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Finding Our Compass: Students of color navigating a doctoral program during a time of political, racial and social upheaval

Nuestro testimonio como guía: Estudiantes de color navegando un programa doctoral en tiempos de crisis política, racial y social

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Abstract: We use a storytelling approach in this study to convey our experiences as graduate students managing the triple pandemic of COVID-19, social unrest, and the mental health of doctoral students of color. We use the analytical practice of storytelling through *testimonios* to investigate how we navigate higher education institutions while enhancing our positionalities in the face of structural barriers and social challenges. We talk about our encounters with racism, discrimination, and power structures to demonstrate the influence of political and social pressures that exist as we navigate the doctoral program. We believe that if higher education administrators and educators are aware of the experiences of students of color navigating the *laberinto* of PhD programs, they can develop curriculum and support structures to help doctoral candidates thrive.

Keywords: Social justice, Reflexivity, Testimonials, Equity, LatCrit.

Resumen: Utilizamos un enfoque narrativo en este estudio para transmitir nuestras experiencias como estudiantes de posgrado que manejan la triple pandemia de COVID-19, el malestar social y la salud mental de los estudiantes de doctorado de color. Usamos la práctica analítica de contar historias a través de *testimonios* para investigar cómo navegamos por las instituciones de educación superior mientras mejoramos nuestras posicionalidades frente a las barreras estructurales y los desafíos sociales. Hablamos de nuestros encuentros con el racismo, la discriminación y las estructuras de poder para demostrar la influencia de las presiones políticas y sociales que existen a medida que navegamos por el programa de doctorado. Creemos que si los administradores y educadores de la educación superior son conscientes de las experiencias de los estudiantes de color que navegan por el laberinto de los programas de doctorado, pueden desarrollar un currículo y estructuras de apoyo para ayudar a los candidatos doctorales a prosperar.

Palabras clave: Justicia social, Reflexividad, Testimonio, Equidad, LatCrit.

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1. INTRODUCTION

You know we've got to find a way to bring some lovin' here today **(Gaye, 1971). In the fall of 1968, Black students at San Francisco State University (SFSU), a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in Northern California, led the longest-running protest in U.S. history. Students gathered their collective voice at SFSU to fight for George Murray, a Black English professor and graduate student, who was fired because he taught students they had a right to bear arms and preached his anti-Vietnam war views (Bates & Meraji, 2019). Black students and other students of color at SFSU knew that their collective voices would shift the atmosphere and create change not only for current students but for future students.**

Two years later, in Spring 1970, Marvin Gaye's brother returned from fighting in Vietnam; he lost his partner after a three-year battle with brain cancer. He was dealing with the fact that Motown records would not allow him to sing about the social unrest because of the fear it would end his singing career, and they would lose money. In 1971, Marvin Gaye created the song "What's Going On" as a reflection of the political climate in the country after the Vietnam War, the health crisis, and racial unrest in the land. Yet, here we are 51 years later, in 2022, and these lyrics are still relevant today for students of color at PWIs.

Students of color in the United States who are enrolled in doctoral programs at PWIs are navigating their education while dealing with racism, health disparities in underrepresented communities, the political process, and the emotional toll of trying to meet hatred with love; empathy becomes exhausting while one is trying to learn at the same time. Secondly, there is the importance of being seen, heard, and valued rather than being bullied and facing White-privileged systems on a daily basis. Students of color are so often "othered" in their classrooms, being taught by faculty that do not share their cultural and ideological perspectives, anrsocd this is after a lengthy tenure in primary (K-12) education, where constant policing and abuse of students' minds and bodies take place to indoctrinate them into the White supremacist and capitalistic system of society (Love, 2014).

Picket lines and picket signs **(Gaye, 1971). People of color who resisted were met with brutality in 2020; we watched a White officer put his knee on the neck of Geroge Floyd for nine minutes and twenty eight seconds, while he yelled he could not breathe and cried for his mother. *Mother, Mother, there's too many of you crying* (Gaye, 1971). A Black man was killed in broad daylight over a twenty-dollar bill as if his life was not much more than that, yet as students of color it was expected that we would show up in the classroom and in our daily lives as if we just did not watch a murder on television of someone who looked like us.**

Brother, brother, brother, there is far too many of you dying; you know we've got to find a way **(Gaye, 1971). As students of color and doctorate students, we watched in 2020 the stark and harsh reality of a continued genocide of Black and Brrown men and women- killed in broad daylight for the world to see, while their murderers and oppressors walk freely to live another day of their lives. We have witnessed more often than we should these oppressors showing up in police uniforms, prosecutors in the courtroom, and politicians in government seats that carry out these injustices and sustain them by looking the other way. We watched children locked in cages at the southern border of the United States, who were separated from their parents, who were locked away as well, and all deprived of basic human decency in**

accordance with the paradigm of militarized structural racism (Sabo et al., 2014). Microlevel and macrolevel forms of structural racism have persisted in Black and Brown communities, maintaining a system of injustice that support White supremacist ideologies in "a myriad of societal domains, including (but not limited to) education, employment, housing, criminal justice, and health care systems" (Garcia, Homan, Garcia, & Brown, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

In this article, we rely on the methodological practice of *testimonio* (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Flores Carmona, 2017; Fuentes & Pérez, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2016) to explore the ways in which we navigated institutions of higher education while enriching our positionalities through obstacles and challenges. Through our commitment to writing and sharing our *testimonios*, we experienced spiritual and emotional clarity that serves as a tool of empowerment to navigate these institutions.

We build on Ruiz & Machado-Casas' (2013) metaphor of navigating higher education as a *laberinto*, a labyrinth, which can make students and faculty of color feel "an overpowering sense of loss and lack of direction as they enter the labyrinth of academic structures, a place that can be dark, lonely, and without much direction" (p. 4). They remind us that while a labyrinth is essentially a maze-like path that can be difficult to walk through, when the practice of walking through it is taken up as spiritual practice, the experience becomes a meditative act to get more in touch with one's soul and deeper existential purpose (Artress, 1996). Ruiz & Machado-Casas (2013) further employ the notion of the *laberinto* of higher education to conceptualize the experiences that students and faculty of color have when navigating the structures of higher education. They explain that:

> **A *laberinto* contains places that are complicated and uncertain. When you enter a *laberinto* you don't really know the way or how you will get to the end. There is some uncertainty as to which way to go, or if the path that you have chosen is the "right" way. As one goes through the *laberinto* one feels overwhelmed because of the uncertainty of where to go. The one thing we do know about this *laberinto* is that one needs to figure out the road(s) that lead to the exit (p. 52).**

While Ruiz and Machado-Casas (2013) use this metaphor to describe the complex paths associated with higher education, we revisit this concept with a renewed lens to walk through our own labyrinths to share our *testimonios*.

We posit that walking the maze-like barriers of a labyrinth are seemingly just as overwhelming and difficult as navigating higher education. However, when walking a labyrinth with spiritual grounding and connectedness, just like engaging in *testimonio*, the experience can feel quite liberating. For example, according to Sandor and Froman (2006), walking a labyrinth is a spiritual and healing centered practice that involves three particular phases in one's experiences:

> **The first phase, releasing, occurs during the walk to the center at a normal walking speed. Walkers are encouraged to empty their minds; repeat a chant, word, or prayer; pose a problem to be solved; or recall a dream to reflect on. When in the center, walkers engage in receiving and may sit or stand while inviting an opening to personal healing, solace, connection, renewal, and wholeness. The third phase of the walk, returning, involves retracing one's steps in the opposite direction. Walkers return to the day-to-day world with each step, and while doing this often experience a change of energy in mind, body, and spirit. The intent of the labyrinth walk is to evoke physiological, affective, and spiritual outcomes similar to a sitting meditation (p. 104).**

As such, engaging in *testimonio* is a deeply personal and spiritual act and experience when processing and reclaiming our struggles as people of color navigating oppression in the world. In the following section, we describe *testimonio* and our methodological approach to this study.

2. METHODS

We engage in narrative research rooted in *testimonio* as our methodological approach to explore the experiences of navigating higher education from the vantage points of five women and three men who all identify as students of color. *Testimonio* has served as a powerful tool for woman-identified Chicanas/Latinas to share their stories about navigating marginalization, and more importantly to stand in solidarity with others who share similar experiences and struggles (Anzaldúa, 2002).

Testimonio offers students of color a liberatory space to reflect on their lived experiences and positinalities in the world through critical race and feminist theory and reclaim their stories with agency (Alba, 2007). Huber and Cueva (2012) assert that, "*testimonio* allows Chicana/Latina researchers to document and inscribe into existence a social witness account reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often erased by dominant discourses" (p. 393). As we look at how oppressed students of color experience oppression through their testimonials, it provides an opportunity for White supremacy systems to look at the power in the narratives of students of color in PhD programs who are also experiencing a triple pandemic.

While *testimonios* have been developed for and by Chicana/Latina women, it has also been taken up by people of color more broadly in order to reflect on, share and witness one another's racialized, gendered and intersectional struggles and lived experiences as a means of consciousness-raising, healing and solidarity (Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Stories of resilience and resistance to subordination often emerge from *testimonio* research which lead to transformative experiences for participants. The very process of *testimoniando* is a homemade theory, the generation of knowledge that is

often delegitimize in institutional spaces (Nuñez Janes & Robledo, 2009). In keeping with *testimonio* practice, these authors integrate nonstandard English words and Spanish words within their manuscript and throughout their narratives; in so doing, it allows their authentic voices to highlight how language choice also embodies a political stance in centering non-dominant identities and cultures as a form of reclamation.

Therefore, this study allows each of us as students of color-identified scholars in the realm of academia to reflect on and heal from our own experiences navigating higher education through the act of testifying about our resilience in the midst of navigating structural oppression. We engage in this labor of love hoping that other communities of color, students, and faculty can relate to our stories and find inspiration to engage in a similar process as a form of resistance and sustainability in the field and the world more broadly.

3. PARTICIPANTS

From this point forward, the contributing authors will be referred to as *colegas* (English: colleagues). The *colegas* met in the Fall 2020 semester in a course titled "Seminar on Social and Cultural Foundations of Multicultural Education," a seminal course in a PhD program in Southern California. The purpose of this course is to explore the "[social and cultural parameters that have contributed to the shaping of American society and affected developments in education," while also developing an understanding of the current state of multicultural education that seeks to undo the field's past shortcomings and detriments. Over the course of the 16-week term, each of the *colegas* brought their own experiential and theoretical knowledge to the course content, applying the ideas they were engaging with to their own specialties and areas of education. From identifying and questioning their positionalities in their personal and professional lives to unraveling the complexities of culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies present in the social justice field, the *colegas* laid the foundation for their own critical scholarly paradigms - ideas that will continue to develop and evolve in an ongoing reflexive process.

These *colegas* are seven doctoral students of color, all finding that while it is challenging to navigate the complexities of a PhD program, this journey becomes all the more grueling when combined with an unprecedented event such as the COVID-19 pandemic and a worldwide social justice movement in combat with the capitalist, White supremacists systems that have a hold of society. These students faced novel and terrible events along with the rest of the world, but experienced it through their own unique lenses as doctoral students of color. Their personal and professional lives were in flux. While education presented the *colegas* with a way to ground their experiences in theory and practice, it did little to alleviate the burden and stress of a global pandemic and triple pandemic. The *colegas* decided to share their pandemic experiences with the academic community in the form of *testimonio* to advance the critical scholarship of qualitative narrative research and show solidarity to other students and individuals of color. We found Marvin Gaye's (1971) legendary song, "What's Going On" helps us to tell our story of our journey together, and the themes of resilience, community, and love are shared through their voices. The *colegas* came to the conclusion that the following topics best encompassed their experiences:

1. **Who are the *Colegas?***
2. **A Delicate Balancing Act: The Struggles of Doctoral Students of Color**
3. **The Eventual Butterfly: Confronting our Imposter Syndrome**
4. **The Struggle is Real: The Pandemic and our Experiences as Doctoral Students**
5. **It's About To Go Down: Activism and Guilt during a Racial, Health, and Political Crisis**

4. TESTIMONIOS

Who are the Colegas?

Ahliyah

My name is Ahliyah Chambers, and I am proud to say that roots trace back to the motherland continent of Africa. My African ancestors, who were once kings and queens, were captured and beaten by White-Europeans then taken to North America. To my knowledge, once my ancestors were no longer

enslaved, they lived in southern states such as Mississippi and Louisiana before traveling to Illinois and California during the Great Migration. My great grandparents and grandparents, like many other African Americans during the twentieth century, left the South with desires of better living conditions and more-promising economic, social and political opportunities for themselves and generations after them (Tolnay, 2003). For years, my maternal grandmother served the community as a nurse in the military then in a hospital located in Los Angeles, California. She instilled the value of furthering their education as she noticed that higher education often created new opportunities for Blacks that otherwise would not be provided. I stand on her shoulders as I will be the first woman in the family to earn a doctorate degree. While earning my Bachelor's and Master's degree, I also became devoted to educating, serving, and improving the conditions for all people who identify within the African diaspora. In addition to being a first-year doctoral student, I am honored to serve at my collegiate alma mater as a resource to support specifically Black undergraduate and graduate students as they navigate their postsecondary education experience at a predominantly White institution. So, as I reflect upon the journey of my ancestors, my identity and life's purpose, I resonate with the words of Black revolutionary leader, Assata Shakur: "It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains!"

Asha'

My name is Asha' Jones, and I have seen the damaging impact of people who chose instant satisfaction over delayed gratification throughout my life. I determined that learning would be the key to changing my life and the lives of those around me. I have dedicated myself to learning. I have never been satisfied with merely getting a good grade, but instead, I want to absorb the information to acquire the skills necessary for my future success. My life experiences led me to apply for the PhD program at San Diego State University in 2016. I was not accepted into the program. I applied again in 2017, and I was not accepted. I went back and forth about applying again in

2019, but my spirit told me I needed to try one more time. I chose to push through the denials because there is a need for Black women in the academy. My life's denials have taught me that every delay will be beneficial to my growth and development as a person and a scholar. As a Black woman, I owe it to other Black girls who want to pursue higher education to be free. As I continue to pursue higher education, I am most intrigued by concepts related to diversity, specifically to those related to access to education for Black girls who are often underrepresented in the academy.

Kimberley

My name is Kimbelry Folkes, and as a critical community-based educator and staunch diversity and social justice advocate, I strive to attend to issues of power, privilege, and oppression to create a more equitable humanity. As a first-generation, Afro-Caribbean immigrant, this title has formed the crux of my many identities. It has been the sole catalyst for my community and academic passions and professional pursuits. Like many immigrants, my family migrated to the United States in search of a better life. However, upon migration, I learned fairly quickly, especially in the realm of academia, that there was a deep bias against linguistically and culturally diverse students, such as myself. Such biases reflected a fundamentally mistaken assumption that diverse students are inept. Through monocultural and monolingual norms, I have witnessed students falling between the cracks as they did not measure up to educators' unjust measures of academic achievement. This misguided framing revealed the distressing disparities in education for underserved and underrepresented communities resulting in what world-renowned author Bettina Love (2016) describes as "spirit murdering" for many students.

Being a first-generation student and the first in my family to pursue a PhD, the journey has been marred by struggle and resilience. Through my personal narrative of acclimation and resistance, I have spent my formative years connecting and engaging in community building, grassroots movements, and organizations where collective action has revealed personal stories of struggles and triumph and have given expression to the history and lives of

people across many communities. Through these efforts, I work with students and families to enact change from the local level and beyond. Such rich experiences have been a lifeline and very instrumental in helping me attain an education and started me on a path of political activism, an empowered trauma narrative and community service. No matter the undertaking, my positionality, essence, and experiences are owed solely to the most high God, my ancestors, and my supportive and loving family. These entities and their legacies, triumphs, failures, and sacrifices adorn my every being and allow me to negotiate and navigate the world with a unique set of abilities and lenses. Standing on my ancestors' shoulders, I am reminded of the strength and vigor of Kwame Nkrumah and channel his famous words to carry me through, "Forward ever, backward never"!

Lauren

My name is Lauren Lahn, and after 11 years of working in higher education, I made the decision in Fall 2019 to pursue my doctorate degree, a degree that symbolically would be the final stepping stone in my career in academia. I knew I had much to learn about being an educator, but had little insight into what lessons this program truly had to offer me - I had only my love of education to guide me. Then, in the space between applying and actually beginning the program, was a year that brought screaming to the surface every injustice and critical issue that has been building in our nation for a long time – the treatment of people of color, the treatment of the poor and working class, the abuse of money and power, and the overall divisive and toxic nature of the citizens of this country. This year served as a catalyst for my growth as a proud Latina, a woman in education, and as an advocate from a low-income, single-parent, household of color. In the following paper I will share my personal journey over 2020, and how the combination of national events and my education finally triggered in me something radical and uncompromising. I have learned to ask deeper, more probing questions of myself and the people around me, and have grown confident in my ability to speak what I see as the truth in the face of inequity, injustice, and hate. I want to facilitate healing, and foster a community of learning and love in my career and in my personal life. However, before that I can serve in that role, I must continue my journey of

reflexivity, critically examining my own biases and beliefs as new information and experiences come to me. I am happy to say I have finally started this journey, and have a lifetime ahead of me of introspection and growth.

Mariano

My name is Mariano Lozano Soto, a native from the San Diego/Tijuana region. I was raised and educated on both sides of the border. I attended High School in Mexico and my educational journey in the US began around 2007 when I enrolled at Southwestern College in Chula Vista. After completing general coursework, I transferred and obtained a BA from CSU, Northridge and later on a MA in Religious Studies from UC, Santa Barbara. Having developed a passion for the humanities and liberal arts, my goal was to obtain a PhD in History of Religions to teach and conduct research. However, my plans changed and returned to San Diego. My interest in foreign cultures/languages has led me to travel to different countries, and work and collaborate in social justice projects in disadvantaged communities. These experiences have contributed to my formation as a social justice advocate. Now as a 1st year doctoral student I look forward to studying issues of critical literacy, civic empowerment, equity and social justice in the bilingual social studies K-12 classroom.

Marnitta

My name is Marnitta George, and I have never taken the time to consider the many pieces of myself until this time. I believe I've spent most of my time relatively drifting, without very many concerns or heartaches, through my existence. I am a black woman, a mother to my three boys, a supportive wife to my active duty military husband, and a 16-year classroom teacher.

It is through this lens that I consider my place here as a first-year doctoral student. I consider my journey from the Detroit Public School system to now and I feel as if I am an observer to my own life. This first year has allowed me an opportunity to reflect on my past experiences and how I, as an educator, have impacted those students trusted in my care. Those years in the classroom juxtaposed with my new understanding of social justice education

invite many emotions of regret over the students to whom I may have unwittingly caused educational harm. Yet, I also remain hopeful that I can now engage in the fight with a deeper understanding of the practices that have diminished the educational experiences of students nationwide. This new understanding provides me with a sense of peace that I am now armed with the knowledge to battle the unjust systems effectively. It is with this lens that I consider my place here at this time.

However, there are other pieces of me that impact my place here as well. I am a mother of three young black boys in a time where it seems their very blackness is a crime. I am in constant fear about their safety and about how others, including their teachers, will treat them. This reality ignites my desire to ensure that my sons and all of the other sons and daughters who enter my classroom find their potential and defeat the negative perceptions surrounding them.

As I learn more about my place as an educator and an academic, I know that I will have new awakenings and new opportunities to use those experiences to take my place in this fight against misrepresentation and mistreatment through education. This is a long fight ahead, and I recognize that there will be moments where one version of my identity will need to take center stage, while the other pieces of me support from the background.

At this moment, I remember my why, my sons, and I recognize that they deserve better, and so do all the rest of the sons and daughters who will be touched directly and indirectly by my actions or lack thereof. Simple observations are no longer acceptable. Now is the time for action. It is time for my action and my work to begin.

Mohamed

My name is Mohamed Abdi, and my family came to the United States after the civil war in Somalia in the late 1980s. Both of my parents didn't have a formal education but understood the values of having one. As a result, they pressured us all into doing well so that we can live comfortable lives. My dad

worked 12 hours a day to provide for all my 13 siblings and I. I don't recall when he practiced self-care or even took a short vacation, and he was always working. My mother was a stay-at-home mom in her earlier years. This all changed when my father, who had diabetes, was diagnosed with kidney failure. The pressures of success amplified. At this point, being the eldest son, I was expected to step in and set an excellent example for everyone to follow.

Unfortunately for my parents, I was not a good student. I often got D and F grades and got suspended many times in K-12. I don't recall a time I ever got 100% on a math exam or a time where I understood the content to the degree where I could explain it to other students. I just felt less than the other students. My 10th-grade teacher said to me that I wouldn't graduate high school. Another teacher shared that I was a failure. Educators never questioned why I didn't understand the material. Instead, they took a blame approach and put it entirely on me. Although my parents couldn't teach me the Pythagorean theorem, or long division, instead, they taught me the importance of not giving up. My mother would say to me in Somali, "you're only a failure if you stop trying," and that's the reason why I am here today in this PhD program. Through all the failures I experienced in K-12, I always kept moving forward. My past failures are why I went on to obtain two masters degrees and now chasing down my PhD I am at a place where I'm hungry for success, and nothing can get in my way or stop me.

5. A DELICATE BALANCING ACT: THE STRUGGLES OF DOCTORAL STUDENTS OF COLOR

Come on, talk to me, So you can see **(Gaye, 1971). Black and Brown students are underrepresented in higher education and fall behind in graduation rates compared to their White and Asian counterparts. After six years, the 2010 cohort of undergraduate students boasted 74% of their Asian students and 64% of their White students successfully completing their degrees, while only 54% of Hispanic and 40% of Black students did (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Moreover, in the 2015-2016 academic year, Black and**

Brown bodies represented only 13.5% and 9.2% respectively of graduate programs in the U.S., whereas White graduate student enrollment towered at 56% (American Council on Education, 2019).

At one point in recent education research, educators pointed to standardized test scores as why people of color did not attain nor thrive in higher education, positioning it as an "individual problem" rather than a systemic one (Banks & Dohy, 2019). However, the narrative is shifting: critical research now focuses on uncovering the gaps in resources and opportunities that have continued to deny Black and Brown bodies access and achievement in higher education. One suspect: the educational institutions themselves. "On campus, miscommunications may exist between instructors or counselors, a lack of knowledge of resources and access to high-quality mentorships, feelings of isolation, and stereotyping, to name a few, may create barriers to success for students of color" (Banks & Dohy, 2019, p. 119). As much as colleges and universities may try, their efforts at inclusive programming do little to unseat these barriers and negative experiences students of color face.

The *colegas* have experienced these same pitfalls for themselves and for the students they work with and for. There is a unique kind of resilience students of color must build to navigate both the academic world and its many unjust and oppressive barriers - one that should not have to be there, but it is nonetheless. Here the *colegas* share their intersectional experiences as people of color, first-generation students, teachers and advocates, and doctoral students - all of which is a myriad of difficulty and persistence.

Asha'

When people say "the struggle is real," I often giggle because it has always been real for me as a Black woman. I've always had a higher level of responsibility in my household and in the classroom since I was a child. Because school administrators did not take the time to get to know me and what I was going through before I came to school, the school system was a source of struggle for me as a Black girl. My gender and identity have been

used as justifications for disciplinary action on several occasions. I had 50 in-school suspensions and 80 out-of-school suspensions during my time in the K-12 system. As a Black girl, I discovered that my discipline differed from that of white students.

Administrators and instructors believed in erroneous narratives about Black women dating back to the days of slavery while I was in college (Fordham, 1993). One of the myths about Black women in the classroom is that they must be tamed because they speak up and are rebellious (Fordham,1993). These misleading educational narratives are rooted in racism, which is pervasive in the educational system. Administrators, educators, and lawmakers in positions of authority can make the necessary modifications to ensure that the conflict does not recur in the future.

Kimberley

Being a military spouse continues to be one of the most rewarding, enigmatic, and adventurous times of my life. Although the aforementioned is true, it would be a fallacy to say that wearing this title does not come without its challenges. I have had to endure planned and unexpected relocations, and finding and maintaining employment as a result. Regarding my educational journey, it has proven to be daunting. As such, I have had to postpone my graduate school dreams, leaving my career and family behind, and relocated overseas. After a few years overseas, our new military orders took us to Southern California. Though a new arrival, I began settling in, and the opportunity was ripe to actualize my doctoral dream. However, I did not know that it would come with the additional obstacles of 2020, which has tested me in ways I could not have imagined. As if being a graduate student during multiple pandemics in the U.S. is not enough, juggling marital duties, multiple employments, familial and household responsibilities have strained my time, leading to decreased sleep and increased stress. Each day is defined by a balancing act to keep my work, family, and community engagements all in play while optimizing functionality and being successful. As a result, I tattooed the concepts of flexibility and accountability on my being to account

for all the unpredictability. At times, it has not been easy to adjust swiftly and find balance as things continue to change by the minute.

Carrying my family on my back as the first-ever to pursue a graduate degree, let alone a doctoral degree in the United States, is a considerable feat. Amongst the ebb and flow of graduate studies, I had to hold space for the social justice uprisings due to racialized policing and the recent tragedy of George Floyd's murder at the hands of law enforcement and all the other murders of police brutality. 2020 reminded us all of the importance of family and the value of community. Despite all the challenges, what emerged was a certain grit and resilience from withstanding it all together. However, being isolated and unable to be with my family has been difficult. My identity as an Afro-Caribbean woman is situated within local and racialized contexts, resulting in familial and community connections that are transnational both in the United States and abroad (Lorick-Wilmot, 2014). Not being with them to experience a much-needed reprieve from this journey's stress has resulted in major familial withdrawals. The familial elders and the youngest generations have set their gaze upon me. Their eyes are fixed on my progress as they all cheer me on from a distance. Though I have highlighted some of the challenges here, I am no stranger to strife, and obstacles will not deter me from the course. There is a famous Jamaican proverb stating, "Eff yuh wah gud yuh nose haffi run." Meaning, to gain success, you have to work hard and overcome your struggles. The scale has tipped over, and the road ahead has many blockades. Nevertheless, I know my Lord and savior have built me for this journey, and his grace and mercy shall keep me moving forward toward my goal.

Lauren

I knew the educational system had its flaws, just as I understood society at large was flawed. But when I began my doctorate program this year I learned the true scope of systemic, racial injustice and the ways it materializes in the classroom and on campus. I have continued to move through levels of realization until I came to this point: "education is doing our students harm". Far too often, school becomes an isolating environment that traps the

individual in a battlefield of social and cultural dissension - the classroom is the stage for society's prejudices against anyone who is an "other" (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015). Our children end up being victims, alone against wave after wave of micro- and macro-oppressions that serve to keep them subordinate. Western, white hegemony holds the power in all systems of contemporary society, and the threat of spiritual, emotional, and physical violence is very real for people who do not fit into that framework (Stovall, 2006).

In the course of my career, my work has brought me close to the military-connected student population. In higher education, student Veterans represent a very diverse population with intersecting identities, and with additional unique, overlapping layers of challenges. 61.8% of student Veterans (Kim & Cole, 2013) are often the first in their families to go to college, leaving them academically underprepared, with lower levels of academic self-efficacy, and less working knowledge of the structure of college overall (Jenner, 2017). Children from low-income backgrounds are statistically more likely to join the military and pursue higher education afterwards (Lutz, 2008), but how and why they pursue higher education is much different compared to their middle- or high-income peers (Mobley, Brawner, Lord, Main, & Camacho, 2018). Finally, people of color utilize Veterans Affairs (VA) education benefits to go to college at a rate almost three times that of their non-minority counterparts (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2017).

These numbers, facts, and statistics are not my own, but they have impacted me still. It is my experience – my positionality – as an educator that has put me in front of my students who inspire me to advocacy, even radicalization. I listen to their stories and I embrace their challenges, because any barrier that stands in their way becomes my barrier; the desire to promote education as an environment for personal transformation is strong within me. But I see now the brokenness of the system and the effect it has on my students and so many others – the Black and Brown bodies, the first-generation college students, the underprivileged and underrepresented. However, if I am ever to become a representative of the best interests of my students, interests that are often directly in conflict with the status quo, I have to establish myself as a

true activist of equity and social justice in education. As Wayne Au (2017) boldly states: "In this historic moment, when our communities are under attack, we need to make clear where our solidarities lie, and act on those solidarities in material ways" (p. 149).

Mariano

Prior to entering this program I analyzed the costs and benefits of the PhD program. Financially it was a tough decision, but at the same time I knew it would probably be the last opportunity to complete a PhD. The older we get, the more responsibilities and the more complicated it is to find a balance between family, professional life and education. Moreover, due to the COVID-19 health crisis, finding that balance is all the more critical and difficult. Working and studying from home has totally transformed our environments and how we relate to others. Inactivity and longer periods of time sitting in front of the computer also affect our health. Being vigilant about COVID can be stressful too; it adds unnecessary stress to our daily lives. Maintaining good health both physically and mentally is essential to be successful in a doctoral program. This makes me think about the racial disparities that were brought to light during the pandemic, and the fact there is a greater risk of contagion and death for Black and Latino populations. A great percentage of these groups constitute the essential sectors that suffer the most. Racial-ethnic health disparities elucidate the structural discrimination and unequal distributions of resources. The legacy of racist policies and practices continue to this day.

As I investigate the literature on testimonios to draw inspiration from others I realize that the writing and active witnessing of testimonio is what Cruz Navarro calls a "dialogically informing narrative first spoken and then used … as a dynamic entry to conscientization and liberation from oppression. Testimonio allows the narrator to show an experience that is not only liberating in the process of telling but also political in its production of awareness to listeners and readers alike" (Burciaga & Cruz Navarro, 2012, p. 527). Telling our story is not simply a narrative act, but rather a courageous and political stance as well. Through the act of re-telling, we allow others to

come into our personal sacred space and learn from one another, share experiences, and provide solace and healing.

Marnitta

As I write this, I am sitting across the desk from my eight year old as he begins his class for the day, while keeping an ear out for the television or video game noises from the rooms of my 12 and 16 year old, who are also supposed to be engaged in their classes. It is a Tuesday morning and we all spend our school days on our computers; either presenting for a Zoom class session or, in my case, leading them. I am a full time teacher, student, and I am also a dedicated wife and mother. Yet, I find myself often at odds with the duty that I feel to each part of who I am at this moment. To this point, I feel like I've done everything for my family. I mean, I'm a mom - it's what I'm supposed to do. Nevertheless, I can not escape the notion that rests in the back of my mind. I have resigned from two teaching positions to follow and support my husband's career. It will happen again before he's retired. As I work full-time, I still carry the responsibilities of the home as I did before starting this program. Now, as a student, teacher, mother, and wife, I struggle to maintain them all with a smiling heart.

I carry an immense amount of guilt and frustration. My family doesn't understand the pursuit of my terminal degree, and my children often remind me of how busy I am and how much I neglect to do for them right now. In a nutshell, my family doesn't know how to support my endeavors - and the reality is, I am not sure if they want to.

I have given up so much of myself, as many parents often do, to best support my family. I've done it all willingly and without complaint over the years. As I grapple with my responsibility and my career, I am disheartened at the lack of reciprocal support. There are so many issues present here within this reflection: duty, expectation of marriage, roles and responsibilities within the household, goals, support, encouragement, raising boys to be good men.

I am trying to figure it out. It's all a bit overwhelming, but yet, I'm not ready to give in. I find myself almost rebelling against myself at this point! I know what I would have done a few years ago: I would have given in, shrunk to the background, and told myself "I'll do that program another time." But I know that now is the time that I must do this! In this first year, despite the toll it took on my home/work/school life, I've also given myself a mission to find out what matters most to me and to find out who I am for me. It's a foreign concept to me as I've not engaged in this type of endeavor before, but I hope to be a changemaker for the educational world. I have to do this for myself!

6. THE EVENTUAL BUTTERFLY: CONFRONTING OUR IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Mother, mother, everybody thinks we're wrong (Gaye, 1971). In the individual process of knowledge development - or epistemology, as researchers call it - there is an ongoing and reflexive process of leveraging gained information against the "sociohistorical, cultural, and political" self in order to development new knowledge frameworks (Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, & Militello, 2008). As researchers we take our experiences, our values, and our beliefs - our identities, so to speak - and apply them to our academic endeavors, resulting in researchers who perceive the world in unique ways and seek to apply their epistemology to their research. However, there is a significant barrier that prevents researchers of color from pursuing their epistemological perspective with authenticity: the imposter phenomenon. The imposter phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978) - now called imposter syndrome - is a negative psychological reaction to an individual feeling as if they do not belong in the environment they are in; they feel as if they are incapable to maintaining their place in the environment; that somehow others around them are more deserving of the opportunities they earned; and manifests in persistent self-doubt, anxiety, and effects performance and motivation in opportunities for continued advancement (Lige, Peteet, & Brown, 2017; Peteet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015; Neureiter & Traut-Mattasuch, 2016). In students of color, specifically those in graduate programs, imposter syndrome is especially prevalent because of a lack of reconciling their backgrounds, representation in faculty from those from the same minority

groups, and a general dissonance in values between the student and the White hegemonic structure of academia (Murakami-Ramalho, Piert, & Militello, 2008).

The *colegas* were not spared from the imposter syndrome and its effects on their experiences and performance during the first years of their doctorate programs. For some, it is an inescapable black cloud that has followed them through all their years in higher education; for others, it was a sudden and unexpected storm that rained over their initial doctorate experience. They hope that by sharing these feelings with each other and with the academic community, they can both resolve these feelings themselves and with the community, and also help others on their own epistemological journeys. But it's not easy to shed the nagging feeling of being an imposter, especially in the face of continued adversity.

Ahliyah

As I entered into the last year of my Master's program, I was given a journal that read on the cover, "I am my ancestors' wildest dreams." I held this journal close and carried it with me when I would go to class and work meetings. Growing up, education was one of my family's core values, and although I seemed cool, calm, and collected on the outside, I was initially very hesitant to apply to PhD programs. What made me special? In my mind, I was just a young Black woman raised in Southern California with an intense desire to improve the educational conditions for all African Americans and underserved communities. As I grow, I observe how higher educational institutions operate because I know they were not initially created with the success of Black people in mind - outside of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

My decision to pursue a doctoral degree came from many nights of prayers with God and talking with my ancestors. What would they do if they were given these same opportunities? The answer was obvious: persist. Exactly what our community has always done - especially Black women. With that being said, I know that my work is still long from finished, so I plan to stay

dedicated to improving the educational conditions for Black people. Although my journey has just begun within a higher educational institution, I will reach the masses of Black communities, despite their education level or access to education, to show them that there is power in our knowledge. Now is the time to put our resources together. I want to be a part of creating supportive infrastructures and networks because no one can take that from us. It's who I am: my ancestors' wildest dreams.

Asha'

For me, the imposter syndrome takes a different form. I've always felt as if I've had to deal with prejudices both in and out of the classroom, with others making me feel as if I don't belong. For me, figuring out who I am as a person resulted in an internal struggle. During my PhD degree, I watched and experienced oppression in the classroom. I sat in a class with three white classmates my first semester in the PhD program and listened to a professor say that I wasn't "PhD student material." For almost twenty minutes, the professor humiliated me and treated me as if I wasn't human, attempting to persuade me that I wasn't deserving of a PhD program. When it came time to give me my final grade, he chose to give me an incomplete, claiming that he would prefer that I redo my paper. As a result, I sought advice from one of my instructors, and we went over the paper's mechanics together. I submitted the paper, and he gave me a score of 39/50, leaving me one point short of an A in the class. It was quite discouraging. I was most surprised by the fact that he, too, came from an underrepresented background.

"Just 'cause folk got dark skin like you don't mean that they will support you, girl" is something my grandma used to say to me all the time. It was really spot on about my experiences. My grandmother had a big influence on me and always encouraged me to question the status quo in everything I do. I find myself doing so as I develop in the classroom and at work. I'm well aware that the key to my victory is to win my struggle. I will fight to stay in the race of learning because it is my calling.

Kimberley

"Girl, what are you doing here? You know you do not belong! Somebody made an error in admitting you. Why do you think you are the first family member to do it? Because it is not possible." These questions and statements are a part of the constant buzzing uttered from my arch-nemesis: my inner mean girl. Authors Ahlers and Arylo (2019) coined the inner mean girl concept to describe self-bullying. Here I am, a first-year doctoral student in a reputable program sponsored by two distinguished and prestigious universities; and yet, my inner mean girl has followed me here. Imposter Syndrome and Stereotype Threat are prevalent markers that sometimes haunt me. The struggles with both issues can often leave me with uncertainty, questioning my sense of belonging, space, and success capabilities (Pauneska et al., 2015).

While social-belonging interventions are available to me in the form of resource centers, counseling, and an advisor, it is not enough. Not because the services or resources are inadequate, but until I can truly take my inner mean girl to reform school, the fight wages on. In the meantime, to combat such feelings, I have had to dig deep and tap into my inner growth mindset. This mindset fosters continued social and academic engagement, ultimately reducing the effects of stereotype threat (Pauneska et al., 2015) and allows me to see that belonging and achievement is a process that develops over time. Russell (2017) explains that we hardly ever reflect on the moments when we are not imposters. Instead, we relentlessly focus on gaps in our knowledge or inadequacy. However, for every moment of inadequateness, there is another moment when we realize a previous challenge is now mundane. One of my dear friends usually says, "When you know better, you do better." I ask, If we all know that our hard work and merit have brought us to the steps of academia, then why do we doubt our abilities and voluntarily accept this anxiety-provoking misery that we are frauds or do not belong?

Through our coursework, I keep hearing repeated themes of the peer effect and how critical it is to build community and writing groups with my colleagues. I have bought into the idea that this is not a singular journey. To

be successful, my collegiate community will have to hold each other accountable and remove the illusion of competition, incompetence and fear. We will have to hold space for one another and push each other towards the final destination. If I had to describe this imagery in my head, it looks like a hype man at any hip hop show; for a biblical reference, the imagery reflects John the Baptist spreading the gospel for Jesus Chirst. On a more personal note, I know there will be days when my inner mean girl wants to come out to play, and when she does, I can give her the boot. However, it takes intentional effort as sometimes she just will not let me be great. I believe the universe is not just a series of meaningless events, but all events have a practical purpose and are a part of a divine plan. To the colleagues in my cohort, we are perfectly placed where we should be. Let us don the best apparel of strength and courage and leave all our inner mean girls and boys in the dust.

Lauren

I believed myself to be capable of achieving almost anything; there have been many personal and professional challenges put in front of me, and I have been able to overcome them. If it is a matter of doing the work – work in a quantitative, objective sense - I have no problem with it. However, when I entered my doctorate program, it demanded that I right away begin the difficult process of critical reflexivity. I froze in fear. This continuous process shattered my belief that I was already entirely anti-racist; instead I found out I have so much work left to do. It required that I admit all my privilege, all my biased beliefs, and commit to the challenge of challenging others on their privilege and biases; and as a non-confrontational person, this mission required direct and often persistent confrontation with myself and others. I can write research papers on academic theory and praxis, but it is much more difficult to base every single piece of written work on your personal perspective.

Imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978) fosters a consistent sense of doubt in a person, even with a list of accomplishments and accolades behind them. It frames success as convenient or a matter of timing, and reduces the individual to a fraud in their environment. I feel these same feelings every day

in my program; this nagging belief that I don't belong here, that I am not at the right place in my spiritual and academic journey to be in a program with this much depth in its values. My undergraduate and Master's programs did not challenge me in the same way as this, possibly because the content of the program did not require me to face in myself that which I have avoided for so long: my complacency with the system as it was.

But all the events of this year, and all the lessons and information I have learned have given me purpose: to fight the systems that impede anyone's right to health and actualization. I now have a base for my reflexivity, a foundation to develop and support my positionality. I still believe I have less right to be here than others, and look at my colleagues in awe at their intelligence and purpose. Given that I have worked hard to gather the tools I need to eventually earn my place in this program, at this institution, and as an anti-racist activist in society, I can relinquish some of the guilt that comes with being an imposter - because I might not actually be one. My background, my dedication to learning and education, and my purpose is genuine, but requires genuine work still. I am a little closer to earning my place at the table, and a little closer to being able to bring something to it as well.

Mariano

My journey through the educational system has always been a constant whirlwind of self-doubt about my academic potential as a future researcher and feelings of whether I truly belong in academic settings. Self-doubt translates into weak performance and anxieties about completing final projects, meeting deadlines and a general distress over school affairs. As a first-generation community college transfer student, I have been blessed with plenty of opportunities that my parents never could have imagined. However, this reality imposes many obligations to succeed no matter the odds. In a way, I do feel it is my obligation and sense of duty and responsibility not only for my family who has always been supportive, but also for my community as a whole.

I remember my first year in much the same sense as Burciaga and Cruz Navarro (2015) narrate their own experiences, "a year composed of many moments marked by feelings of inadequacy, guilt, anxiety, and confusion, and constant self-imposed pressure to survive" (p. 36). Similar feelings have followed me my entire educational journey. Feelings of insecurity, of inadequacy, of guilt, etc. Writing a testimonio is an intellectual exercise that combines the personal and professional identities that inform our attitudes, values and behaviors. As such, it allows us to construct an overarching narrative that aims at achieving 'ideological clarity' and to reveal what has been silenced (Alfaro & Bartolomé, 2017). Clarity is important because it shows us our why. It allows us to navigate the ideological spaces in academia that were once reserved for exclusive groups. The university as a Western institution with its own systems of knowledge production and knowledge organization has marginalized and isolated specific forms of knowledge not deemed valuable. But I think it is necessary to push back, to create spaces where different forms of knowledge can coexist. Instead of coping with the imposter syndrome and trying to conform to a cultural and epistemological standard, we should strive for what a "post-abyssal interculturality would therefore need to be founded on ontologies and epistemologies that are unthinkable; a critical interculturality that requires centering the knowledges of southern, Indigenous, and other marginalized peoples by those communities and their allies, and which then is negotiated interculturally" (Pirbhai-Illich et al., 2017, p. 239).

In a sense, I've always struggled with impostor syndrome and I know many students experience those feelings of linguistic and cultural alienation and feel that I now have an opportunity to make an impact to try and change those conditions so that students feel safe.

Mohamed

Imposter syndrome is something that I never thought I would encounter. I thought it happened to individuals with lower self-esteem or who lacked confidence. This doctoral program gave me imposter syndrome. There were many times that I felt that I did not belong- or that I was at a lower level academically than other students in my program. These feelings made me feel

very uncomfortable and unsure of my skill set. I knew deep down that I deserved to be here and that I didn't lack any skills; but seeing everyone else speak and engage with each other made me question my abilities. My feelings of imposter syndrome took over and impacted my schoolwork. I would usually go to my parents for support, but they probably never heard of imposter syndrome and would have difficulty understanding why I felt I didn't belong in a doctoral program. Hence, I kept it to myself until it was clear I needed to talk to someone. I mentioned these feelings to my mentor, and he instantly started to debunk them one by one. By doing this, I gained back so much confidence that I had lost. He also told me to pick up the phone and to call him whenever these feelings came back. We all have insecurities that we deal with, which might negatively impact our lives.

As someone who has a mentor and mentors, I know the value of having someone who provides constant reassurance. Being a first-generation doctoral student comes with a lot of pressure. It's easy for us to fall into imposter syndrome. It's easy to feel that we don't belong in higher education institutions.

7. THE STRUGGLE IS REAL: THE PANDEMIC AND OUR EXPERIENCES AS DOCTORAL STUDENTS

I'll tell you, what's going on (what's going on) (Gaye, 1971). The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in early 2020, and individual states began to systematically shut down in an effort to combat the sickness, which was already present and devastating. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has COVID records dating back to January 22, 2020, when just 33 coronavirus cases were confirmed across the country (2021). That number had climbed to 520 by February 2nd, up from 55 the day before; by the time California proclaimed a state of emergency, there were nearly 2,000 instances nationwide. However, a dreadful subversive trend emerged: the COVID-19 epidemic was disproportionately harming people and communities of color (CDC, 2021).

According to the CDC, the pandemic exposed "social and racial injustice and inequity" in public health, which was caused by "some social determinants of health [that] have historically prevented [racial and ethnic minority groups] from having fair opportunities for economic, physical, and emotional health" (CDC, 2021). The environment in which an individual and their community operate, such as their places of employment, school, recreation, and the general economic and social resources available within that community, are considered social determinants of health (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020). There is a disparity in resources and opportunity between communities of color and White communities, and the pandemic brought this disparity to light in a new way. Chronic diseases afflicting people of color, such as heart disease, diabetes, and respiratory disorders, exacerbated an already vulnerable population (Betancourt, 2020). These inequities, along with the nature of "vital" job, a lack of access to adequate healthcare, social mistrust of the healthcare system, and, in many cases, language obstacles, have resulted in a fatal scenario for racial and ethnic minorities throughout the United States (Betancourt, 2020).

The *colegas* were not immune to the social and health crisis, and each one felt the suffering alongside their brothers and sisters across the country as members of their distinct communities of color. They observed the difficulty in their own families and students, and they shared in the communal inequity of suffering.

Asha'

2020 was a year of disappointment and reflection as COVID-19 impacted students across the world and me as a 2nd-year doctorate student, both directly and indirectly. My adopted brother and father both suffered from COVID-19, even while taking all the necessary safety measures. My biological brother was also found dead in a bathroom and died from complications from a drug overdose, and we are still waiting to hear if he contracted COVID-19. As a student, I had to switch from learning in-person to learning online, which presents many different challenges. As a student, I had to learn new platforms and a new way of learning outside the classroom, along with my fellow students, faculty, and other staff.

In comparison to face-to-face classes, research suggests that students of color and academically underprivileged students suffer in virtual classrooms (Baker, Dee, Evans, & John, 2018). California has made significant progress in providing money for student support services for Black children; however, COVID-19 and the transition to remote learning have reversed some of those accomplishments (Baker, 2018). COVID-19 has impacted my learning experience as a student, causing me to feel worried, unsure, confused, angry, overwhelmed, and missing in-person instruction. I'm having trouble writing and pushing through the microaggressions and plain racism that I face in the workplace as a Black woman. Receiving support from the PhD program director, my professors, graduate supervisors, and my church family has been the greatest blessing. Many people have said that 2020 has revealed a lot about how Black people are treated, and my mind process has been that this is exactly what I've seen my entire life.

Kimberley

While adhering to the stay-at-home orders, I anxiously awaited the news if I would be considered a doctoral candidate for the Fall 2020 cohort. While waiting for my golden ticket to arrive, I fell ill and ended up in the hospital with an unrelated COVID-19 matter and was barely clinging to life. This health scare was severe and pervasive, but I was alive! However grateful for life I was, this traumatic event was a layered experience. I have heard many stories and statistics about the black woman's dehumanization within the healthcare system. So as I was unexpectedly clinging to life and unaware of the danger I was in, having to worry about being a "black woman" in the healthcare system was ever-present in my consciousness, with me every step of the way based on my hospitalization experience. Additionally, due to COVID-19 restrictions, my family was prohibited from accompanying me into the hospital and was unaware of all that had transpired. I was all alone undergoing this tribulation. A few days later, I was cleared to go home and begin my grueling rehabilitation and recovery process. During my recovery process, I got the news I was accepted to the doctoral program. Though I would not have chosen to attend via a virtual platform, being admitted to the program was a saving grace. The news gave me something to focus on and to

look forward to. My husband questioned if this was the right time to start a program in my condition. However, I was determined to achieve this dream.

The struggle has been oh so real! While trying to heal daily, I was mourning the loss of my black and brown brothers and sisters all over the world to the hands of societal ills (pandemic/health care system and the criminal justice system). This was all too much! This opportunity to write my testimonio has been emotional yet therapeutic and has aided in my ongoing recovery journey. The pains and struggles endured have tested my character to the limit. The trauma narrative is a powerful technique that allows survivors of trauma to confront and overcome their painful memories through storytelling (Trauma Narrative, n.d.). Trauma narrative (n.d.) describes traumatic memories as being emotionally loaded that even the smallest of reminders can be crippling. However, writing this testimony allows me to tell my story, replacing these memories with new self-empowering and self-loving ones instead, creating a new theoretical space to express and navigate the complexities of struggle and resistance (Saavedra & Pérez, 2012). It is time for me to unchain myself from the albatross of grief and trauma that has surrounded me during the start of my doctoral journey. I have been reflecting on this experience as I write this piece. Despite it all, I am elated to be in a community with like-minded individuals and still contribute to the fight for social justice and equity, if even just from my bed. I am so grateful for every connection I have made to the working groups, class discussions, and outside classroom interactions. My professors and colleagues inspire me and provide a shoulder for me to lean on during this educational journey. Finally, now nearing the end of the semester, I can see the finish line.

Looking back at this path, it all sounds like sheer insanity; however, I am transcending past resiliency and turning my trauma into post-traumatic growth. I have learned that I am a force to be reckoned with, especially when I have set my eyes on a prize. Alternatively, maybe it is just "Black Girl Magic."

Lauren

As I have stated before, I am a Latina, and this year brought me closer to my ethnic identity in ways I never experienced before. One of the things I cherish most about my culture is our collectivist mentality: the idea that the fate and future of the group you are associated with is more salient than the fate and future of the self (Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). In the LatinX community, it is familismo – the "high value LatinX individuals place on the family and keeping the family together by prioritizing the family's needs over the individual's needs and emphasizing obligation..., affiliation..., and cooperation" (Abreu, Gonzalez, Rosario, Pulice-Farrow, & Rodriguez, 2019). While people who gravitate towards an individualist mindset might be wary of the terms "prioritizing," "obligation," and "reliance" from the passage, I see the symbiotic nature of familismo as something beautiful to be celebrated and admired.

That is what drove me home back in March of 2020, when the stay-at-home order was declared in response to the pandemic. It was the desire to rejoin my tribe, to be back with my mom and sisters and work through this strange time together. With so many unknowns circling around, I couldn't risk being separated from them for any amount of time, let alone during a crisis. They are everything to me. In fact, during one class session in my program, Dr. Belinda Bustos Flores asked us to name one or two facets of our identity in an exploration of our "despertando el ser" – a critical examination of the self's "identity, consciousness, and beliefs" (Flores & Clark, 2017). My first self-identifying statement, before anything else, was (and usually is): "I am a daughter, and I am a sister." I see this very often in the LatinX community; we are almost always defined first by our relationships with each other, then later on, our relationships with the self.

I came home so we could support each other – my mom, sisters, and me – and in turn support the people we love as well. Another guest educator for one of my classes – Dr. Silvia Cristina Bettez – shared with us her scholarly work on Critical Community Building: the idea of promoting and fostering interdependence in a community by engaging with the needs of others as well

as with the needs of the self (Bettez, 2011). The result of this community building pedagogy is an increase in social responsibility, which should extend outward from the immediate community to society as a whole. Essentially, if we care more about the people around us, then this sense of responsibility, equity, and social justice should generalize to other communities as we work towards healing. In light of the pandemic, I saw this commitment to social responsibility in small pockets around the nation: businesses like Spectrum and Cox gave free Wi-Fi to families (including us) for the students who had to be educated from home; people were making masks and giving them to hospital workers and charities to distribute to the homeless; even in Detroit, Michigan, where water (a basic human necessity) for many low-SES citizens was shut off, the city pledged to turn their water back on for free to help these families survive the pandemic.

There are so many more touching stories, and so many wrongs being righted (even temporarily) in light of the global disaster. It seems to always take something catastrophic to remind us to be good to each other; that "we are in this together" only after we are hit the hardest, and we have to lift others up rather than leave them to suffer. There was still so much that needed to be done during this time, and so many other ways we took advantage of or devalued each other. However, it seems like for quite a bit of people, familismo at local levels emerged – as did our activism and commitment to other sociocultural ideologies like justice and anti-racism. The community may be hurt, but I see space for healing and growth. And at the very least, the pandemic gave me and my family an opportunity to spend real time together, reinforcing our own community and strengthening familismo at home. We know each other a little better now, and love each other all the more. I am truly blessed.

Mariano

When the pandemic started back in mid-March, I decided to temporarily relocate to Tijuana to be closer to family. I'm grateful for the opportunity of working from home and not having to cross the border everyday like many students and essential workers do. Still, I cannot stop thinking about those

perseverant K-12 students, crossing the border on a daily basis in hopes of getting a quality education. The border restrictions have greatly affected families and students, and will continue to do so even after they are lifted. Cultivating perseverance in the face of adversity is a long-term process. As a student, perseverance, resiliency and discipline are key attributes that got me through difficult times. Now more than ever, it is critical that teachers provide extra support to promote student achievement. Early in my education I realized the importance of teachers' beliefs, attitudes and expectations and the effect of these factors in student achievement. Teachers who hold high expectations inspire students to continue in school (Marrun, 2018). Overall, I had caring professors who were extremely supportive and encouraged my academic aspirations. Although the first years of my experience in higher education were much more difficult since I was navigating the various institutional, cultural, and ideological spaces in an unknown environment with very little support. Over time I began to develop positive relationships with advisors and dedicated large amounts of time cultivating strong relationships with fellow students to create a social support system.

Aside from the health crisis our country is facing, we find ourselves at a crossroads. The current political climate has been extremely detrimental and alienating to minority students. Not only are we navigating an inherently hostile academic environment, but the societal conditions under which these changes are unraveling are even more troubling. Election years are always complicated; but this time, with racial justice protests around the country, with a health crisis that Black and LatinX most suffer the effects of the pandemic, with political leaders that refuse to acknowledge the very rules that sustain democratic government, we can observe the deterioration of the experiences of doctoral students mentally, financially, and physically. If anything, the year 2020 has revealed the many unresolved issues we must face as a society in order to heal and move forward.

Mohamed

2020 has been the most challenging year for me. Although this year is coming to an end, the challenges that I overcame are something that will forever be

on my mind. The year started very well, and I was finally in a role that I enjoyed- helping students of color navigate higher education challenges. Providing the support that I needed when I was in undergraduate studies brought joy to my life. A couple of days after my birthday in March, the announcement of shutting down the campus and moving things to be remote was made. I was not sure what this meant for my students or myself.

I spent my summer in and out of Zoom meetings with students and colleagues. When Fall hit, I realized that I was also going to be learning via Zoom meetings. I was upset because I knew deep down that it wasn't going to be the same. I knew that the learning level was going to diminish since there was no face-to-face interaction between the students and professor. I always prided myself on being strong both mentally and emotionally. I didn't think isolation would impact my mental and emotional health, so when I started to experience anxiety symptoms I was taken by surprise. I did not know what to do. I started eating less, staying in my darkroom more, and being less social than before. I noticed I lost motivation to do my assignments and lost interest in things I once enjoyed. When it came to schoolwork, I also felt insecure and less than other students that were in my class. This year put both my mental and emotional health to the test.

My parents are proudly supportive of everything that I do. They are the strongest individuals that I know. They came from Somalia with nothing but the clothes on their backs and started a life from scratch. I have never heard them indicate the need for therapy. Keep in mind, they left Somalia because of violence, witnessed the killing of a loved one, and lost all of their possessions - things that are worthy of years of therapy. I said that to say this: did I really need therapy? Yes. Was I ashamed to ask them for guidance given everything they've been through? Yes. Other things stopped me, such as the cultural views on mental health and how we view it as taboo. I was shy to talk about mental health to my parents because they've been through so much, and I wanted to be strong like them and not need professional help. I realized later that therapy does not make the individual weak. It takes a strong person to ask for help when they are in need.

8. IT'S ABOUT TO GO DOWN: ACTIVISM AND GUILT DURING A RACIAL, HEALTH, AND POLITICAL CRISIS

For only love can conquer hate (Gaye, 1971). One of the limitations of the social justice field lies in the fact that research often shares *theory* with its audience, but rarely does it share *praxis*. Advocates identified some courses for change. There were virtual platforms to speak from, picket signs and messages to write, and marches to walk in; just a few of the many ways that communities were sharing their outrage during this time of social upheaval. However, could this work truly combat generations of racial, social and economic inequity fueled by White supremacy and capitalistic ideology? Advocacy groups and benevolent organizations could provide support to struggling families and ailing businesses in their time of need during the pandemic, but was it enough to save the declining mental and emotional well-being of entire communities of color? The unrest and struggle was exacerbated by the mounting racial and political crisis that reached its peak by Summer of 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, the continued epidemic of police brutality, and the racist dissent of the White nationalist community that loudly emerged in counterprotest to BLM. Black and Brown bodies - and later, Asian bodies as well - were under assault from a deadly disease and a deadly syndemic of injustice in the U.S.

The *colegas* experienced a mixture of activism and guilt across the year: work was being done both in and out of the classroom, but was it enough? Derek Chauvin was arrested and Trump lost the election, but was the damage already done? Systems of power and oppression had roots deep in this community, and while the *colegas* committed to the fight, it can quickly lead to emotional fatigue.

Ahliyah

My first semester as a doctoral student was the most exhausting semester yet. I never imagined beginning a doctorate program in the middle of a public health, racial, and political crisis. Burnout felt inevitable. It became increasingly difficult to focus on academic and work-related tasks while

watching Black people being disproportionately affected in all of these crises. How am I supposed to stay focused on academics when Breyonna Taylor can be murdered by police while sleeping in her home yet her murderers still walk free? To preserve my health, I attempted to block out the pain I felt in my heart because I, too, could have been Breyonna Taylor. As I led a mentoring program to support the success of Black undergraduate students in their second-year, we often spent time discussing the impact of police brutality, COVID-19, President Donald Trump's divisive leadership. Like many others, these students were infuriated by the blatant disregard for Black life, and constantly needed space to process through this trauma. In efforts to create space to process my own thoughts and emotions, I got in community with Black graduate and doctoral students from my home institution. Through building this community, I began to understand that being a Black doctoral student is much more than paving the way for new scholarship within academia. It is understanding that we, as Black people, are traumatized. It is okay for us to feel the pain and rage that our ancestors once did. Now the question is, what are we, as educators, going to do about it? And that, that is why we are here.

Asha'

It is my second year in the program, and this triple pandemic snatched my mental health, life, and wellness as a Black graduate student. The trauma of watching George Floyd cry out for his dead mother as a White police officer took his life over a funky twenty dollar bill. The trauma of hearing about Breonna Taylor being killed while in her sleep by White police officers, only to have them walk away with no formal charges for taking the life of an innocent Black woman. The trauma of seeing that White Supremacy is still at work in Kentucky, where a Black Attorney General assimilated to the dominant culture and their White power scheme. The trauma of hearing a sitting United States president refuse to denounce White supremacy and refer to COVID-19 as the "China flu." All things that have taken a toll on my mental health as a Black graduate student.

In my second year, I found myself angry as I continued to see how Black women are disregarded and criminalized in the classroom and the workplace. As a Black woman in a PhD program, and in my career, I have been silenced and mistreated by the dominant culture. To have other people who have the same skin tone as I say, "Girl, just do what you gotta do and get this degree; this is a good-paying job; just ignore the people and get your check." I find myself saying, "Girl, push through because some Black girl needs your story. Your story breaks the chains of oppression. Somebody gotta sing a Black girls' song. So why not you?" Human beings are influenced by the dynamics of power and knowledge in society (Gore, 1995). Regulation of Black people describes the rules or directives established to control or manage people and incidents explicitly. There is an expectation by the dominant culture that expects Black people to assimilate to the culture of power in the classroom, workplace, or the academy of higher education creates a space where their voices are silenced (Delpit, 1988).

This country was built on oppression, and the dominant culture continues to oppress our voices in society, church, workplace, and in the classroom. I will push through, but I'm tired, and this triple pandemic has opened my eyes even wider to what I already knew.

Kimberley

Simply put, I am tired! Before we even get to swallow or catch our next breath, there is someone else being murdered or harmed in our communities. With the political divisiveness currently happening, the social justice uprising, and the ongoing aftermath of the murder of people of color, what do we do? How are we still standing? I have realized that nothing I can do will protect my family or other people of color from the dangers that come with racism; it can only come from systemic change. Talking about the concept of race needs to go beyond white hoods and burning crosses and dig deeper to proactively abolish systems of oppression, dehumanization, and racism (Stovall, 2015). I hope that these actions will lead to a critique of the current systems based on a deep understanding of history and the lived experiences and contributions of many for tomorrow's youth (Freire, 1970; Pour-Khorshid, 2020; Stovall,

2015). With the fatigue of a 400 year-old burden, change is needed now. For my family and my students who have lost loved ones to violence, police brutality, incarceration, and the pandemic, our families are forever changed. As the world continues to spin and business moves forward, we are all not okay! Business as usual is not good enough.

There is a constant and conscious negotiable effort to define and create a roadmap for successfully navigating academia's treacherous terrain. Undergoing critical self-reflection, the term "radical vulnerability" has deeply resonated with me (Valdez et al., 2018). In their article, Valdez et al. (2018) describes the importance of centering "Radical Vulnerability and Soul Care" as an act of political and pedagogical warfare that can be used to heal us from racial trauma to reimagine our movement through the lens of emotional, physical, and spiritual wellness (p. 248 - 250). As a new graduate student occupying such a space in these troubled times, one can only characterize the experience as peculiar and gut-wrenching. The events on television were not antiquated; instead, they were happening in real-time. My slain brothers and sisters' stories struck me deeply as the reality is the continuous story of loss and trauma in my community. The disastrous impacts of racial and criminal justice trauma are my daily reality as a person of color. The pandemic has brought me face to face with the framework and my limitations in traversing being a student and activist simultaneously. As I watched many people taking to the streets to protest racialized policing, the cocktail of rage and anger left me exhausted and frustrated. I wanted to be there with them, side by side in the trenches with my people, but addressing my health and the pandemic's realities prevented me from doing so. I questioned if I was a sell-out as practically everyone I knew was standing up. After sharing my inner turmoil with my classmates, they released me from my guilt. During my undergraduate years, my colleagues and I would not have a second thought about chaining ourselves to the doors of the Multicultural Center or Associated Students building to engage in protest. But currently being bedridden and recovering from surgery, I was physically unable to join the movement. At that moment, I was prioritizing my physical self-care, and I was

no sell-out. Through redemption, my colleagues were able to help me transform my guilt into something valuable (Anzaldúa, 2002).

Dixon et al. (2014) produced a practical guide designed to celebrate all the ways our communities can engage in liberation, titled "26 Ways to Be in the Struggle: Beyond the Streets." This publication recognizes that for some people who seek justice and support liberation, they cannot show up in body, and their lives may not allow them to be in the streets. Pursuing my doctoral degree and being a change agent in all of the spaces I hold is one way I am a part of the fight. Carrying the weight of all I have endured this year and dealing with all of the trauma and drama of the world made it very difficult to show up in school and classes sometimes. However, the marathon continues to dismantle institutional racism now and into the future. Giroux (2015) states, "Education is more than a degree and a pathway to a job. It is a crucial understanding and overcoming of the current crisis of agency politics and agency faced by young people." As I build community with my new cohort, each day gets a bit easier. With them, we can build and lift each other, engage in dialogue, and work to create sustainable infrastructures that can continue to make systemic change, and hold decision-makers, elected officials, and institutions accountable. I choose to focus on the positive impact that I will have on my young scholars, and as such, I must carry on because this is my activism.

Lauren

"White passing" (Foran, 2018) is a term I recently learned, but a concept I am intimately familiar with. My family has been here for many generations, having come to the United States during a time when cultural diversity was not celebrated – you either conform to American whiteness and hide your true colors, or face being ostracized. We do not speak Spanish in my household, and there is no family left in Mexico to visit. I am fair-skinned, and my last name is not Latin. I can pass as white, and that reality drove a wedge between me and my culture for a long time. I found myself at times aligning with some white ideals, adopting colorblind racial ideologies (Foran, 2018), and believing that the system was made to work for you as long as you worked

with it (meritocracy). I had privilege, and that privilege was built on racist principles. Then I committed to a change – I grew the hell up. I engaged with women of color in positions of power and influence in education, who's backgrounds mirrored my own more closely than my White peers. I met radicals from all color backgrounds who spoke from positions of love about unseating oppression across all systems, and empowering their students to fight for change. I learned that, regardless of my misconceptions about whiteness, my heart aligned closer with their stories than any stories I garnered from the dominant culture.

The year 2020 brought a whirlwind of change, predicated by incident after incident of racial and social injustice. First of which was the Coronavirus pandemic, an international epidemic that continues to wreak havoc on the United States. Disproportionately, this virus devastated low-income communities and communities of color, people who statistically worked in "essential" jobs and who's low-income status prevented them from access to adequate healthcare to protect against the virus (Betancourt, 2020). The second defining incident was the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police at the end of May 2020. This event, to an outsider like myself, seemed to reinvigorate the Black Lives Matter movement and polarize an already-polarized nation. This movement demanded citizens locally and nation-wide make a choice: call for an end to police brutality against Black and Brown bodies, or you condone it. You are either antiracist, or you are not. At the same time, there was mass incarceration of Mexican and Latin immigrants happening at our border: men, women, and children held under abhorrent conditions and abused by law enforcement. Meanwhile, continual racist rhetoric came from the President, both online and on camera, further driving the wedge between people on issues surrounding social justice for people of color. I remember clearly the rage I felt at every Trump procession leading up to the election, magnified when I saw Brown faces in these vehicles in my own community. I was so confused, and I felt betrayal I had never encountered before. Having shed the shell of "white passing," I wondered how my fellow Latinos could align themselves with this racist? With someone who's policies devalue and undermine our people, our experiences, and our livelihoods! I

was shocked and hurt, and that was before the "National Day of Remembrance for Americans Killed by Illegal Immigrants" was declared on Dia de Los Muertos 2020 - the last slap in the face to my people before Trump lost the election. He took a day that was intended to be a celebration of family, love, and heritage, and turned it into a political pariah.

I was elated to see this man out of office, but still reeling from the injustices over the past year, from both within and outside my community. This has radicalized me, as a Latina, as an educator, and as an antiracist – I want nothing more than to help my community heal from this year, but also fight alongside others who see the work that still needs to be done. But it's hard and it's exhausting, and the weight of my guilt is heavy for who I was before. However, I am renewed with purpose, and committed to bring about the positive change that I too expereinced: we can all get over ourselves and love each other better.

Mariano

The U.S. has experienced many crises in the last decade but the most significant is the racial injustices Black people continue to face. Back in late February 2012 I was an undergrad student working as a TA and vividly remember the news about Trayvon Martin. A few years later, in the summer of 2014 during my grad program, two names became national news: Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Back then, the entire student body along with local Black Lives Matter leaders organized rallies to protest police brutality and demanded racial justice. My classmates and I joined forces in solidarity with what we believed was the civil rights issue of our time. We marched and attended vigils to show support. The year 2014 was also significant because it saw the rise of the pernicious alt-right ideology based on white supremacy: antisemitism, nativism, homophobia, xenophobia has persisted and solidified through the Trump years.

In 2020, I look back at that moment in 2012 when I first heard about Trayvon Martin, and I'm able to contextualize it and understand the historical processes that have led to our current situation. Earlier in the year I was

teaching 10th-grade World History and an elective called Social Issues in Film. At first, I struggled to engage students with the subject matter, but eventually showed them that history is a tool that helps us better understand the causes that drive human affairs.

When schools were closed on March 13th because of COVID-19 I was also saddened by the fact that my film class did not get a chance to watch American History X and discuss the issue of racism in America. Or at least I thought so. Instead, they got a better lesson about racism in America from current events. Towards the end of the semester, on May 5, a video about Ahmaud Arbery was released; Ahmaud was an African American who was fatally shot while jogging. Later that month, George Floyd was killed by a white police officer.

How to make sense of 2020? Should it be remembered as the year that showed it was still possible to forge a multiracial, multiethnic democracy? Or the year that brought American exceptionalism to its knees and presaged its coming demise? How to explain to students about activism and the importance of this epoch defining year and its implications for the future of democracy? Now as a PhD student I seek to understand what are the main causes that influence student civic engagement. Now, more than ever, educators must emphasize the relevance of social studies curriculum to form students with a justice-oriented mindset and develop critical consciousness to challenge the roots of social injustices and inequalities (Watts, Diemer & Voight, 2011). Answering these questions are now central to my goal both as a researcher and educator. Hopefully, through rigorous investigative work and relevant and responsive pedagogies, my future work can make an impact inside and outside the classroom.

Marnitta

I don't know how to do this. I see the news, I watch the videos, and I write in my journal, but that's just me, alone, with my thoughts and fears. I see my people hurting. I watch them leave their homes, risk their safety, and put

themselves and their family's well-being on the line for me. Yet, I remain at home and in my safe place, watching from afar.

I'm a Black woman. I am a Black mother to three Black boys. I have a Black husband. Nevertheless, I have only watched while others, Black and non-Black, have died, been arrested, and have lost themselves in the fight that will ensure peace and justice for me and mine. I want to be out there, but desire doesn't always transfer to doing. So, I sit, watch, and send my hopeful energy to others from my sofa.

As I see my people fight, I ask myself if there is anything I can do. What should I do? How do I find my lane and join the fight in a way that is authentic to who I am? Am I an orator, can I lead small groups of people through my spoken word? Not really. Am I a writer, who can pen a strong message that will evoke my readers to reflect and react? Not yet. Am I an influencer, who will create a post that will be shared to many? Nope. So, what do I do? How can I help? What do I do to support and participate in the process of equity, equality, and empowerment for all oppressed people?

These questions are constant. As I engage with my colleagues and my peers, I hope that my doctoral studies will help me find the voice that dwells within. I hope there is one there. I know there are ills that exist boldly and undercover that need to be addressed, but I question whether I am one who can help do it. What is my place and purpose here, and how will I use this opportunity to do right by those who have gotten me to this place?

I am working on trusting myself and recognizing the strengths that I know lie within. Of late, I've reminded myself that I don't need to be intimidated anymore or compare myself with the work of others, I do have a path and I do have a purpose. It will be revealed to me as I continue to engage. I know that observation is no longer an option. Only action. This is my first step.

9. CONCLUSION

As our cohort was thrown into unfamiliar ground in coping with the COVID-19 epidemic, we were all confronted with new and different kinds of difficulties and obstacles, both micro and global. As the *testimonios* show, the fundamental psychological and pedagogical difficulties can be overcome with reflexive writing and a community of like-minded scholars supporting each other. These stories, however, represent a small portion of the weight and strain that students of color face across the country. Throughout our educational system, young people are put to the test to prove their worth, strength, and drive to succeed despite a system that would rather label them as invisible. Nonetheless, we've arrived! Our existence disrupts the system in ways that we don't completely comprehend or recognize. This society's pressures, its structures, our experiences, our families, and our perspectives have positioned us in this time and place to be engaged in this task that we consider "our calling." This is a reminder we repeat to ourselves and share with our readers: diamonds are formed by applying pressure. It's now or never for us to shine.

We believe that *testimonio* writing provides a spiritually grounded labyrinth "walking" experience for students and faculty of color in higher education, allowing the writer to engage in the three steps of a physical labyrinth walk: Releasing, Receiving, and Returning (Pour-Khorshid et al., 2020). In short, we suggest that engaging with critical racial theory, feminist theory, cultural capital, and praxis such as *testimonio* is a healing-centered practice that could provide future generations with pathways of possibility to navigate all educational environments. We affirm that our commitment to change will not diminish despite continuously battling racialized policies and places that aim to silence our voices. We draw our strength to destroy the systems that exist to try to limit our reach by reclaiming our own power and position to make change.

We now have the tools necessary to rebuild an educational system that is truly equitable for all pupils. Our foundation is built on a curriculum that

empowers, celebrates, and cherishes each individual rather than diminishes their voices. As Rao et al. (2021) found in their qualitative case study examining non-native students in English-speaking U.S. classrooms, the learning environment works best and power is redistributed when true efforts are made to know where their students come from, as well as how their experiences can be a melting pot in the classroom. Our cement is a mix of all voices, not just those in power; it's solidly combined with a mortar that assures that the next generation of learners, rather than feeling devalued, experience joy and empowerment in their classrooms. As academics, we strive to establish the foundations for future generations to navigate the labyrinth with ease. This leads individuals down the path of releasing their fear of not belonging, receiving the knowledge, information, and tools they need to recover, and returning to society with their identities affirmed and new skills to critically engage with the world around them (Pour-Khorshid et al., 2020).

However, our work does not end there; we must all continue to walk through the labyrinth and guide others on the basis of social justice and equity that we have established. Future generations will take up this mantle and participate in critical and loving dialogue with their counterparts in order for generational healing to occur and continue.

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