

**UCLA**

**UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

Examining the Current State of Hollywood and Future Directions for Chicana/o Filmmakers:  
A Chicana Feminist Testimonio

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5dp0w16z>

**Author**

Lopez, Brenda Yvonne

**Publication Date**

2017

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Examining the Current State of Hollywood and Future Directions for Chicana/o Filmmakers:

*A Chicana Feminist Testimonio*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Art in Education

by

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

2017

© Copyright by

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

2017

## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Examining the Current State of Hollywood and Future Directions for Chicana/o Filmmakers:

*A Chicana Feminist Testimonio*

by

Brenda Yvonne Lopez

Master of Art in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Chair

This paper aims to examine the current landscape of representations in Hollywood through a Chicana feminist filmmaker's autobiographical *testimonio*<sup>1</sup> that discusses her experiences as a film student, filmmaker and educational researcher. This paper then discusses future directions for film and media education through the interdisciplinary lenses of ethnic studies, film studies, cultural studies, and gender studies.

To inform this perspective, I have chosen to weave together three components: (a) current data on representations in Hollywood in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality along with

---

<sup>1</sup> *Testimonio* is a Spanish word that means testimony. In social research, it is a method that emerged from the Latin Americas and has since been used across many disciplines in qualitative research. Lindsey PerezHuber, though she does not claim to provide a universal definition for *testimonio*, offers a description of how one might frame a *testimonio* in educational research. "Testimonios are usually guided by the will of the narrator to tell events as she sees significant, and is often an expression of a collective experience, rather than the individual" (L.P. Huber 2009, p. 644).

an overview of the history of Chicana/o cinema (b) an autobiographical *testimonio* through which I share my own experiences as a Chicana feminist filmmaker and student, and (c) a discussion on how to move towards more inclusive representations for Chicanas/os in Hollywood. The goal of this paper is to examine the current state of Hollywood, the prospects Chicana/o filmmakers such as myself face, and how Chicana/o and other filmmakers of Color can persist in making movies that reach wider audiences. I offer my perspective and educational journey as a story that might challenge dominant narratives produced by Hollywood, both behind the scenes and on the silver screen. I present my story as one bridge, alongside the many other bridges built by women of Color in academia and film before me, in order to yield pathways for telling our stories through film. In this paper I will address the role of dominant media as a powerful source of socialization, and further more, why critical race media education of future filmmakers and mediamakers of Color is significant in the larger conversation of media's social cultural implications.

This thesis of Brenda Yvonne Lopez is approved.

Douglas Kellner

Kathryn Anderson-Levitt

Robert Teranishi

Daniel G. Solórzano, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: The Current State of Hollywood: A Straight White Male Industry	1
Chicanos Go to the Movies: The History of Chicano Cinema and Political Resistance	6
Methodology and Analytical Frameworks: Using Autobiographical Testimonio	9
My <i>Testimonio</i> : A Chicana Feminist Filmmaker	14
Discussion: Unpacking my Testimonio	27
Pushing Onward Towards More Diversity in Hollywood	32
Work to be Done in the Classroom	34

## *The Current State of Hollywood: A Straight White Male Industry*

Making films has traditionally been a privilege out of reach for people of Color and to an even further degree out of reach for women of Color, disabled, and LGBTQ communities. In a recent study from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, as a part of the Media, Diversity, and Social Change Initiative, Dr. Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti and Dr. Katherine Pieper, have compiled data over the last nine years to examine the portrayals of gender, race, ethnicity, LGBT and disability in the film industry. Each year since 2007, this report has taken the one hundred most popular films in the U.S. and determined that Hollywood has disproportionately privileged white men in all areas of production, both behind the camera and in front of the camera. More importantly, this report points to the voices that continue to be missing, lacking and misrepresented in Hollywood.

When looking at the representation women have attained in popular films, this report states that “the needle is not moving on screen for females” (Smith, Choueiti, & Pieper, p.1). From 2007 to 2016, the percentage of female speaking roles has fluctuated between approximately 28% and 33%, with no indication of progress. In the top one hundred films of 2016, only 34 films depicted a female lead or co-lead, of those, only three female actors were of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Women of Color have been and remain to be absent as speaking and leading characters in Hollywood films to an alarming degree.

In considering the creative and technical positions behind the camera, women are scarce and women of Color, especially Latinas, are essentially absent. Of the 900 top films from 2007-2016 which includes 1,006 directors, a mere 41 were female directors making only 4.1% of the total directors. Out of those 41 female directors, three of those directors were Black or African



American women, and two of them were Asian or Asian American women. There was only mention of one Latina director in this study—only one of the 1,006 in the last nine years. In looking at the racial and ethnic demographic of directors to include men of Color, out of 1,006 directors, there were only 53 Black or African American male directors (5.6%) and 28 Asian or Asian American male directors (2.8%). This study asserts that when Hollywood thinks director, that director is more often than not white and male. A heading over one of the infographics in this study reads: “Directing and Composing: Females Need Not Apply” (Smith, p. 4). If this is the message sent to female directors in general (and in general this means white women), what does it mean to be a director as a person from an underrepresented community?

The lack of representation for minority groups, as well as their absence in positions of authorship, in the most popular films in Hollywood is significant because these films are the most viewed and most widely distributed cultural texts that inform and reinforce our understanding of the society we live in. As demonstrated in this study, racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, homophobia, and xenophobia persist in Hollywood—and the reach of these ideologies are not limited to that of dominant film culture, it also operates on a social and individual level, as a cultural agent of distortion and suppression of minority voices and stories.

*Just as the spectator, the term of the moving images, is taken up and moved along successive positions of meaning, a woman (or a man) is not an undivided identity, a stable unity of “consciousness,” but the term of shifting series of ideological positions. Put another way, the social being is constructed day by day as the point of articulation of ideological formations, an always provisional encounter of subject and codes at the historical (therefore changing) intersection of social formations and her or his personal history (De Lauretis, p. 14).*

Here, Teresa De Lauretis discusses “the cinematic apparatus as a historical and ideological form” to be understood as “social” and “technical” (De Lauretis, p. 14). To

understand the consciousness of a viewer of cinema one must acknowledge the ways in which films are coded through language and images created from the perspective of the filmmakers. Thus when viewers watch a film there is a shift in the reading of the film as a text, at times adopting the language of the film and filmmakers, and at times adapting its language to their understanding of their own personal experiences. This is problematic when films are constructed in ways that distort or misrepresent the realities of minority groups because as an ideological form, cinema holds political significance that informs and perpetuates ideologies that keep minorities marginalized. Here De Lauretis focuses on this problem as it pertains to women, but it is complicated even further when discussing issues at the intersection of gender and race.

Cultural studies scholars, Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, warn that “individuals are often not aware that they are being educated and positioned by media culture, as its pedagogy is frequently invisible and is absorbed unconsciously” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 4). Culturally, we in the U.S. have come to know watching movies as a leisurely passtime where in we expect to enjoy entertainment and escape from our everyday lives. We enjoy walking in the shoes of protagonists and getting swept off our feet by their romantic gestures—we suspend disbelief and go on adventures with the people on the silver screen and without knowing it, we come to trust our fictional companions. We follow them on their journeys and consider it a privilege to witness their heroisms and feats. We laugh at their jokes and continue to laugh at them even after the movie is over. We internalize their consciousness and quite literally, through sight and sound, their points of views. We do not realize that this consciousness is not born out of our own thoughts and experiences, but rather that it is systemically crafted through the narrow lens of the *straight, white male gaze*.

Laura Mulvey refers describes the “male gaze” as a dominant point of view in American cinema that portrays female roles as passive, while male roles are portrayed as active. Mulvey further critiques the “male gaze” in cinema by claiming that it “projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, p. 19). In adding the *straight* and *white* markers to this concept of the male gaze, by identifying the dominant perspective exercised in Hollywood as that of the straight white males, we can then frame our understanding of its pedagogy as one that must be analyzed at the intersection of various forms of subordination as this gaze is privileged in its projection of gendered, racialized, and sexualized expectations. This intersectional understanding of Hollywood culture is key to challenging the ways in which its pedagogy perpetuates the stereotyped portrayals of women, people of Color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people. The perspective of the straight, white male gaze is absorbed unconsciously, and therefore its reach can be difficult to measure. However, we can see that it is strong in Hollywood, and as a country with an abundant amount of appreciation for movies, we encounter this gaze regularly through some of our favorite characters.

We root and rally for these leading characters through their adversity and pain—but it is time that we, the underrepresented, ask ourselves, when have our fictional companions shown up for us? When will they root and rally for us? It is time for them to learn our languages, feel our pain, and celebrate in our triumphs. It is our turn to lead in cinematic tales of adventure, romance, and humor, because until we, as underrepresented communities, are able to see ourselves on the silver screen as whole and complex people that navigate complex lives, we will struggle to imagine ourselves as the protagonists in our own communities. We cannot continue to wait for our Hollywood heroes to come and visit our homes so they might later tell tales of how we live, who we are and where we came from. It is time to challenge this colonized hold that

Hollywood has over our communities because these heroes have too often falsely represented our histories, our communities and our people.<sup>1</sup>

The cultural epistemology produced by film media is so rapidly updating and reinventing its language and reach, especially now in the digital age of online streaming and social media. For this reason, it is especially important to be critical of its pedagogy in order to discern the impact it has on shaping the way we understand our own cultures, as well as the dominant cultures. Douglas Kellner addresses the influential role of media texts on audiences from a cultural studies perspective. He writes, “the emphasis on active audience reception and appropriation [...] has helped cultural studies overcome the previous one-sided textualist orientations to culture and has also directed focus to the actual political effects texts may have” (Kellner, 2015, p. 14). Instead of analyzing films based solely on their significance as texts, Kellner suggests a multidirectional approach that examines the relationship between the text and the audience as an active site for socialization. In framing our understanding of an audience as an active one to contextualize the experience of watching and consuming media into an inevitably politicized occurrence, we open up critical conversations about the importance of nuanced and complicated representations of all people. Kellner also warns that romanticizing an “active audience” as being solely responsible for their interpretations of texts may overlook the powerful influence of manipulation that media employ (Kellner 2015, p.15). It is vital to recognize the technical and the social qualities inherent in cinema in order to bring a cultural shift into Hollywood that speaks to underrepresented audiences in ways that validate their own lived experiences and histories, rather than the skewed, one-dimensional, and oppressive representations prevalent today. Through a critical cultural studies approach, we can see the need to meet this issue on both sides of the screen—as audiences and as creators. As creators we must

work to break into Hollywood and bring more underrepresented filmmakers along with us. As audience members, we must learn to meet films with a critical mind. In imagining what this radical shift in Hollywood would look like, I would like to focus on the Chicana/o experience with cinema, and how through a history of resistance to oppressive representations in Hollywood, Chicanos and Chicanas have carved out space for their own film in spaces of political resistance.

### **Chicanos Go to the Movies: The History of Chicano Cinema and Political Resistance**

Looking specifically at the representation of Chicanos in the American Cinema, historically, Chicanos have been portrayed as “dirty, violent, hypersexual, treacherous, and thieving” (Noriega, 1992, p. 3). In the Wild West films between 1906 through 1920s, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Chicanos were portrayed in the roles of bandits, outlaws and red savages. At this time, films such as these were cranked out by Hollywood at a rate of about one picture per week. In 1911, these films were met with contention in the borderlands of Texas. The critical responses from professors, students and newspaper publications such as *La Cronica* regarding stereotyping in these films are important to note as they are signs of political resistance from Chicanos that predate the Chicano Movement of the 1960s by about fifty years. Though the first Chicano film is said to have been made in 1969, these early critiques of dominant cinematic narratives that depicted Latinas/os, Mexicanas/os and Chicanas/os in dehumanizing roles, highlight the long history of oppressive imagery the Chicano community has witnessed, named, and resisted since.

In Chon Noriega’s, *Shot in America: Television, The State and the Rise of Chicano Cinema*, Noriega situates the beginning of Chicano Cinema with what is considered the first

Chicano film—Luis Valdez’ “I am Joaquin,” adapted from the epic poem by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales. This film marks the rise of Chicano Cinema out of the political causes driven by the farmworkers’ struggle and Chicano student movement of the 1960s. It is a reclaiming of Chicano identity, one previously misrepresented and distorted by Anglo-American culture. This film is described by Noriega as a poem film that uses *floricanto*, “a concept for Chicano poetry that bridge[s] spoken and literary language by way of the neo-indigenous sacred.” *Floricanto* can be translated to mean “flower and song” and Noriega describes it as a “combination of prayer and poetry in Aztec culture to map a transhistorical identity onto the emerging political culture of the 1960s” (Noriega, 2000, p. 2). In his film, Valdez juxtaposes ancient imagery and soundscapes that position an Aztec aesthetic alongside the modern day political struggles of the Chicano Movement. This transhistorical identity is important to the Chicano movement because it speaks to the multidimensional experiences and identities that Chicanos navigate in their day to day lives, as well as in conceptualizing their political struggles that are informed by a long indigenous history while navigating the contemporary issues of systemic inequality and racism. Translating this consciousness into cinematic form then takes on a poetic quality in “I am Joaquin,” one that is rooted in historical, communal, and personal reflection.

In naming a dominant attribute of the Chicano civil rights movement, Noriega paraphrases Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in describing “poetic consciousness” as “a phenomenon found not just in the ubiquitous poetry of the times, but in the broader function of poetry as a medium for fostering a social movement as well as the development of Chicano Studies itself” (Noriega, 2000, p.1). As a movement born from the fields and the classroom, this concept of poetic consciousness unifies the Chicano cause with a common language, the war cry of poetry. Noriega then goes on to quote the filmmaker himself, “[t]here is no inspiration without

identifiable images, there is no conscience without the sharp knife of truthful exposure, and ultimately, there are no revolutions without poets” (Noriega, 2000, p.1).

Sylvia Morales brought a new voice into the Chicano Cinema movement through the introduction of Chicana Cinema and her first film, *Chicana* (1979). As Noriega writes, “while *Chicana* appears to imitate *I am Joaquin* in [its] ideology and in its skillful use of still photographs, it also presents the Chicana history that the ‘seminal’ Chicano film overlooks” by “bringing movement—the movement—into the domestic sphere” (Noriega, 2000, p. 11). Morales’s film rewrites the cinematic representation of the presence of Chicanas in the political Chicano movement of the 1960s and further validates the domestic labor that fueled the cause. *Chicana* is not simply a response to the film *I am Joaquin*, rather it is an affirmation, a claim that centers the role and experiences that Chicanas lived within the movement, and as Noriega points out, *Chicana* locates the same poetic impulse of *I am Joaquin* in a gendered labor history. “Valdez looked to ‘flower and song’ for the discourse of the social change, Morales reversed the course and articulated the poetic through the material: bread and roses; Noriega quotes Morales, ‘Hearts starve as well as bodies. Give us bread, but give us roses’ (Noriega, 2000, p. 12).

Chicano Cinema has since made its way into Hollywood, only to be shut again. Today, Chicana/o content exists mostly in the avant-garde genre, educational spaces, government funded platforms, and non-profits organizations. An accessible and powerful tool at the disposal of filmmakers today is YouTube.com. In a recent article in the Wall Street Journal written by Jack Nicas, YouTube is said to be on the path to eclipsing U.S. television viewership in surpassing a goal of 1 billion hours of video playtime per day. Where U.S. television and mainstream Hollywood have a finite amount of real estate when it comes to air time or theatrical release,

platforms such as YouTube, Amazon Video, and Netflix have changed the game to one where a sea of voices can be introduced and cultivated to attract viewership. In a later section I will continue to discuss the potential role these video platforms can play in radical shifts to mainstream representations.

### **Methodology and Analytical Frameworks: Using Autobiographical Testimonio**

Feminist scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks have called upon women of Color to reflect on and share their stories and experiences in the realm of academia, placing importance on cultivating a consciousness capable of navigating academic and professional spaces that have systemically challenged the presence and opinions of women of Color. These scholars are the inspiration behind my decision to write an autobiographical *testimonio* about my own experiences as a Chicana feminist student and filmmaker. I choose to frame my autobiographical story as *testimonio* because my story is rooted in the multiplicity of my identity shaped by my familial heritage, race, ethnicity, culture, education, gender, and profession—my story is a specific account of an experience of someone at the intersections of all of these experiences.

In discussing the origins of *testimonio* Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodriguez state:

*Although it is difficult to mark a historical moment of its inception, the testimonio has been inscribed and sanctioned as a literary mode since the 1970s, in large part as a result of the liberation efforts and the geopolitical resistance movements to imperialism in Third World nations. We come to understand this form of writing as part of the struggle of people of color for educational rights and for the recovery of our knowledge production (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, p. 526).*



*Testimonio* has since been used across many disciplines as a qualitative method that foregrounds the voice and story of the narrator as a witness, and as an “agent of knowledge.”

Lindsey Perez Huber, though she does not claim to provide a universal definition for *testimonio*, offers a description of how one might frame a *testimonio* in educational research. “*Testimonios* are usually guided by the will of the narrator to tell events as she sees significant, and is often an expression of a collective experience, rather than the individual” (L.P. Huber 2009, p. 644). I work from this description of *testimonio* in offering my own story as one rooted in a collective experience of in-betweenness—or as Gloria Anzaldúa names this experience, using the Aztec word for “torn between ways”—*nepantla*. *Nepantla* is a word I have clung to from the moment I read it. It is name for all of the times I have felt caught between places, feeling as though I belonged neither here nor there. It is the name I attribute to my ability to navigate the multiple worlds I inhabit, and it is a name I was given by another Chicana, whose experiences bared the same name. There is a power in this that is difficult for me to describe because it is a power that only I can give myself, yet the potential to access and acknowledge this power, was given to me by another Chicana in the form of written words, in pages bound into a book. It is because I read those words, that I choose to write my own, as a *neplantera*.

*We need neplanteras whose strength lies in our ability to mediate and move between identities and positions. Necesitamos neplanteras to inspire us to cross over racial and other borders. To become neplanteras, we must choose to occupy intermediary spaces between worlds, to build bridges between worlds like the ancient chamanas who choose to see through the holes in reality, choose to perceive something from multiple angles. The act of seeing the whole in our cultural conditioning can help us to separate out from overidentifying with personal and cultural identities transmitted by both our own groups and the dominant culture, to shed their toxic values and ways of life. It takes energy and courage to name ourselves and grow beyond cultural and self-imposed boundaries. As agents of awakening, neplanteras remind us of each other’s search for wholeness (Anzaldúa 2015, p. 93).*

In this search for wholeness as students, educators, and filmmakers of Color, we must choose to exist in between worlds, celebrate ambiguity, and push against dominant narratives and structures that oppress our minds, bodies and spirits. To continue this thought on how we as *neplanteras*, might locate the “cultural and self-imposed boundaries” we struggle against, I turn to the words of Audre Lorde:

*I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all of our choices. (Lorde, p. 113).*

Here Lorde calls upon all women to look introspectively, into “that deep place of knowledge,” to confront the oppression we have internalized and look into its face so that we might recognize that this face is not our own, but rather an intruder. We must excavate our doubts and reveal their true nature to learn how to move beyond that oppressive self doubt towards a consciousness that is informed by our own knowledge and by our own lived experiences, and furthermore, to use this informed consciousness to “illuminate all of our choices” through political struggles.

Through the process of this introspective excavation, we will inevitably face the pain of tearing through our previously held understanding of who we are and the roles we are capable of taking on in the world outside of ourselves. It is an inevitably painful process because it is as if we tear through our own flesh to remove these “toxic values and ways of life.” The wounds left in the wake of this excavation will need to heal and scar.

To move towards an understanding of healing, I turn to bell hooks who writes, “Stories also help us heal (p. 52) ...It is one of those powerful ways to educate, to create community” (hook 2010, p. 56). To educate and build community is to make ourselves strong through helping those around us while simultaneously validating our experiences and knowledge. We do this work because we have to. "We do this because the world we live in is a house on fire and the

people we love are burning” (Cisneros, 2015). Sharing my autobiographical experience as educational research is a privilege afforded to me by the scholars I have quoted above and many others. I offer my *testimonio* to stand alongside the many voices of my *neplantera* sisters who *choose* to see through the holes of “reality” and who fill those gaps with their own stories.

It is important for me to engage this process of introspective excavation because it is a journey I will ask others to take with me in my future research as an educational researcher. It is a journey I find essential to uncovering the ways we can better serve those who are underrepresented in dominant discourse in education and beyond. “The revolution begins at home” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, p. xlvii). Home is where I have learned and where I continue to learn about the world—but here, in the company of these radical scholars, is where I learn to bridge the personal and political.

#### Methodological Framework: Cultural Intuition

In this *testimonio*, I will engage my *cultural intuition*, a Chicana feminist epistemology which Dolores Delgado Bernal proposes as a methodological framework that emphasizes the inclusion of the following four components into the research process:

- a) Personal Experience (\*Includes Collective Memory & Community Memory)
- b) Existing Literature
- c) Professional Experience
- d) The Analytical Process (\*Places emphasis on collaborating with participants in the analysis of data)

Dolores Delgado Bernal describes an epistemology as “more than just a ‘way of knowing’ and can be more accurately defined as a ‘system of knowing’ that is linked to worldviews based on the conditions under which people live and learn” (Delgado Bernal, p. 106). Dolores Delgado Bernal emphasizes the significance of cultural intuition and how incorporating it into the

research process proves to serve the complexities of the multifaceted ways we as Latinas and Chicanas come to know what we know.

*A Chicana researcher's cultural intuition is achieved and can be nurtured through our personal experiences (which are influenced by ancestral wisdom, community memory, and intuition), the literature on and about Chicanas, our professional experiences, and the analytical process we engage in when we are in a central position of our research and our analysis. Thus cultural intuition is a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal collective and dynamic (pp. 567-568).*

I will be using *testimonio* as a method to recount my experiences with the intention of shining light on the intersections of institutionalized oppression employed in film education and beyond.

I am drawn to the method for reasons made succinctly clear by Reyes and Curry Rodriguez:

“feminist epistemology influenced Chicanas and empowered them to develop the narrative format as redemption—as takers of the stories, as readers of the narratives, and as creators of the analysis” (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, p. 526)

### Critical Race Counterstorytelling

Tara Yosso defines a counterstory as a story that “recounts the experiences of racism and resistance from the perspective of those on society’s margins” (Yosso, 2006, p. 2). Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso propose an analytical framework through critical race counter storytelling that draws from critical race theory (CRT) in education using five tenets.<sup>2</sup> The five tenets of CRT in education will be incorporated into my work in the following manner:

1. **Centering the significance of race and racism** as it is historically and currently positioned in relation to Chicana/o and Latina/o representation and authorship in cinema and Hollywood.
2. **Centering my own experiences and knowledge** as a Chicana feminist filmmaker, student and educational researcher.

3. **Challenging dominant ideologies** and deficit views of the Chicana/o community in Hollywood by providing a counterstory that does not simply react to deficit views or try to “prove” marginalization, but rather a story that documents the “persistence of racism” as well as sexism and ultimately speaks for itself (Yosso, 2006, p. 10)
4. **An interdisciplinary approach** that weaves together cultural studies, ethnic studies, gender studies, and film studies to explore and analyze my own *testimonio*.
5. **A commitment to social justice** through self-representation and a call to action in how to better serve future Chicana and underrepresented filmmakers and mediamakers through education.

### **My *Testimonio*: A Chicana Feminist Filmmaker**

This isn't a story about some poor disadvantaged kid who miraculously made it out of a bad neighborhood—you know the story I'm talking about. You've probably seen it before—maybe at the movies, maybe on the news or maybe during some of your favorite TV shows—the kind of story where a white savior teaches the people of Color how to ascend up out of the atrocious living conditions they are in. Yes, I grew up in a low-income household. Yes, my parents immigrated to this country without documentation. Yes, I am of Mexican descent. Yes, you can check off a lot of boxes that might make that white savior in the movie think to themselves, *poor thing*. This might all be part of my story, but these circumstances do not define me in the way dominant narratives in popular TV programming or Hollywood films portray. This is a story about how these circumstances have taught me one of my most favorite lessons of all—how to tell my own stories.

Here is my truth. I might have grown up in a low-income household, but I never wanted for anything. My parents built a home for us that was happy and warm. It was the kind of home people came into and didn't want to leave. They would stand in the doorway, feel the warmth,

smell the hot food and be seduced by cup of instant coffee and *chisme*. That turned into dinner, and that turned into playing music on the porch and talking well into the night. I had a very happy childhood surrounded by people who loved me and who would do anything for me, and I knew that. Even as a kid I knew what I had was special and I recognize the privilege it is to have a solid support system, two healthy parents, two healthy brothers, food on the table, and people to share all that love with. In fact, because of the privileges I held, I didn't realize I was poor until I was labeled "the affirmative action girl" much later in life. I didn't realize that being the daughter of immigrants had set me up as someone other people viewed as deficit. When that label came, I started to ask my mom questions like how much money we had, how on earth that was enough, why can't I remember a single time I wanted a toy or literally anything and had to hear the words "we can't afford that." My mom attributes this to how good her kids were at understanding the unspoken limitations we had, but I attribute it to how both her and my dad refused to let us think things we wanted were out of reach, but also built an environment where material things weren't as important as the moments shared between us.

She tells me still that she did everything in her power to make sure we never felt limited. She told me that it was fortunate that we were patient kids because luxuries took time for us to take hold of. When we wanted a computer, mom and dad saved up until we got that computer—it was never a matter of *will we get it*, just *when we'll get it*. It meant *over-time at work*, it meant *sacrifice*. If I wanted a certain toy, mom and dad put it on lay away for as long as it took so it would be under the Christmas tree. I don't know how they did it. I'm amazed still at their ability to make it all look so effortless. As an adult, I now know the cost of living. I know how much food costs, how much a roof costs, a bed, clean clothes, transportation etc. Every extra penny my parents had, and there weren't many, they put right back into giving their kids everything they

wanted. My parents worked hard, long hours, day in and day out. They saved up and spent it all on us. They invested everything, all their energy, into reassuring us that we were taken care of and that what we wanted was achievable.

I in no way mean to minimize the struggles and hardships being in these situations come with, but rather shift the perspective to the one my parents afforded me—the one they paid for, like some really long lay away plan where day after day they deposited their sacrifices, sweat, tears and heartaches, so that we might be able to look back and not see our childhood for the material things we lacked, but rather for all the lessons we learned about work ethic, family, faith, and love. I have no doubt that the burdens of these disadvantages weighed heavily on my parents' shoulders, but I choose not to let the weight they carried define our story because they made a choice long ago to focus instead on the riches their hard work brought into our lives, the kind of riches that fill your soul—love, faith, strength, resilience. As a kid, you can't help but be lured into the ideal of wealth and success and let's face it, Richie Rich did make it look like he was having a lot of fun, but for me it was more so about how much fun it was to watch. I never actually wanted a rich lifestyle I couldn't even imagine what that would feel like, or what it meant to live in the worlds of movies like this. While I enjoyed watching Disney channel movies and all of their “stumble into [ fame, fortune, popularity, love] plotlines,” there was always this separation between me and the screen. At the time I couldn't name this separation.

I stand by my claim that I was never poor despite living in a low-income household because I lived a childhood that was rich in love and all the priceless memories we made as a family—*carne asadas*, *fiestas*, *musica*, family movie nights where I would make fun of my dad's choice to watch Vicente Fernandez ride on horseback alone through a desert, singing songs of sorrow to the musical accompaniment of a mariachi that was no where to be seen. He laughed

and said, “Ha, you’re right. Where is the mariachi?” I loved watching movies with my parents and poking fun at old timey Mexican cinema. I never got to meet my paternal grandmother, who passed away when my father was fifteen-years-old, but anytime the Mexican actress Maria Félix appeared on our TV, my dad would tell me again that his mother’s name was also Maria Félix and she had hair just like a movie star. I used to dream of my *abuelita* Félix in black and white—she would come to my window and I would beg her to stay, tell her how much my dad missed her and that he watched all of her movies, but she would vanish before speaking a word and I would awake to Sunday cuddles where the five of us, my parents and my two big brothers, would get tangled up and *hechos bola*, somehow managing to fit on mom and dad’s queen sized bed, where we would fight about whose turn it was to make breakfast and whose knees and elbows were jammed into our sides. Sundays were the days my parents got to rest.

In retrospect, my love for cinema dates back to these moments with my parents, and the time I spent watching Disney movies. It wasn’t until high school that I picked up a camera with the intention of shooting and making my own content. My sophomore honor’s English teacher invited me to join his first group of broadcast journalists for our high school TV news program and after a semester in this program, this same teacher put me up for an all expenses paid internship with NBC, where high school students from around the country would be considered for the opportunity to take a closer look at the behind the scenes work of a huge national news outlet. I was one of the twelve students selected. The NBC program paid for flight and hotel accommodations for me and one guardian. I remember the day I found out about landing the internship because that night my parents and I went to the hospital to visit my eldest brother and his wife who had just had their first child, Sebastian. I was so excited to tell my parents about the news but as soon as the words left my lips my parents took one look at each other and I knew



something was wrong. I was fifteen-years-old at the time, and the rules of the internship were clear, I could not attend alone and New York City was simply too far for my parents to drive. I suspected my parents wouldn't be able to come with me for a variety of reasons, but the one that most afflicted them was their fear of flying. My mom told me we would discuss it at home later. I immediately reconciled with the idea of not being able to go. It seemed so far-fetched to begin with that the idea that it couldn't happen was almost expected. We stayed at the hospital until visiting hours were over, I held my little nephew and relished in an overwhelming happiness to welcome him into the world.

As we were about to leave, my middle brother showed up to see the baby, and we all headed home. I shared the news with my brother and he immediately lit up with joy. "That's amazing! When do you leave?" I told him it probably wouldn't happen, but it was still an honor to have been selected. He asked my parents why they wouldn't let me go. My mom said she had no problem with me going, but she couldn't take a week off of work, and neither her nor my dad were comfortable flying. My brother asked me if I had to take a parent. I told him that the rules of the internship stated that I needed a guardian over the age of eighteen. Without missing a beat, he told me, "I'm twenty years old, Brenda! I'll take you!" I teased him about milking me for a free trip to New York, but the truth is, I was over the moon. I went on this internship and upon returning to my hometown, I decided that I would give filmmaking everything I had. I knew I wanted to make movies, I just didn't know what kind of movies. I spent the following two years making short documentaries, music videos, live-action narrative short films, and even got to direct a large scaled production for a PSA against drunk driving that is still used by the school today. I remember those days mostly as days I would wake up before the sun was out to have breakfast with my parents and catch an early ride to school with my dad and my uncle. My dad

laughed at me and my eagerness to get to school, but he was proud, and it was because of his support along with the support of my TV production teacher and the rest of my family, that I was able to focus on my dream of becoming a filmmaker. My family acted in my short films. My mom made meals to feed the hungry high school crew of filmmakers. My parents let me turn our living room into a make-shift studio for a documentary-styled interview, when my interviewee was only available on the weekend and my teacher encouraged me to take home all of the equipment in order to finish my film. My dad brought his pick-up to school and loaded up the backdrop stands, the keno-flow lights, the camera bags and the tripods. I had a strong support system rooting for me make my movies.

When the time came to apply to college, my teacher encouraged me to apply to two of the top film schools in the country. I immediately ruled out one of them because I considered it to be “too Hollywood.” I wanted to study independent cinema because I identified with it aesthetically and culturally. I knew there was no way I would be able to attend this school without a full ride scholarship, but I sent in my early admission application and worked on ways of getting funding. Loans were not an option for my family and I, so I turned to scholarships. My teacher pushed me to apply for the Gates Millennium Scholarship, and because he had already done the work of nominating me, I felt obligated to follow through. I had no hopes of actually getting it as I wasn’t a student in the running for valedictorian or anything like that, and according to my peers, those are usually the students who land scholarships like this. I applied anyway, and I prayed on it. My mom later confessed to me that she sent contradicting prayers God’s way, hoping that I wouldn’t get the scholarship that would take me away from her. Despite her secret prayers, my mom rushed to my high school TV class in the middle of her work day to bring the envelope containing the official notice that I had been selected as a Gates Millennium Scholar. I can

picture her and my teacher hugging and jumping in a circle as my teacher told my mom that my life had just changed forever. It felt cosmic. My mom told me that God heard both of our prayers and answered mine. We waited on the admission letters from all of the universities I applied to. I didn't get into my dream school the first time around and I ended up attending a Cal State University for my first year of college. I was set on going to film school, and I had the financial support to follow through. I started college that year with the intention of reapplying to my dream school and transferring.

I spent my first year of college in San Francisco, where I quickly found community and peers with similar experiences. My friends and I were all first generation college students in our families, we all had deep ties to our home towns, and we all tried our best to recreate the pieces of home that brought us comfort. My two closest friends were from central California, and their parents were able to make weekend trips out to San Francisco more frequently than my own. I remember getting together with my friends and their parents on those special weekends, enjoying *tamales*, *champurado*, *posole*, and *pan dulce* that they had brought for us from home. In these moments, I felt like I had a little piece of my parents and my family with me. Though I struggled with leaving home for college, because I was the first in my family to do so, this strong sense of belonging and community amongst my friends and their families grounded me and kept me going. My friends encouraged me to apply to film school, they stayed up late with my working on my film project submissions and they reassured me every step of the way. I resubmitted my application and my mom, again, was the bearer of good news. I walked out of my final for my last class of my freshman year to find that I had seven missed calls from my mom. She told me I had received an acceptance letter, and that I better start making plans for the big move to New York City. She was crying, and laughing, and I couldn't make sense out of her reaction. She told

me that had *sentimientos encontrados*, colliding feelings, or mixed feelings. She and my dad had just gotten used to the distance between us, and now I was moving clear across the country. The transfer students entering the film program were required to attend a summer session to catch up with the production classes, and that left me only a few weeks to settle everything in San Francisco and head east.

I had never felt lonelier than when a yellow taxi dropped me off in front of my new home, a twenty-two story high rise dorm building. I had packed everything I could into two large bags that came up past my waist and had tiny wheels that gave out on me every step of the way. I had racked up enough mileage with Southwest airlines to get a free one-way flight to New York City with two free checked bags of any size, so I filled them up with pieces of home; quilts, pillows, a tortilla press, books, and photo albums. I fumbled with my luggage and made my way up. I knew absolutely no one and home sickness hit me harder than ever. Exploring the city alone intimidated me and I stayed in my dorm as much as I could manage. The only thing I had to look forward to were my classes.

I was often the only woman of Color in class, and there were few people of Color in general. I was embarrassed by the question “where are you from?” because no one seemed to know the name of my hometown. “It’s by LA.” They would respond, “Oh okay, but like, where are your parents from?” The embarrassment went on, and I developed a script. “I’m from LA, but originally my family is from Mexico.” That’s about as much as most people wanted to know. I later understood moments like these, where my my alienation was highlighted and where others called attention to it, as racial and gender microaggressions. On the surface, “*Where are you from?*” seems an innocent enough question, but whenever someone asked me this question, I felt

caught. I felt as though I had been pretending to belong and someone had finally called me out on it. One question and my cover was blown. I was an imposter.

I spent my years there learning to cope with feelings of not belonging, at times trying to blend in, and at others trying to keep to myself. I explored experimental filmmaking, narrative live-action filmmaking, and even co-produced a feature documentary with a classmate that did well for itself on the festival circuit and was later picked up for distribution by Wolfe Video, an exclusive distributor for LGBTQ+ films. For the most part, I focused on writing and directing narrative live action films, finishing my coursework and working on this documentary on my free time.

### **Writing Short Films: To Tell the Believable or to Tell the Truth**

*Write what you know.* These words echoed in my mind as I sat at my computer, trying to find the words to begin my next screenplay. *Write what you know.* Easy enough. I brought my ideas with me to class and we went around the room, sharing our script ideas out loud, giving extended “elevator pitches.” At this moment in time I was in my second year of college, and in my first year as a transfer student to one of the most prestigious film schools in the country. I was shy and quiet and nervously awaiting my turn. I listened to my classmates, the excitement in their voices, the confidence, the intensity that rang through during their pitches. I told myself *this is a class; this is a place of learning. Even if I bomb, I will learn from the experience.* My classmates shared their ideas and I followed them carefully. They sounded familiar, like updated and shorter versions of movies I had watched all my life. They were funny, and clever, and captivating.

The culture in this program was one heavily fueled by competition and while I do believe that competition can sometimes add an intensity to a learning environment that can lead to innovative ideas, for me, this competitive environment heightened my sense of not belonging. I felt consistently reminded of the pressure to prove my worthiness of a spot in this program. Every time I was asked to speak, I felt a question pulling my words back down into my throat—*Am I good enough?* It was my turn to speak in my writing class. I shared my ideas to write a short film about a young Mexican woman crossing the border into the United States. My story was strung together with scenes pulled from my memory of stories told to me by my mother about her actual crossing. I wrote what I knew understanding full well that autobiographical stories are often the most difficult stories to translate to the silver screen, but overall I was still excited about the opportunity to share an idea with my classmates that was so personal as I thought that a story so personal would also bring novelty, something most artists aspire to bring to their work. I saw the blank expressions on the faces of my classmates as I spoke, and that question tugged a little harder making my voice crack—*am I good enough?* My pitch was over and it was time for feedback. I was met with comments regarding how “believable” this story was. *Would a girl this age actually venture out alone like that? Could she really convince her father to let her go on such a dangerous journey by buying him a six-pack of beer? That makes no sense. Try to make her more relatable. Maybe make her a little older. Change the scene with her father. Yeah, definitely.* The class agrees. I take the notes. The professor shuffles to the next script, “I think you’ve gotten some good responses, Brenda. Okay good.”

I went back home to my dorm room and I read through my notes. I couldn’t quite place the uneasiness I felt; there were so many doubts circling around my head. I reassured myself that I should take the notes, make the changes and move forward. Obviously movies written from

real life experiences had to be manipulated to a certain extent to fit on the screen. There is always so much we must leave out, because there is only so much we can say in a limited amount of time. Yet, I still struggled with writing this script because I had trouble understanding the actual issues that my classmates had with my story. I thought the biggest issue was that it was not believable or relatable, that much was clear. They tell us to learn to “kill our babies” to make stronger films. You have to cull the weak ideas to allow the stronger messages to develop. Maybe it was my delivery. Maybe I didn’t show enough confidence. The story I had pitched in class was anchored in vivid moments I understood from my mother’s stories. The scene where she asks her father if she can catch a ride with their neighbor to cross the border and presents him with a six-pack of beer does not signal that she is buying her way out. That six-pack represents the labor she invested into buying it for her father. She gives it to him, not as a means of buying her ticket out, but rather because she wanted to make her father happy, and let him know that she would be capable of taking care of herself and in time, the rest of her family. It is her goodbye because she has already decided to go. She has already set her journey into motion, and she is only asking him for permission out of respect. This is the story I wanted to tell, but I was not ready to defend it because I wasn’t sure how to.

I decided not to write this script and changed my story. I instead wrote a script about a woman in the 1950’s struggling with the limitations she faced as a woman competing with the mainstream images of what she was supposed to be. I used this script to apply for the advanced level production course and was offered one of twenty spots in the class. In this class, I would compete for one of ten allotments to produce this short film. Twenty students, including myself, spent a semester in script workshops and pitches to prove our abilities to make our films. I vividly remember a script workshop when I asked my classmates whether they thought it would

hurt the script to make my lead character a woman of Color. I explained that for me, it would be important to present this narrative as one reimagined from the perspective of intersectionality that a woman of Color would access more vividly. The class responded in no uncertain terms that this would complicate the film too much. My professor reassured me that the script was in a good place as it was, and rather than risk my chance at an allotment, I stuck with my white female lead—an iconic image. I ended up receiving the allotment and I learned a lot from the experience of making such a technically and stylistically challenging film. I worked with a talented and passionate team to bring this story to life and I left the class feeling inspired by and supported by my professor.

To this day, the footage from this film still sits on a hard drive, unfinished. I feel shame when I think of the times I gave into the doubt of whether the stories I wanted to tell would be believable, or good enough, or too complicated to follow. I feel shame now when I think of all the money, energy and time my team and I spent on this unfinished film. I had carried this shame with me without naming it, without understanding that it is what had kept me from moving forward as a filmmaker.

### **Graduate School: Where I learned to name my shame.**

*“I will not be shamed again, nor will I shame myself” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 106).*

Two years after completing my bachelor’s degree I went back to school, only this time I decided to pursue a program in education with a focus on cultural studies and race and ethnic studies. I had decided early on that an important component of any work I produced, as a filmmaker or otherwise, would encompass giving back to the community I grew up in. However,



I still struggled with notions of whether I had anything of value to offer. Education as a whole—in respects to how it manifests within institutions, communities, personal experiences, familial experiences, and spiritual experiences, has been at the center of my growth and development as a person and it has also been the means through which I gained mobility to navigate between spaces of privilege as well spaces on the margins of society. I thought I came to graduate school a blank sheet of paper, awaiting the pen strokes that would prompt my purpose. I wasn't yet sure exactly where my studies would take me, but I was confident that I had come to the right place. My goal was still very much to make films about and for people like me, but I also wanted to learn how to share the tools I had gained in filmmaking with students growing in the same communities I came from and how I might better serve them in spaces of higher education and secondary education, the spaces where I honed my craft.

I struggled when I first arrived to graduate school, as I struggle still, to locate, name, and interrogate my purpose while navigating the world of academia. I felt isolated and completely other as a student without a background in research. I had spent the last six years working in creative writing and film production, and I had just stepped into a completely new arena. I was lucky enough to have found professors that would challenge my doubts and insecurities as a student by actively reminding me of the assets I brought to the classroom. These educators took the time to see me not for *what* I was missing, but rather for *who* I already was as well as who I was capable of becoming. I was not an object meant to reflect the institution's dominant discourses, I was now the subject—a person, whole and willing to learn from them, challenge them and use them to further my work. I stepped into their classrooms fighting that question that made knots at the base of my throat—*am I good enough?*—but something different happened there in the company of these professors and the classmates I shared space with. I cried, and

laughed, and shared, and spoke freely. I left these classrooms feeling empowered and in community with other students of Color. I left these classrooms aware of the fact that this question and many others like it would persist in trying to keep my voice silent and in distortion, but I also left knowing that I was capable of resisting these internalized and oppressive thoughts and that the acknowledgement of this ability to resist was the catalyst to the (re)discovery and development of my voice. I left these classrooms knowing there were individuals at this academic institution with whom I could speak freely and unapologetically about my plans for what I hoped to contribute as a student, as a filmmaker, and as a member of this new found community, without ever wondering whether what I had to share was worth offering.

With this new found validation, I set out to learn how I might be able to apply my skills as a filmmaker to bring forth transformative and accessible work in the field of education and beyond, to challenge dominant narratives about people of Color and other marginalized groups framed in deficit views. I have my weapon, now I need to learn how to wield it.

### **Discussion: Unpacking my *Testimonio***

In *Masks and Other Disguises: Exposing Legal Academia*, law professor, Leslie G. Espinoza uses an autobiographical anecdote about career reports she wrote as a twelve-year-old student to explore the concept of expectations. In these career reports, a young Espinoza discussed three possible career options: one for before marriage, one that was wishful thinking, and a final one that was her most ambitious. The careers she discussed in these reports respectively were, a secretary, an airline stewardess, and a nurse. For a twelve-year-old girl in a California public school in 1964, Espinoza grappled with the limitations placed on her as a minority student. These institutionalized expectations took time for her to dismantle, but she was

able to triumph by exceeding these expectations and becoming a law professor. Espinoza poses the following:

*The knowledge that we may depart from expectations is the first triumph. The prerequisite to this victory, however, is the identification of those expectations and the social construct they represent. Critical Race Scholarship is one vehicle through which minorities in law understand and reconcile the world as predicted, the world as experienced, and the world as dreamed” (Espinoza, p. 1885).*

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged in the work of legal scholars in the 1970s when these scholars recognized a stall in the fight against racism since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. These scholars worked to develop tools with which to examine subtler forms of discrimination and racism. The CRT movement is described by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic as “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado & Stefancic, p. 3). CRT challenges notions of incrementalism and “the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (Delgado & Stefancic, p. 3). Since its inception, CRT has branched off into other disciplines including education.

In her article titled, “Just What is Critical Race Theory and What’s It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?” Gloria Ladson-Billings discusses racialized conceptual categories:

*Conceptual categories like ‘school achievement,’ ‘middle classness,’ ‘maleness,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘intelligence,’ and ‘science’ become normative categories of whiteness, while categories like ‘gangs,’ ‘welfare recipients,’ ‘basketball players,’ and ‘the underclass’ become the marginalized and de-legitimated categories of blackness. The creation of these conceptual categories is not designed to reify a binary but rather to suggest how, in a racialized society where whiteness is positioned as normative, everyone is ranked and categorized in relation to these points of opposition. These categories fundamentally sculpt the extant terrain of possibilities even when other possibilities exist (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9).*

Here Ladson-Billing gives clear and recognizable examples of racialized concepts that are still prevalent socially and can be found in the field of education today. Ladson-Billings discusses the importance of storytelling in CRT in challenging conceptual categories such as these. These words written by Ladson-Billings in 1998 hold true today. These racialized concepts and expectations are strongly reinforced in Hollywood storytelling today and concepts such as these followed me in film school, and even in my own writing.

The knowledge that I may depart from the expectations of me to re-produce notions of whiteness in my films and in my screenwriting was an empowering discovery, but for me, this discovery came after leaving film school. I have learned the ways of production in the dominant Hollywood discourse through film school, but now, in knowing that these ways of writing and producing films uphold systemically oppressive structures, I must unlearn these ways, at least in part, in order to make way for critical representations to emerge in my own work. While I do think unlearning this discourse is a vital part of moving forward to more liberating representations in Hollywood, I also think it is important to keep the language of the dominant discourse handy, as it can serve to inform our critiques and it may be needed to infiltrate and change the Hollywood culture. While I still fear that the films I write and produce will be met by resistance in mainstream media, I am confident that there is a gap to be filled by critically conscious content for Latina/o and Chicana/o communities, because I see the way my community demonstrates excitement for new content from their own communities.

Rosa Linda Fregoso describes Chicano/a films as “oppositional cultural forms” inherently tied to Chicana/o cultural politics as oppositional, revolutionary cultural politics (Fregoso, p. xvii). Fregoso draws from Chon Noriega and Gary Keller’s conceptualization of what defines a

Chicana/o film. Fregoso arrives at a trinity of characteristics wherein Chicana/o films are “by” “for” and “about” Chicanos. Fregoso claims that these characteristics aligned with the purpose they served in the context of revolutionary, oppositional cultural politics. However, with later “onslaught of ‘gangxploitation’ films” this trinity no longer aligned with a progressive discourse (Fregoso, p. xvii). Fregoso stresses that in order to evaluate whether a film is reactionary or progressive, one must examine the “configurations of power relations operating at any given historical moment” (Fregoso, p. xix). She uses *I am Joaquin* and the film *Zoot Suit* as examples of radical films in terms of anti-racist politics, but not at all when it came to battling sexism and homophobia.

With the emergence of Chicano films in Hollywood with films such as *Zoot Suit (1984)* and *La Bamba (1987)* by Luis Valdez, issues surrounding the Chicano Cinema Coalition’s breaking into Hollywood arose in the form of a debate within itself regarding “whether the apparent access to Hollywood represented an extension of a radical agenda or a middleclass reformism” (Noriega, 2000, p. 200). Noriega goes on to say that the point of this debate was “moot” as this access to Hollywood for Chicanos “ended abruptly and radical politics became more moderate in the face of a hemispheric neoliberalism” (Noriega, 2000, p. 200). Noriega then discusses the parallel drawn by Henry Gamboa Jr. and Rosa Linda Fregoso between Chicano Cinema discourse and intercourse, in that the Chicano filmmaker does not achieve what he wants—“access to and success in the American film and television industry”—from his “defiantly public act of self-naming and self stimulation” as depicted in Gamboa’s 35-mm still, *No Movie* titled “Chicano Cinema” (Noriega, 2000, p. 200). This critique of Chicano Cinema, highlights the ways in which the movement fell short of reaching “within and across communities” (Noriega, 2000, p.201).

Since the shut out of Chicano filmmakers from Hollywood, Chicano/a filmmakers have mostly worked in the avant-garde genre and branched off onto platforms created by government programming such as PBS, and Chicana/o and Latina/o organizations such as the National Association of Latino Independent Producers, National Latino Communications Center, the National Hispanic Media Coalition, the Latino Public Broadcasting Project, and many other organizations that advocate for the production and distribution of Latina/o and Chicana/o content. PBS hosts a program by the name of POV, short for Point of View. This program has been a part of PBS since 1988 and has featured over 500 non-fiction films that “are known for their intimacy, their unforgettable storytelling and their timeliness, putting a human face on contemporary social issues” ([www.pbs.org/pov/about](http://www.pbs.org/pov/about)). Many of these films share the lived experiences of those whose voices are absent from mainstream media and provides a platform for filmmakers to land their projects. PBS offers tools to filmmakers to seek out funding and resources for getting their films made and distributed on their site and beyond.

Amongst these resources is a list of do-it-yourself digital distribution methods for independent filmmakers and mediamakers to consider when looking for places and ways to share their content with the possibility of making some income. Amongst these websites and platforms is CreateSpace.com which has partnered with Amazon Video Direct and allows for filmmakers to upload their content and set their own prices for digital download rentals or purchases—Amazon takes a 50% cut of the profits and the filmmakers keep the other 50%. Another popular website listed is YouTube.com, where the amount of money made by content creators varies depending on Google advertising. I recently attended a CBS workshop on self-distribution where many of these site were discussed and the overall message for independent filmmakers and mediamakers to take home was that distribution has now opened up to more folks in the digital

age, and while it takes a lot of work and resources to put in the time to grow a following large enough to where self-distribution makes sense financially, for many filmmakers this is often the best route forward in getting their content seen by more people.

### **Pushing Onward Towards More Diversity in Hollywood**

In today's digital era, we can see a growing access to larger audiences for mediamakers of Color. During a recent tour to YouTube Space LA, I learned that YouTube, a free online video platform, rewards its mediamakers who have over 10 thousand followers with access to free soundstages, cameras, and editing equipment once a month. Once mediamakers reach 100 thousand followers, they have access to more resources including two or more extra days in the soundstages with free equipment, and more face time with YouTube specialists that work with YouTubers to optimize their channels and videos. YouTube Spaces also offer free workshops for their YouTubers. YouTube is a great resource for filmmakers of Color to grow their audience and following, and this following can become a marketable asset.

Writer, director, actor, Issa Rae is best known for her current show on HBO called *Insecure*. This show is similar in style to her original YouTube web series titled, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. Despite her recent success in landing a deal with HBO, Issa Rae continues to use her YouTube channel as a tool for creating unique and various forms of content centered on Black characters. As a filmmaker, she is constantly diversifying her reach, creating accessible content that garners and maintains her strong following.

Another example of a woman of Color that has diversified her reach as a filmmaker is Oscar nominated, Ava Duvernay. Duvernay spent fourteen years working as a marketer and

publicist on over 120 film and TV campaigns. She then began her journey into directing feature length films through the documentary genre. Duvernay has become a leading director of our time and has unapologetically pushed forward in TV, documentary, and live-action narratives centered on Black characters. She proudly shared via Twitter that the first season of her show, *Queen Sugar*, featured all women directors. Amongst these directors is LGBT Chicana director, Aurora Guerrero, the writer and director of *Mosquita y Mari*, a film in the official selection of the Sundance Film Festival in 2012. The community built between these female directors of Color is exactly what Hollywood needs. As women of Color, we need to come together and bring other women of Color with us as we ascend into positions of leadership.

In an interview with L.A. Woman magazine, Ava Duvernay offered the following words in regards to ascending in Hollywood, “So often we’re trying to climb this ladder that leads nowhere for us... Stay centered, I really think that’s key.” This is a simple response, but in actuality, the work it takes to stay centered as a filmmaker of Color is one that requires many skillsets. Ava Duvernay is asked about the lack of diversity shown at the Academy awards and she calls upon the academy to do their part in addressing the issue, “The Academy has been there a long time. I don’t disparage it... But the onus is not on the marginalized to educate and remedy the problem, because we didn’t build the problem.” While Duvernay pushes for Hollywood to take it upon themselves to fall in line and do what must be done to recognize and remedy the lack of diversity in Hollywood, she also continues to push forward in creating work that attacks this issue from another direction. I agree that the onus should not fall on the marginalized to explain matters of institutionalized discrimination to their oppressors, however, in educating future filmmakers and mediamakers of Color, we must help them hone their weapons in their struggles against institutionalized discrimination.



My proposal to continue the push for infiltrating Hollywood is not one born out of the desire to see more Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in the limelight for the sake of individual fame or success, but rather one rooted in a democratic struggle for stories made by, for, and about minority communities in the pursuit of social justice to be featured on a platform that bares heavy influence over our cultural politics as a country. This war against institutionalized discrimination must be battled on many sides; it is important to continue our work in oppositional spaces, but we must also continue to push for a share of Hollywood's silver screen. It is our right to reclaim our stories, voices, and histories.

### **Work to be Done in the Classroom**

Just as we need to adjust the minds and voices at work behind the scenes to better represent our marginalized communities, we must incorporate critical discussions of racism and other forms of discrimination in high school film classes and into film production and screenwriting courses in higher education. It is crucial to look at the landscape of film education in the context of democracy, because as John Dewey writes in *Democracy and Education*, “what nutrition and reproduction are to physiological life, education is to social life. This education consists primarily in transmission through communication” (Dewey, p. 11). If we omit the links between capitalistic interests of Hollywood and institutionalized structures of oppression that perpetuate harmful stereotyping and the dehumanization of minority communities, how then will we teach our youth to become active agents in the critical decision-making that enables democracy. If education informs our civic involvement, it is crucial that we employ a multiperspectival approach that makes visible the structuring of Hollywood storytelling and how film education perpetuates the same structures.

Dewey wrote, “persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being so many feet or miles removed from others” (Dewey, pg. 5). He was referring to the influence of letters and books to transcend people in the act of social learning, but this same concept can be applied to modern media and its social influence. If we consider the massive amount of media we consume and the time we spend interacting with video content on a daily basis, on a global level, it is impossible to ignore the reach of media as a force we learn to navigate in our own ways of being and in our own understandings of the world around us. It is vital to position critical media literacy<sup>3</sup> as a necessary tool towards the democratization of film and media education so that students may feel at liberty to explore their own stories and the stories of their communities without worrying that these stories will not fit into appropriate boxes.

In my own experiences, I felt the most freedom to create films that reflected my experiences while I was learning to use a camera and edit projects in my own community at a high school level. I attribute this to the fact that the actors and characters I envisioned were bound to the resources I had available to me at the time, and the resources available to me were the ones provided by my family and by my peers in a town predominantly populated by people of Color. Because I didn’t feel limited in who I was able to portray in my films, I never had to face the complex limitations imposed in mainstream filmmaking. Therefore, I entered spaces in higher education, like screenwriting classes and workshops, unprepared for the onslaught of racially charged resistance. I thought the hardest thing about film school would be getting in, but I still find myself unpacking the pedagogies used in those classrooms, and how damaging those pedagogies were to my creative development.

Educational philosopher, Paolo Freire writes in, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (Freire, p. 49). Upon realizing the reality of oppressive structures, students are able to engage conversations about resistance in film education from a more revolutionary standpoint of transformation. Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal’s definition of *transformational resistance* “refers to student behavior that illustrates both a critique of oppression and a desire for social justice” (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, p. 319). Transformational resistance is the practice of students coming into consciousness and acting against oppressive conditions that limit their education and further opportunities for growth. The seeking of social justice in their education will lead them to discover a consciousness outside that of their oppressors, that speaks from their own experiences, identities, strengths and goals.

It is for this reason that as a former film student, current Chicana feminist filmmaker, and educator that I call for the implementation of critical race media literacy, as set forth by Tara Yosso to begin to critical conversations with student filmmakers and mediamakers of Color. In her article, “Critical Race Media Literacy: Challenging Deficit Discourse about Chicanas/os,” Yosso describes a two-part curriculum informed by Solórzano’s collective use of the five tenets of CRT and Freire’s critical pedagogy that describes a student’s path to critical thinking as one that “moves from magical, to naïve, to critical consciousness” (Yosso, p. 54). Yosso’s critical race media literacy curriculum is a transformative tool that brings students face to face with cinematic portrayals and prompts them to interrogate these representations by acknowledging that

*(1) media images are constructions; (2) media are driven by money; (3) mediamakers bring their own experiences with them when they interact with media; (4) media utilize different combinations of moving and still images, words, and sounds to communicate with viewers; (5) we bring our own experiences with us when we interact with media; and (6) we can acquire multiple literacies as we become critically media literate (Yosso, p. 55).*

Yosso concludes that students exposed to this curriculum, “were very clear in describing how media, through repetition of negative portrayals, teach Chicanas/os that they are inferior to whites, and in turn, whites learn that they are better than Chicanas/os” (Yosso, p. 59).

*How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation? Only as they discover themselves to be the “hosts” of the oppressor can they contribute to the midwifery of their liberating pedagogy. As long as they live in the duality in which **to be** is **to be like**, and **to be like** is **to be like the oppressor**, this contribution is impossible. The pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization (Freire, p. 48).*

Thus in the pursuit towards liberating the minds of future mediamakers and filmmakers of Color, we must incorporate critical race media literacy into film courses at a high school and college level. This is important in because it provides them with the tools needed to defend their rights to tell and share their stories widely so that they may unapologetically set into motion a radical shift in mainstream representations.

While we see Chicanas and Chicanos making important and relevant films that do just this, these films are often only available in academic spaces or through very limited theatrical releases in festival circuits. These stories are still missing amongst the mainstream Hollywood pictures. While I can understand a need for the countercultural and politically oppositional aspects of these spaces, we must also push forward to include ourselves and our stories into dominant spaces that wield institutionalized power through oppressive forms of social and cultural pedagogy. The gap between critically conscious Chicana/o and Latina/o filmmaking and

Hollywood is one we should push students to explore and challenge. It is my belief that this venture can begin through self-distribution channels such as YouTube, Amazon Video Direct, iTunes and other online video platforms. If students have access to cameras and editing equipment, there is no reason they can't begin to develop an online presence, and accrue an online following that will in turn grow their mainstream following. There are also methods of crowd funding such as Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and Patreon that enable filmmakers and mediamakers to create content in financially sustainable ways. There is not one solution to tackling this issue; it requires multidirectional strategies. As consumers, we must push for changes in hiring policy for Hollywood studios and TV studios. As educators, we must also arm our future filmmakers with the tools to dismantle oppressive narratives and create critical content of their own. This work begins in the classroom.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Guillermo V. Flores, "Race and Culture in the Internal Colony: Keeping the Chicano in his Place," in *Structures of Dependency*, ed. Frank Bonilla and Robert Girling (Palo Alto, Calif.:Stanford University, 1973), 189-223.

<sup>2</sup> See Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (January 01, 2002); Solórzano, D. G. D. D. B. (October 01, 2001); Solórzano, D.G.,&Yosso, T.(2000); Solórzano, D. G. (1998); and Solórzano, D. G. (1997)

<sup>3</sup> See Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). "Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education" In D. Macedo & S. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media Literacy: A Reader* (pp. 3-23). New York, New York: Peter Lang.

---

## Bibliography

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands: The new mestiza = La frontera*. San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute.
- Anzaldúa, G., & Keating, A. (2015). *Light in the dark = Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Bernal, D. D. (1999). Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68, 4, 555-82.
- Bernal, D. D. (September 01, 2001). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: the mestiza consciousness of Chicana students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14, 5, 623-639.
- Cisneros, S. (2015). *A house of my own: Stories from my life*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Delgado, R., Stefancic, J., & Harris, A. P. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- De, L. T. (1984). *Alice doesn't: Feminism, semiotics, cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1963). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.
- Espinoza, L. G. (1990). MASKS AND OTHER DISGUISES: EXPOSING LEGAL ACADEMIA. *Harvard Law Review*, 103, 8.)
- Fregoso, R. L. (1993). *The bronze screen: Chicana and Chicano film culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.
- Huber, L. P. (2009). Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge: "Testimonio" as Methodology in Latina/o Critical Race Research in Education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education (qse)*, 22, 6, 639-654.
- Kellner, D., (2015). "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture" In Dines, G., & Humez, J. (Eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (4th ed., pp. 7-18). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.

- 
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). "Critical Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Reconstruction of Education" In D. Macedo & S. Steinberg (Eds.), *Media Literacy: A Reader* (pp. 3-23). New York, New York: Peter Lang.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (January 01, 1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education?. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11, 1, 7-24.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Lawrence, Charles R. III, "The Word and the River: Pedagogy as Scholarship as Struggle", 65 S. Cal. L. Rev. 2231, 2298 (1992)
- Moraga, C., & In Anzaldúa, G. (2015). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press.
- Mulvey, L. (2009). *Visual and other pleasures*. Houndmills: Palgrave: MacMillan.
- Nicas, J. (2017). YouTube tops 1 billion hours of video a day, on pace to eclipse TV; google unit posts 10-fold increase in viewership since 2012, boosted by algorithms personalizing user lineups. *Wall Street Journal (Online)* Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1872276741?accountid=14512>
- Noriega, C. A. (1992). *Chicanos and film: Representation and resistance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Noriega, C. A. (2000). *Shot in America: Television, the state, and the rise of Chicano cinema*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Public Broadcasting Service. (n.d.). Retrieved August 30, 2017, from <http://www.pbs.org/pov>
- Reyes, Kathryn Blackmer, and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez. 2012. "Testimonio: Origins, Terms, and Resources." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45(3):525-38.
- Smith, Stacy L., Choueiti, Marc & Pieper, Katherine (2017). "Inequality in 900 Popular Films: Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBT, & Disability from 2007-2016". Media, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, USC Annenberg. [http://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/Dr\\_Stacy\\_L\\_Smith-Inequality\\_in\\_900\\_Popular\\_Films.pdf](http://annenberg.usc.edu/sites/default/files/Dr_Stacy_L_Smith-Inequality_in_900_Popular_Films.pdf)
- Solórzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 24(3), 5-19.
- Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, racial and gender microaggressions, and the experiences of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 121-136.

---

Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T. (2000). Toward a critical race theory of Chicana and Chicano education. In C. Tejeda, C. Martinez, & Z. Leonardo (Eds.), *Charting new terrains of Chicana(o)/Latina(o) education* (pp. 35–65). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Solórzano, D. G. D. D. B. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework: Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Educational Administration Abstracts*, 36, 4, 411-568.

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (January 01, 2002). Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8, 1, 23-44.

Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical Race Media Literacy: Challenging Deficit Discourse about Chicanas/os. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 30, 1, 52-62.

Yosso, T. J. (2006). Why Use Critical Race Theory and Counterstorytelling to Analyze the Chicana/o Educational Pipeline? In *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline* (pp. 1-20). New York, NY: Routledge.