research indicated that low-income, Hispanic students were more likely to start at a community college and less

likely to persist and graduate once they transferred. I was certain that the data I was researching would tell me something different because most students in South Texas were similar; thus, statistically we could account for those factors in the analysis. The data was limited and financial aid status, which was the only variable I could use from the data I received, didn't tell me the story I wanted to know. So, I was left wanting to gather more data to be able to show more information and attempt to tell a different story. Having been left with a yearning to research transfer students in a more detailed study, I was set on expanding my data set and conducting a quantitative-qualitative study for my dissertation.

As I went through my doctoral program and was enlightened by a number of scholars and authors who challenged the dominant research narrative, I realized that my story was part of challenging the dominant narrative as well as countering the dominant research strategy. I spent the first two years of my program building my literature review and crafting a way to include more variables in my research.

Even though I knew my ultimate goal was to earn a doctorate, my decision to enroll in a program was not an easy one. The only doctoral program in education that my institution offered was an Ed.D., and I knew from working at an institution of higher education that an Ed.D. was often not regarded as highly as a Ph.D., a common misperception. I asked several mentors and colleagues their thoughts about which program to pursue, and I received several solid pieces of advice, particularly to consider what my career goals were. If I wanted to remain in an administrative role in higher education, then having an Ed.D. would suffice; if I wanted to find a career as faculty, and especially a faculty member at a research institution, then having a Ph.D. was a must or at least I was told. Again, I had bought into the master narrative of traditional, research mindsets. Not knowing what my future held, I wanted to be certain to give myself the

best opportunity, so I researched quite a few Ph.D. programs. There were not many in the area from which to choose and there certainly were not many options other than online or distance programs, neither of which were my preference. I had one colleague who told me that I need not worry what came at the end of my name, but rather focus on what was at the beginning of my name, the coveted title of "doctor." Having the advantage of working at the University, I inquired about the Ed.D. program and learned that the department was planning to start a track in higher education, so I decided to apply. Previously, the primary focus of the program had been on public K-12 school leadership. When I was accepted into the program and chose a concentration, I purposefully chose to take as many quantitative courses as were offered to have on my educational record to indicate that I was capable of doing rigorous research.

In one of my doctoral classes, I was asked to respond to an article that had been published about how students determine which colleges they attend, particularly students from rural background, which tied into how Ivy League schools recruit students (Cardoza, 2013). While writing and reflecting on my experience attending a prestigious university, I was encouraged to continue writing my story, honing in on my experiences and having to think critically about how those experiences translated into the way I approached my work. By that time, I was comfortable sharing my story of being a young mom and defying the stereotype, and I was beginning to understand the impact that sharing my story had on others. As I was introduced to a fairly novel and limited, though powerful, body of research that delved deep into story and critical readings, I was even more convinced to use my experience as a research topic. Having been trained in a positivistic research paradigm, I was not certain that studying myself and my story was the best route to take for a dissertation topic, but I agreed to spend some time figuring it out.

As I reflected on my time at Stanford, I realized how my role as a "nontraditional" student summed up my experience well. When our graduate dean (I lived in graduate student on-campus housing during my time at Stanford) learned that a small group of "nontraditional" students resided under his purview, he recommended that we petition the University to create a student organization for nontraditional students; hence, we became the "nontraditional student organization" at Stanford. Stanford University, with its abundance of resources, was able to provide for its students in various ways to ensure their academic success, and we were afforded the resources that traditional student organizations received to support their causes (in our case, funds were used for babysitting fees and dinners to study for midterms and finals). In more ways than one did "nontraditional" define who I was – as a poor, minority student from a tiny, rural town attending an elite, private institution, and with a family, no less. Chávez (2012) articulates this marginalized feeling by describing herself as "a Chicana who positions herself along the liminal perspective" (p. 334) and an "anomaly in higher education: a working-class, Chicana, first-generation college student with a Ph.D." (p. 334). Even now, nontraditional continues to define my role as a Latina leader in higher education.

Just as I took a "nontraditional" path in college life, I finally chose to do the same with my research. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2002), "critical race researchers acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways, with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower" (p. 26). Fittingly, I chose to remain in the field of higher education and allow my life and my life's work to be influenced by my education and vice versa. As Chávez (2012) summarizes, "Stories are the ways humans make sense of their worlds" (p. 340), so, too, have I been able to make sense of myself, my research, and my work, through story.

Llano Grande

Upon reflection, it was through the work of the Llano Grande Center for Research and Development when I was first introduced to storytelling and community narrative work. Llano Grande "creates access to higher education, engages students in community change initiatives, and develops leadership that respects local history and culture" (Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, & Militello, 2016, p. 53). Trained in this pedagogical framework, I had been exposed to some storytelling and narrative while in high school, though I don't think I was able to appreciate the value of what I was learning until it was no longer there or I was no longer immersed in my comfort zone. For that summer I worked with Llano Grande, I was able to partake in interviews and transcribe stories from the elders in our community. I learned a great deal about the history of the area in which we lived. I had never, however, considered it "research" because by the time I was in college, the classes I was taking as an undergraduate at Stanford were all about what was learned in the classroom.

It made me realize the work that Llano Grande was undertaking in capturing oral histories was much more pivotal than I ever could have imagined by just transcribing interviews. Without knowing it at the time, I had been transformed by hearing people's life stories and how they had an impact on our community. As I continued my educational pursuits and ventured into my professional career, I was able to see theory put into action, using story or *platicas,* to create relationships and bring a critical consciousness to light. The realization that my research started long before I realized it made it all the more profound to discover, much as the metaphorical circles of which I was becoming increasingly aware solidified for me the Indigenous representation of life and research (Wilson, 2008).

CHAPTER V

MESTIZA CONSCIOUSNESS

> From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an "alien" consciousness is presently in the making—a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una conciencia de mujer.* It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 377)

I made it. This is exactly how I felt as I started this last chapter of my dissertation. I have made it this far, but I know I didn't do it alone. As I started out my doctoral journey, I was clear that I was doing it for myself first but for many others, as well. As I read literature in relation to my topic as a Latina leader in higher education, I realized that I also did it for all of those knowledge-bearers who came before me and from whom I have learned as well as the generations who will come after. I initially struggled to understand the value of my story and the role my dissertation had to others in the field of education, and higher education, in particular, but the more I researched and read books and articles that valued my epistemological and ontological beliefs and the more I was able to reflect critically on my experiences, the more convinced I was to pursue the autoethnographic *testimonio* as my methodological choice for research. I opened my dissertation by sharing several stories, one which initially shaped my research experience when I was told not to include the word "I" in my academic papers. As a critical response to that experience, I have intentionally inserted my voice into my research and formulated my entire dissertation around my story. In addition, I have consciously and strategically chosen to begin every chapter of my dissertation with "I" as the first word.

Writing my story has been a challenge on many levels, but writing this conclusion has been particularly hard because so much of my life is still being written, still being shared, and still being lived. This concluding chapter will provide an overview of my journey through this research process, outline the lessons that can be garnered from shared stories based on how I have interpreted my life experiences and learned from it, and provide considerations for next steps and future research.

Autoethnographic research is as much a process as it is a product (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Bochner, 2012; Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; Wilson, 2008). I have scoured other research methodologies in the field and found that the autoethnographic *testimonio*, through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, LatCrit, and Chicana/Latina/Mexicana feminist theories, provides for me the theoretical, epistemological, axiological and methodological congruency that permeates who I am as an individual, a researcher, and a leader in higher education. Chávez (2012) writes, "I use critical race theory because I have no choice; it is what I know and how I come to know" (p. 343). Along the same lines, I use *testimonio* because it aligns with what I know and what I value.

In order to address the guiding research questions that were posed for my dissertation, I have interspersed stories of experience and analyzed them throughout the chapters. Traditional approaches to qualitative research indicate that "after data are collected, the qualitative researcher undertakes a multi-stage process of organizing, categorizing, synthesizing, analyzing, and writing about the data" (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009, p. 449). Fortunately, during the entire research process of my autoethnography, critical analysis and reflection is taking place. Below are the questions that I sought to answer through my work:

1. How does my story, my autoethnography, my *testimonio* empower the individual, the researcher, and the leader, particularly in the realm of higher education?
2. How do relationships, community, place, and circumstance impact a personal narrative and enact agency?

I have struggled with what the findings of this chapter will be, particularly because I find myself falling back into the traditional research mentality, attempting to define the "validity" and "reliability" of my story (Gay, Mill, & Airasian, 2009), including "generalizability" or "replicability" of the research. In traditional qualitative research style, I have analyzed my reflections, my stories, and my memories, and have captured patterns and coded the information that I have shared, but it's difficult to lay out conclusions or recommendations because I am still living my life. My story is still being written and my consciousness is still being challenged. I do know that defining myself and my work will take a lifelong commitment, and if there is anything that one person can take away from my story and the relationship we have created through this process (Wilson, 2008), I can only hope that it has had meaning for the reader (Bochner, 2012). I also anticipate that this dissertation will serve as an impetus for many aspiring students to pursue doctoral studies and explore their voice via stories through autoethnography. Jones (2005) grapples with the autoethnography as a theory and as a method, questioning, "How do I balance *telling* (about autoethnography's history, methods, responsibilities, and possibilities) with *showing* (doing the work of autoethnography here on these pages)" (p. 764). The process of balancing the two is not easy, and I trust that my research, my work, my experiences, and my story has done just that. By utilizing the method of the *testimonio,* I have helped give a voice to non-traditional college students, low socioeconomic rural students, Latinas in higher education and leadership positions, and working mothers in academia. There are many lessons to be

learned and below are four that I have concluded from my work. I trust that readers will be able to take away many more lessons. In honor of the process and the research, each lesson begins with a story.

Lessons Learned

Know Yourself in Relation to Others and Embrace Your Story

I was fortunate to have been provided with scholarships from private donors to help me pursue my education while attending Stanford University. Every year, I would sit and write thank-you letters to the donor or to their estates, if the actual donor was deceased, and share a little about myself and how the scholarship helped me with my studies. During my last year on campus, I was invited to a dinner in honor of the scholarship recipients. At the table which I was seated, an administrator shared that one of her most surprising but memorable admissions essays was from a young girl who wrote about how cheerleading taught her leadership skills. When I heard her begin to share, I was filled with embarrassment; it felt like, at first, she was mocking my experience. At the time, I didn't have the courage or the confidence to reveal to my table that I had actually responded to one of the admissions essays about my experience being a cheerleader. She admitted that it was an interesting choice for a topic and a unique story, but that was what also made it memorable. At Edcouch-Elsa High School, there were not many extracurricular activities or sports in which to participate, so I joined those that I could, and since I enjoyed gymnastics more than anything but no local gym to join, competitive cheerleading became my outlet. Being a cheerleader did not define who I was, but it definitely provided me with life lessons about teamwork, trust, and leadership. I described the leadership skills that cheerleading taught me, even as I didn't hold the title of head cheerleader. Writing about this topic may have been unconventional, but it impressed upon this particular admissions counselor

an unforgettable story. I have come to realize that my story made an impact because she remembered it. Through the work of Llano Grande Center at the high school, I was challenged to explore story as a tool to counter the master narrative. While the stereotype of cheerleaders is such that they do not have the best reputation in school, I had found the positive aspect of the sport and had chosen to write about it. After hearing this lady share that four years later, she still remembered my story, I can't help but think it helped secure my acceptance at Stanford.

Throughout my dissertation writing process, I have come to realize that knowing yourself in relation to others and embracing your story is an imperative, but sharing it is equally important. Not everyone has the opportunity to write or share about stories that have impacted their lives, but autoethnography and storytelling should be part of the academic curriculum. Part of getting to know yourself critically means putting yourself in uncertain and uncomfortable situations and reflecting on those experiences. "Reflection is the heart of autoethnographic storytelling" (Bochner, 2012). Anzaldúa (1987) refers to this experience as a jolt, and part of a process of attaining *conocimiento,* an awareness or reflective consciousness. I have had many instances of jolts in my life – getting pregnant at such a young age, facing divorce, and immersing myself in new situations and circumstances. Through writing and reflection, I have learned to find my voice. "The predominant formal aspect of the *testimonio* is the voice that speaks to the reader through the text in the form of an "I" that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention" (Beverly, 2005, p. 548).

Wilson's (2008) core conviction is that knowledge is not individual but relational; he writes "[i]t is important to recognize that the epistemology includes entire systems of knowledge and relationships" (p. 74). In writing stories and reflecting on experiences, I have realized that most of my stories are shared experiences. This is why I asked my sisters and parents to

participate because for me, sharing with them is the norm. When we share, we are able to establish relationships that are critical to our existence. When we create relational accountability (Wilson, 2008), it allows us to learn to listen and have difficult conversation, as these conversations should happen in dialogue (Freire, 1997).

Furthermore, I have learned in my academic work, my personal life, and my professional experience that emotions and feelings are a real part of who we are as human beings; they play a role in many aspects of our lives, and it is unfair to attempt to restrict or be asked to remove ourselves from these emotions in order to conduct academic work. They deserve to be acknowledge and shared. I have at times been moved to tears and other times felt pure excitement and pride when reading the stories of other researchers. Bochner (2012) sums up, "By offering stories that show the struggles of ordinary people coping with difficulty contingencies of lived experience…our research stories can help people put themselves in the place of others (Jackson, 1995)" (p. 160). By doing so, we are able to better understand each other and bridge our differences.

Critically Challenge the Master Narrative

In 2013, I was asked to react to an article on NPR titled "Elite Colleges Struggle to Recruit Smart, Low-Income Kids" (Vedantam, 2013) which referenced a report by Hoxby and Avery (2012) for the National Bureau of Economic Research, *The Missing "One-Offs": The Hidden Supply of High-Achieving, Low Income Students*. As the titles indicate, the articles referenced how few high-achieving, low-income students attended elite colleges. Having fit the description of a "one-off" student, I was asked for a doctoral class paper, to provide a response and engage in a dialogue with the research paper about my experience.

My response appeared in the *Daily Yonder* (Cardoza, 2013), an online news source for rural communities, and it became a defining moment for me. Not only had I been challenged to think critically on my experience at Stanford, but I had been brave enough to share this story with the world. Even though I had shared my story before, it was to audiences to which I could relate – students who looked like me or a community that wanted to support students like me. My story did challenge the master narrative in many ways – about rural students, about low-income students, about Mexican American families, about teen parents, etc., but I had not been tasked with writing about it for publication. As frightening as it was to imagine my words in print and online, it became a motivation for my dissertation. I wrote about my experience at Stanford, the numerous resources that had been afforded to me during my time there, but I was also critical about the notion that students like me didn't apply to elite colleges. I challenged universities like Stanford to do more and to be in communication with their alumni from rural areas to recruit better students. I don't know that any concrete actions were taken after my article was published; it wasn't even sent to the admission department at Stanford, but it became the impetus for writing my story in dissertation. I had already been armed with the literature about autoethnography and *testimonio*, and I was beginning to internalize the theories that helped frame my research.

Early in our dissertation writing, I had a conversation with my colleague, Ernesto Ramirez, also a doctoral candidate, where we discussed Scheurich and Young's (1997) article on epistemological stance, and how we decide when/how to push boundaries. I told Ernesto that he had a better understanding of what was academically acceptable or "in the box" and was able to create a stronger argument to push or reject it. He asked if I had not been in academia (higher education), whether I would have been more willing/able to think outside the box. I inferred that

I could not yet outright reject the box because I didn't understand it as well as he did. We agreed that part of our political selves determines how we write our dissertations, which in turn, determines what we contribute to the literature, which reinforces how knowledge is created and shared. Thus, our political epistemology defines our political self. I conceded that I had the tools to push some boundaries, but that I also tended to stay within conventions, a standard that I noticed mirrored my personal and professional roles.

Saldívar (2014)'s dissertation is a prime example of challenging the master narrative. He had his first-year college students identify the roles and responsibilities they faced as students. For many who attended the regional university where he worked, in addition to identifying their role as a student, they also included daughter, granddaughter, sibling, employee, parent, caregiver, etc. Saldívar then asked the students to rank those roles in importance. For traditional college students, the role of student is likely the most important during their college experience. Other roles such as child or community member end up secondary because of the time, effort, and commitment needed to be successful in college. However, for many of his students, predominantly low-income, first-generation, and Mexican American, commitment to the family and the responsibilities held therein takes precedence, for "[t]o raise *un nino bien educado* (a well-educated child) requires the education of the whole being in relation to family and community" (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999, p. 423). For Saldívar, even when he was in college, he realized how his role as a student was the priority, though he never neglected his other roles, as the dominant culture would expect a college student to do. He recalls, "I was telling my students I was successful because I disengaged from home but I was successful because I was more rooted in home than ever before and I had faculty members who encouraged my engagement in my community" (Saldívar, 2014, p. 157). Saldívar and I share similar stories in that we both

graduated from Edcouch-Elsa High School, were trained in the Llano Grande Center's pedagogy, studied at Stanford University, and returned "home" to help more students become successful college graduates. He became a professor, and I chose to work in administration. Even though we have had the privilege of learning from one another and being situated in an area rich with wisdom, it still requires a constant and consistent reminder to go to our source.

Smith (1999) accurately explains that "[s]haring knowledge is a long-term commitment" (p. 16). She makes it clear that it is the obligation of the researcher to "share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented" as "[t]he challenge always is to demystify, to decolonize" (p. 16). Writing this dissertation has provided me with the tools to break down the master narrative, but it is a constant battle to decolonize my mind (Pérez, 1999; Smith, 1999).

Chávez (2012) adeptly concluded in her *testimonio,* "I have found that when I write, I am unable and unwilling to create the traditional "academic distance" between the papers I produce and the voices of my educational experiences" (p. 334). The reason I write this dissertation as autoethnographic *testimonio* is that it is my method of choice. Chávez continues, describing how "the actions and behaviors of our everyday lives—the instances that serve to inform theory—are set aside as researchers prioritize measures to maintain objectivity" (p. 335). These objective methods, while more common in academia, do not have to be the only way in which research is conducted.

Numerous researchers devote their work to challenging the master narrative. Pizarro (1998) credited a Chicano epistemology that allowed the researcher to invite the researched to be part of the process, to question definitions and data analysis, and to empower them through research not just as a result of call to action. Jones (2005) reminded us to "[l]ook at the

intersections…as examples of how you might radically contextualize your texts and your subjectivity; embody personal and community accountability; attend to connection without collapsing or foreclosing debate, dialogue, and difference; move people to understand their world and its oppressions in new ways; and create the possibility of resistance, hope, and—yes—freedom" (p. 784).

Sykes (2014) concluded in his story, "this research does not seek to be the authoritative account on transformative autoethnography, but rather to appreciate its pedagogical value, specifically for minority learners to investigate the intersection of culture and identity" (p. 9). Similarly, Beverly (2005) determined that "*Testimonio* gives voice to a previously anonymous and voiceless popular-democratic subject, but in such a way that the intellectual or professional is interpellated in his or her function as interlocutor/reader of the testimonial account, as being in alliance with (and to some extent dependent on) this subject, without at the same time losing his or her identity as an intellectual" (p. 554).

Integrate Culturally-Relevant Pedagogy and Practice into the Profession

I sat in the circle of chairs, a pedagogical strategy with which I was very familiar, as I had been participating in Circle since high school. Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, and Militello (2016) describe Circle as a dynamic-critical pedagogy of reflection, "longtime rituals of cultures and communities that provide space to open up fresh possibilities for connections, collaboration, and understanding" (p. 82). In my experience, Circle was a safe space, a place to be heard and a place to listen; a place to find creative and meaningful responses or solutions to challenges. We had used Circle a number of times, throughout my high school experience with Llano Grande, during my doctoral program in class and in the community, and even in my professional world with faculty and students. This felt different; we had been asked to attend a listening session, but

not to participate, which was not how I had been taught about Circle. I was still fairly new to Sacramento State, and I found myself torn between my roles – a detached administrator and a *Chicana* at heart. How could I attempt to persuade our college students that Robert Nelsen, with whom I had worked for years and knew exactly where his heart lay, and I were their biggest advocates while explaining that our hands were tied in many instances? How could I share with these students that I had once been in their shoes without sounding patronizing in order to try to understand from where all the pain and anger and largely misinformation was coming?

In the days after Donald Trump had been announced as the President-Elect, in California and across the nation, there was a great deal of uncertainty and legitimate fear of what was to come. In response, the University hosted a number of forums and listening and healing sessions and attempted to give students, faculty and staff alike an outlet to express their thoughts and feelings. Unexpectedly, some of the discontent from the students was aimed at President Nelsen and his administration because we had not and could not declare our campus a sanctuary campus; thus, we found ourselves in this particular situation, days before the semester was about to end. There were tears, anger, and frustration, particularly from our undocumented or DREAMer students and incredible sensitivity to the uncertainty of the new reality of a Trump administration. There was little that we could do at that point, little solace that we could offer the students, because there was little that we knew about what policies would be enacted and how exactly some of these situations would play out. So, we listened. I was torn, finding myself in the middle of two worlds, not much different than how I've felt before as a human being – not Mexican (enough), not American, what Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) refers to as the Borderlands, an uncomfortable territory.

It took me a couple of days to reflect on this instance and think critically in order to decide how best to move forward and address the situation in my role as Chief of Staff but also as a Chicana/Latina leader. It wasn't the first time at Sacramento State that I found myself in an unfamiliar predicament – wanting to reach out to the students but not knowing exactly how. I was hesitant, as we had met with the students several times to discuss the dilemma administration was in given that our Chancellor did not allow individual campuses to declare themselves sanctuary campuses. Still, the students had taken to rallying on campus and marching to the President's Office quite frequently for various issues, so it took me a little longer to find my inner strength to reach out to the more vocal students and create a relationship with them. I realized that while serving in this role in Texas, it was evident that I was not an outsider because I grew up there. In California, I had not established myself because I had not built a relationship with the students. In addition, I was in the midst of writing this dissertation, and I was immersed in the literature. Torres (2003) provides simple advice for educators working with Latino students: "ask some of these students" about how they feel the institution is handling their needs and what more can the university do for them. This reminder became clear in the moments after this sharing session. It was a moment to put theory into practice.

I reached out to each of the students who had been vocal and expressed some concerns and asked them to join me for coffee. All agreed, and I was able to share with them my perspective while providing them the space and opportunity to be heard in a more personal, intimate moment. It felt incredibly rewarding to get to know each student on a personal level, relate to them, share with them, and learn from them. Sharing our stories with each other solidified a meaningful, authentic relationship that I anticipate will only grow (Wilson, 2008). It

also solidified for me my work in this community (Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, & Militello, 2016), and reinvigorated my sense of self.

There have been times where I feel my decision-making skills are on target to manage certain situations. Sometimes, though, I have to forcefully channel culturally-responsive ideas from those whom I have studied and from whom I have learned. For example, the experiences I had at the community learning exchange programs in Hawai'i and then in my hometown made it abundantly clear that I don't have all the answers, and only in working together will we find solutions. My reading of Wilson's (2008) work on relationships and relational accountability helped me realize that I needed to form a relationship with these students. Guajardo, Guajardo, Jansen, & Miletello (2016) reminded me that my work needed to be immersed in the community and at the University, the students are my community. Gloria Anzaldúa, Minerva Chávez, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Emma Pérez, Lindsey Pérez Huber, and others reminded me that my *Chicana* or *mestiza* consciousness provided for me the tools to connect with the students, all of who were female, and together, we could find ways to enact change. If not immediately, I find it important for them to understand their role and their ability to be the academic and political leaders of change that we so desperately need in our future. These conversations have not been easy and sometimes the answers are not apparent or there really are no answers. It is still worth having the conversation.

Torres (2003) lays out three general, overarching variables meant to assist and provide insight for faculty and administration working with Latino students, which include "the relationship between identity development and cultural orientation, environmental factors, and the link between generational status and parental expectations" (p. 3). To this point, it becomes critical to enlist and hire qualified candidates who look, talk, and live like those who we want to

help. A lot of times it falls on faculty of color to embrace and encourage students of color in times of need, and when you are limited in the number of faculty of color on your campus, it strains their availability and mental capacity, as the issues with which our students are dealing are tremendous, varied, and many times, deep.

Lead from the *Latina* Heart and Reach for the Collective Soul

At an outdoor reception for a special guest we had visiting campus, Diego joins me, as is common for him to do at Sacramento State. He leans over to me and asks, "Who is that? Have I met her before?" He is referring to Dr. Maya Soetoro-Ng, a scholar and faculty member at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa and Director of Community Outreach and Global Learning at the Spark M. Matsunaga Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution. She also happens to be President Barack Obama's half-sister. She was invited to campus to give a talk on peace. He had not yet met her, but he was not shy about asking to be introduced and feeling very comfortable in his place. When we had our turn to meet her, I marveled as he carried on a flawless conversation with this incredible individual, something I struggle to do at my age and never could have done at his. He was quite pleased to meet her, but the ease with which he navigated the space that evening still remains with me. He was so comfortable that during the question and answer session after her talk, we were seated in the first row of the room, he raised his hand and boldly asked her a question, to which she responded. It brought me back to sitting in classrooms in college and never being able to get that hand up to ask a question. I can only hope that this experience continues to give him and me the confidence and ability to be that brave and inquisitive.

Diego Maximiano. I have said numerous times before that Diego is my life's therapy. Our decision to have another child at the time was an easy one; my husband and I were both

desperate to find a connection as being "home" had created a strain on our marriage. Diego Maximiano was born on February 8, 2006; a full 8-pound, 9-ounce bundle of true joy. Two weeks after I delivered him, we were set to launch the Mobile Go Center at UTPA, the State's first mobile unit to promote college awareness throughout low-income communities where we were literally taking the information out to them. I showed up to the ribbon-cutting ceremony because as a young professional, I did not want the sigma that being a mom meant I couldn't commit to my work (Williams, 2000). By this age, I was learning to navigate my work obligations and personal expectations a little better, and I made it a point to bring Diego with me to events, particularly when they were in the evenings or on weekends.

Having Diego with me, especially now in California, has provided him exposure to a wide variety of experiences and opportunities. I realize that I am fortunate to have the support of my boss who has allowed me to do so, but I also know that this is more how it should be in all professions. Integrating your personal life with work life is something that we should all strive to achieve. As a final story to characterize this point, Diego was with me at my office during a day his school had off. He was drawing patiently on my desk when someone stopped by to see me regarding an issue. I asked Diego to "take a seat" in the adjoining office (the President's office) so that I could handle the issue. When I went to check on him, I found him sitting comfortably in the President's chair, at his desk. He had literally taken the President's seat, and I could not have been prouder as a mom and a professional.

President Nelsen refers to the college campus as his family. In Texas, he was known for saying *Somos Familia*; we are family, and living up to it. In California, we have integrated the sentiment into a Hornet family. Coming from a white male seems to legitimize the concept, but that's okay. When it comes from a leader, it is an incredibly impactful way to have the message

relayed and reinforced across campus. Not everyone agrees with the perception. Early in Robert's time at Sacramento State, we received an email from a staff member urging the President to refrain from using the word "family" since he didn't have any family members who worked at the University, and he felt it was inappropriate for us to refer to each other as family since he didn't like some of his coworkers and would never see them as such. I was saddened more than anything that this person felt the need to send such an email, and my response touted the metaphorical family to which the President referenced and the need to treat each other as such. The idea of family is central to our role as leaders on campus, and it's a reason why I value working with the Robert Nelsen.

Writing this dissertation has given me the ability to reimagine myself as a leader, taking from the knowledge I have learned from the home, in my community, and in the classroom. Anzaldúa (2007), whose work I did not read until my graduate programs and who actually grew up in deep South Texas, has been a major influence in my work because I relate to her in many ways, particularly as she describes *la mestiza* and the "tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 101). She writes:

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

This skillset has provided me the ability to play my role incredibly well, as I have to have flexibility in handling many situations. It also gives me the ability to be creative and authentic in helping find solutions. As a leader, having the skillset to accomplish set goals and the heart to do so with authenticity, love, and care have been the best possible combination for me. I have many mentors and advisors and now, I consider, knowledge suppliers—my parents, my siblings, my

children, my community, my teachers, my friends, and my loves, who have provided me with varying perspectives and made me think differently about certain topics.

In describing how critical hope allows educators to grow roses in concrete systems, Duncan-Andrade (2009) relays the message that those flowers that do grow do so with damaged petals which represent "the attributes of indignation, tenacity, and audacity. "Audacious hope demands that we reconnect to the collective by struggling alongside on another, sharing the victories and the pain" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 90). I have shared with a few colleagues that I feel like this generation is missing a truly bold leader to be an exemplar the way Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr. were, but it also provides for us an opportunity to find a collective movement to bring about and foster change in our next generation of students and leaders in a sense of critical consciousness, critical hope, and critical love. Gabriel and Diego and all the students we serve represent our future, and we have to ingrain in them a mindset of working in and with community. As Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson, and Militello (2016) reinforce, we are better when we are able to unite the power of place and the wisdom of people.

Future Research: Women of Color in Leadership

During my first semester working at Sacramento State, I had submitted a draft of my dissertation proposal when I got on a conference call with my chair, Dr. Frank Guajardo. He provided valuable feedback on my writing, and then provided additional names of researchers for me to read and use in my work. He mentioned Dr. Caroline Turner, who was at Arizona State University, so I looked her up while we were on the call. Unbeknownst to him or me, she had taken a new position as faculty at Sacramento State! I immediately got in contact with her and we scheduled a time for lunch and conversation. She was incredibly passionate about her research and offered to help me on mine, as well. A couple of weeks later, Caroline emailed me

about a conference where she had been asked to give a keynote, along with an opportunity that she thought would be good for me to present my research. Given that I was near submitting my dissertation proposal, I agreed to submit a conference proposal to present my work. The conference titled "Women in Academia" was being held in Australia, so I submitted a proposal and was accepted. I was honored to have been able to attend and share my work with wonderful women in the field.

What I learned from that trip and what remains with me today is that there is so much more that we can and must do for women in academia. Some of these scholars were doing incredible, groundbreaking work on women in academe; others were new to the profession, and like me, were at various stages of the doctoral process, attempting to find our path in academia. This is important because Smith (1999) reminds us, "For each indigenous intellectual who actually succeeds in the academy, however – and we talking relatively small numbers – there is a whole array of issues about the ways we relate inside and outside of our own communities, inside and outside the academy, and between all those different worlds" (p. 14).

Anzaldúa (2007) conjectures:

> *En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the *mestiza*. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—la *mestiza* creates a new consciousness" (p. 102).

Anzaldúa's explanation for *la mestiza* having a "tolerance for ambiguity" adds to the depth of the identity of having a "plural personality" (p. 379), an ability to appreciate, acknowledge, and accept the wholeness of individuals and their circumstances. This new consciousness is a consciousness that every student graduating from college should strive to attain and what institutions of higher education should strive to teach their graduates. In a world

where the individual is lauded for personal achievement, and at a time when the leader of our great nation has brought to the forefront individuality, it is now more than ever important to actively challenge the master narrative.

The challenge still exists for educators to take these examples and pedagogical methods out of the classroom and utilize them in every day interactions, as well as in the professional environment. As I near the end of my dissertation, I know I am just at the cusp of my professional and academic career. There is much more to be studied, learned, and reciprocated.

Labor of Love: Birth of a Dissertation and a Latina Academician

I joke that when I gave birth to Gabriel, I aged ten years. The miracle of childbirth changes a person, not just physically and emotionally, but psychologically, spiritually, and holistically. After having lived through the doctoral process, I can say that birthing a child is not unlike birthing the self – studying, reading, researching, and writing a dissertation fundamentally changes who you are as a person (Wilson, 2008). This journey has transformed me, as a scholar, as a mother, and as an educator. While this journey was much longer than an actual pregnancy and birthing process, it will forever be a part of me, just as my children will as well. The same way a child must be nurtured and cared for and provided and constantly loved, so, too, must our individual and collective intellect. I fully understand that motherhood is not an option for everyone; I have friends and colleagues who have chosen not to have children, or who have literally had to choose between their careers and motherhood, and I don't devalue their choices. That is what part of this process is about – learning their stories and respecting their decisions. I share that for me, the experience has been similar, as I have aged and matured during the process of writing.

One of the hardest parts about writing this dissertation is that I have had to do it alone. As much as I tried to be in community with my family, friends, and colleagues and give credit to my mentors, my teachers, and my community, at the end of the day, it has been me in front of this computer, typing and trying to make sense of how this dissertation reflects me and my life. My *testimonio* is a story, a life experience that must be shared not only within academia, but with families that value education and the abundance of rewards that are brought about by that goal. As my father shared after reviewing my draft, I humbly and boldly agree that my story is exceptionally relevant and delightful and should be shared.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Daria Lisa Cardoza is the proud mother of Hilario Gabriel and Diego Maximiano Prieto, daughter of Osvaldo and Alicia, and sister to Connie, Karina, Sara, Selina, and Rebecca. She graduated from Stanford University with co-terminal degrees—a Bachelor of Arts in Economics in 2003 and a Master of Arts in Social Sciences of Education in 2004. Lisa joined the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) as Associate Director of a newly established Valley Outreach Center, implementing the Mother Daughter Program, Go Centers, and Pre-College Academic Programs, all efforts to increase the college-going rate in Texas. In 2007, Lisa served as the Assistant to the Vice President for Enrollment and Student Services and then returned to lead the outreach department as Director of College Access and Support Programs/Senior TRIO Director in 2009, overseeing three federal TRIO programs, two federal and one local migrant programs, a state engineering pre-college program, and a college access outreach center. Lisa joined the UTPA Office of the President in 2010 to serve as Chief of Staff to President Robert S. Nelsen, expanding her job duties to include governmental relations in July 2012. That same year, she was named to the Texas Women in Higher Education Board of Directors. In 2013, Lisa was named a Director of the state-wide leadership organization, the Texas Lyceum. Upon the creation of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV), Lisa accepted a position as Associate Vice President for Governmental Relations. In 2015, Lisa moved to California State University, Sacramento, to serve as Chief of Staff, once again to Robert S. Nelsen. She earned her Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from UTRGV in May, 2017 and took on an interim role, as Vice President for University Advancement. She can be reached at dlisacardoza@gmail.com.