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## Berkeley Review of Education

### Title

Vulnerable Manhood: Collaborative Testimonios of Latino Male Faculty

### Permalink

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### Journal

Berkeley Review of Education, 6(1)

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### Publication Date

2016

### DOI

10.5070/B86110054

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# Vulnerable Manhood: Collaborative *Testimonios* of Latino Male Faculty

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## Abstract

*Drawing from Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, and Muñiz (2012), the authors of this article utilize dialogue partners to develop collaborative testimonios of Latino male faculty. We center the importance of engaging in vulnerability while embracing peer support to address issues of isolation, marginalization, and other challenges that Latino male faculty experience in higher education. We then develop and discuss the implications of a homebodied intellectual manhood, which we define as an identity that has emancipatory potential related to self-authorship, knowledge creation, negotiation of power in academia, and pursuit of social justice-oriented practices.*

*Keywords:* males of color, faculty, *testimonios*, higher education

*Situating knowledge in the brown body begins the validation of the narratives of survival, transformation, and emancipation of our respective communities, reclaiming histories and identities (Cruz, 2001, p. 668).*

For Latino males, school is often a site of alienation, trauma, and frustration without sufficient emotional support for grappling with these experiences (Camarrota, 2008; Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2012). For Latin@ faculty, the university can be a cold and unsupportive environment (Aguirre, 2000; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012). In some ways, this is not surprising considering that Urrieta, Méndez, and Rodríguez (2015) note that “of the overall number of U.S. faculty, Latina/o tenured faculty represent 1.48% of the total and Latina/o full professors account for a shameful 0.68% of all US faculty” (p. 2). Within this context, collaborative *testimonios* can serve as resources for intellectual, emotional, cultural, and spiritual support for Latino male faculty.

In this article, we model the use of *reflexiones* to inform testimonios (Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, & Muñiz, 2012) with dialogue partners who assist each other with expressing emotion, engaging pain and suffering, and collaborating in the healing process

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for Latino males in educational settings. By working as dialogue partners, we address three core prompts:

1. How do our identities as Latino males with working-class backgrounds impact our perspectives and experiences in the academy?
2. What does it mean to “belong” in the academy?
3. What are our perspectives on “selling out,” that is, sacrificing one’s integrity, core values, or identity to gain approval, popularity, or praise from others?

Via our collaborative testimonio approach, we seek to contribute to a more embodied, less individualistic, and more holistic set of narratives on achievement and success for males of color. To this end, we introduce the concept of *homebodied intellectual manhood* to describe the body as a site of knowledge that can provide a resource for critical, epistemic grounding. This process of engaging a vulnerable form of manhood seeks to contribute to current male of color scholarship that often frames “successful” Latino male bodies as routed for entry into higher education without attending to the emotions, pain, or various forms of irresolution they face.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

#### **Research on Latino and Working-Class Males in Education**

This article outlines a practical way by which Latino male faculty can share and unpack feelings and struggles, support one another, and ultimately develop strategies for empowerment. We both come from working-class communities, and thus our identities as Latinos are intertwined with our working-class and geographically based identities in ways that are revealed in our analysis and addressed in our theoretical framework.

In this article, we draw heavily from scholarship that focuses on males of color in education (Harper, 2009, 2013; Harper & Harris, 2010; Rios, 2011). Specifically, for Latino males, scholars have explored many issues, including but not limited to belonging at colleges and universities, punitive school and societal policies, the impact of caring educators and mentorship, and counter-school attitudes among low-income youth (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Foley, 1990; Noguera et al., 2012; Rios, 2011; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008). We draw in particular from assets-based accounts of Latino males in education. For example, Ríos Vega (2015) provides an account of how Latino teenage boys draw from their communities in additive and empowering ways to navigate the various systemic challenges and microaggressions that they face in North Carolina. Similarly, Pérez (2014) explored how high-achieving Latino male college students used *Community Cultural Wealth* (Yosso, 2005) to achieve academic success while also advocating for changes on their campuses. Yosso (2005) describes community cultural wealth as an assets-based approach that is grounded in how students of color often draw from six forms of capital (aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance) to navigate and excel in schools. Although important, this body of scholarship generally does not provide insight into a collaborative way by which Latino men can make sense of their journeys and ongoing struggles. Research on collaborative sense-making is needed because the academy is often set up to encourage isolation. Moreover, little is written about the pain of the “winners” and how academic success can in fact lead to ambivalent outcomes and feelings of loss (Carrillo, 2013a,

2013b). Indeed, ambivalence and feelings of loss have been central to our own experiences of being “winners.”

We also draw from research on “scholarship boys” (Carrillo, 2010, 2013a, 2013b; Hoggart, 1957; Rodriguez, 1982) that offers insights into emotions, fragmentation, and narratives of loss and inner-work. The term “scholarship boys” was first coined by Hoggart (1957) and later applied to Latino students by Richard Rodriguez (1982), most notably in his memoir, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Scholarship boys are working-class students who excel academically but experience many tensions related to their social-class mobility via their academic success, including strong feelings of nostalgia and a desire to go back to a working-class home. These feelings also serve as sources of knowledge that provide various clues about the role of schooling in one’s personal development and identity. The acknowledgement of the emotional life of scholarship boys is a central theoretical underpinning of our work. We are inspired by this work as we seek to be vulnerable in our writing and dialogues with each other in order to become attuned to our emotions and to learn about how we each deal with various tensions in our roles as faculty.

### **Emotion, Vulnerability, and Testimonios in Males of Color Research**

Referring to education research, Urrieta (2003) points out that “often, issues involving pain, contradiction, or anything that might involve self-criticism are avoided, left out, minimally and uncritically addressed, or simply ignored” (p. 149). Within research on Latino males in education, this is to deny a central part of the educative experience, given that there is a lot of interpersonal violence in schools, and school sometimes functions as a marginalizing and punitive “youth control complex” (Rios, 2011, p. xiv) for males of color from an early age. For working-class Latinos who continue into higher education, the classed, individualistic, and competitive culture of the academy can be highly alienating and leave them feeling isolated and marginalized (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012).

Testimonios (Beverly, 2000; Cervantes-Soon, 2012; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) allow oppressed groups to speak about their oppression, and they present a powerful strategy to combat the isolation and marginalization that Latino male faculty face in academia. Testimonios have roots in Latin America, often addressing indigenous and other forms of emancipatory struggles (Menchú, 1984; Poniatowska, 1971; Smith, 2012). They have also been used to center the agency and struggles of immigrant mothers (González, 2006) and to contest androcentric and Western forms of knowledge (Elenes, 2000). Further, Cervantes-Soon (2012) outlined the ways in which high school female students in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico used testimonios to make sense of their identities as they faced various systemic threats.

Writing about the experiences of Latino male faculty, Reddick and Sáenz (2012), powerfully reflect on their academic journeys and brotherhood as they made their way back “home” to the University of Texas at Austin as accomplished faculty members. Others have also highlighted the challenges that professors of color face within a competitive academic culture where they often encounter additional demands related to campus diversity issues that are generally not expected of their White peers. Taken together, these conditions often lead to exhaustion (Hernandez, Murakami-Ramallo, &

Rodriguez, 2015; Urrieta & Chávez Chávez, 2010). There is no scholarship that uses this collaborative testimonio model among Latino male faculty. In this article, we draw on the use of testimonios and reflexiones (Espino et al., 2012) to develop our own process of brotherhood, emancipation, and *critical hope* (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). According to Espino et al. (2012), reflexión is a process in which dialogue partners interpret each other's testimonios and develop a form of collective consciousness. Through our collaborative exchanges and reflections, we gather strength, mold our collective critical consciousness, and map out strategies for engaging in holistic growth.

Further, Chaplin, Cole, and Zahn-Waxler (2005) suggest that boys tend to be less emotionally expressive and less likely to be vulnerable as they develop. Much of this is due to the stigmatization of the expression of emotions by males. Additionally, research shows that adolescent boys want intimate friendships but have difficulty sustaining them over time (Way, 2011). We contend that even as "successful" Latino men, we also desire these types of bonds, and the intentional method of collaborative testimonios helps us to sustain and center vulnerability and dialogue in our roles as faculty of color in predominantly white institutions.

By partnering organically, we have spent the last three years contacting each other through texts, phone calls, emails, and even video games. We provide, through our documented reflexiones, a model of this method for others to use in their own growth process. Drawing from Saldívar's (1990) exploration of Chicano narrative, our collaborative testimonios

signify the imaginary ways in which historical men and women live out their lives in class society, and how the values, concepts, and ideas purveyed by the mainstream, hegemonic American culture that tie them to their social functions seek to prevent them from attaining a true knowledge of society as a whole (p. 6).

### **From Rational Achievers to a Homebodied Intellectual Manhood**

The aforementioned scholarship helped us develop the concept that guides this work, *Homebodied Intellectual Manhood*. Over the years, we were vulnerable with each other, supporting each other, and reflecting on the painful experiences related to being Latino male faculty. We often talked about our working-class roots in the south Bronx and the barrios of south Los Angeles, California. We accessed feelings of renewal and hope by looking back and sharing this information with each other. We hope to encourage scholars engaged in research on males of color in education to embrace narratives that are connected with the voices in our bodies. Homebodies (compilation of "home" and links to our bodies) are sites of knowledge and resources for social change and change of self that draw from our communities of origin. They embody attitudes and feelings that are based on stories, roots, and integrity around community memory, self-definition, and self-determination. This concept of homebodies is important because it empowers us to maintain our identities and our integrity as we navigate the academy, which is often a site of violence, erasure, and isolation.

The vulnerable side of the body and of emotion may provide critical information for maintaining a sense of well-being and a commitment to social justice goals (Carrillo, 2010). As Lock (1993) states, "The body, imbued with social meaning, is now

historically situated, and becomes not only a signifier of belonging and order, but also an active forum for the expression of dissent and loss, thus ascribing it individual agency” (p. 141). Moreover, we draw from Carrillo’s (2010) conceptualization of *home*, which he framed as a holistic navigational system. This notion of home is a physical and metaphorical form of embodiment that provides guidance (drawing from working-class and Latino roots) related to activism, academic success, self-authorship, community memory, and social justice. We did not leave our communities solely for “success” or to “make it”; we are additionally and inextricably tied to our goals related to social justice and paving the way for working-class students that may experience similar conditions.

The stories and lessons of our upbringing are imprinted in our souls; we carry them with us everywhere we go. Put simply, “we embody our theory” (Cruz, 2001, p. 668). Our working-class home continues to teach us about what it means to be a man, how to critically engage the world, how to deal with feelings of loss, and how to nurture our relationships. As such, homebodied masculinities are conducive to developing emotionally open intellectual manhoods. Moreover, developing an open, vulnerable, and agency-laden process of self-talk and reflexivity is important because as Rios (2009) points out, “one of the outcomes of pervasive criminal justice contact for young Black and Latino men is the production of a hypermasculinity that obstructs resistance and social mobility” (p. 151). As such, being attuned to the inner-self has the potential to inform manhood in ways that critique society and its many punitive structures while also providing knowledge that may lead to additive and emancipatory notions of masculinity.

Historically, dominant society has used its collective memory as a form of domination over subaltern groups (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004). Our embodied perspective related to our Latino, working-class home centers our power struggle with social memory and the agency we have to circulate our notions of our pasts and futures. Foucault’s (1977) work on technologies of power also helps us understand how academia often forces docility by surveilling the body, so that we are forced to serve in ways that adhere to dominant discourse structures, arrangements, and notions of common sense.

Our bodily knowledge that often comes from our working-class roots has “lower/outsider” status and often alarms the dominant university culture when it is enacted or performed. Our demands or expectations, for instance, may be perceived as activist (framed within a negative, non-intellectual gaze), naïve, wrong, or misinformed. Additionally, Wacquant’s (2014) argument that we need to move from a sociology of the body to a sociology from the body—one that situates that body as an active space that constructs knowledge, power, and practice—also informs our notions of homebodied intellectual manhood. The body is a site of desire, reflexivity, hope, and commitment. As Latino male faculty, we find hope, power, and often pain through our ongoing authoring within various sites of contestation.

Finally, homebodied identities (a) acknowledge the role of emotions and knowledge as embodied and placed, (b) center the agency of the authors, and (c) emphasize how home and the body are connected and travel together. This is akin to Bourdieu’s (1984) *habitus*, which consists of dispositions created via interplays with our social worlds. Yet, unlike *habitus*, our notion of homebodied intellectual manhood is premised on a conscious process of identity-making. This entails participation in critical forms of reflection and decision-making that are flexible, contradictory, and liberating. It also

entails consistently naming who we are becoming and why and how this process occurs. Although we acknowledge that we are constrained by both past and present structures, we also engage the power of the narrating process by thinking, writing, and taking action to change structures, ourselves, past beliefs, and current conditions. Our collaborative form of testimonios, as discussed in this piece, is one such conscious process of constructing specific bodily and intellectual acts.

### **Methods**

In the spring of 2013, the authors met during a guest lecture that was given by Juan F. Carrillo at Duke University at the invitation of Jason Mendez, former director of the Program in Education at Duke University. The authors felt a sense of connection immediately. We related over music, our working-class backgrounds rooted in the South Bronx and the barrios of South Los Angeles, and our experiences in the academy. Soon after this event, we went out with our families to eat Indian food and began to exchange ideas about how we could collaborate. Our friendship continued and we gathered periodically at restaurants that were showing games that we both were interested in watching. We engaged in occasional trash talk related to the New York Knicks vs. the Los Angeles Lakers and the Jets vs. the Raiders, and we exchanged thoughts on Hip Hop.

These exchanges became more frequent over time. It was refreshing not to have to embody the tiring, all-encompassing, traditional notion of what it means to be a professional. We were connecting outside of our performances as professionals. Over time, we formed a stress-relieving rivalry by playing NCAA football on PlayStation 3 after our children went to bed. This was not the kind of relationship we expected, as two people who met at Duke University, but it provided us with the space to have lives beyond journal articles and the expansion of our *curricula vitae*. At the same time, the connections we built outside of our professional worlds influenced our experiences within it. Some of our conversations were just about sports, but other conversations were about how to navigate and change Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and how to connect our activism to the expectations of our jobs. This South Bronx–South Los Angeles connection, a “ghetto brotherhood” in a sense, illuminated how we could build agency, empowerment, and family by locating our passions, interests, humor, and vulnerabilities on our own terms.

We have found that discourses around “boys don’t cry” (Shamir & Travis, 2002) and clean articles about youth of color who “make it” are digestible but do not resonate with our experiences. Therefore, we used reflexión and collaborative testimonios as an extension of this type of approach. However, rather than treating agency as a tool for bounded assimilation, we used our stories to investigate how we exercise agency when we code-switch and navigate multiple cultural worlds. Additionally, instead of presenting clean stories about making it, we started from our own vulnerability, which became a powerful source of strength and knowledge. Our process of reflexión and collaborative testimonios ultimately led to our theorization around homebodied intellectual manhood.

Our process began with an exchange of verbal reflexiones related to our roles, sources of happiness, and frustrations in the academy over approximately two years. Our reflexiones occurred in several formats and venues, including via phone, email and text, and in person at social and academic venues. Ultimately, we decided to write testimonios

about some of the consistent themes that emerged from these reflexiones. We created three core questions:

1. How do our identities as Latino males with working-class roots impact our perspectives and experiences in the academy?
2. What does it mean to belong in the academy?
3. What are our perspectives on not selling out?

Each of us wrote testimonios that answered these questions, and then responded to what the other wrote. After reading each other's testimonios, we coded the data using a two-phase process called open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). During the open coding phase, we were open to various possible lines of inquiry. In this part of the coding process, we realized that we believed strongly in bringing our classed and multifaceted (e.g., race, gender, region in terms of upbringing) identities as Latino males from working-class origins into the academy. Eventually, we moved into a focused coding phase. In focused coding, we moved from open, more general coding to identifying key themes that derived from the data. Specifically, the focused coding stage elucidated three themes: (a) roots and identity, (b) finding our place, and (c) "outsider" status.

### **Collaborative Testimonios**

We drew primarily from Espino et al.'s (2012) testimonio method, which emphasizes *reflexion*, a process by which individuals engage in inner work that subsequently informs their testimonios. As Espino et al. explain, "*reflexion* entails an examination of the inner self and sharing that inner self with a trusted dialogue partner" (p. 445). The dialogue partner then provides self-reflections related to a given testimonio. In Espino et al., the writers and dialogue partners included professors, a higher education administrator, a graduate student, and a recent doctoral graduate (all of whom were Latinas). This collaborative form of writing and sharing testimonios resonated with our method for sharing with and supporting each other. For many years, we reflected together on our working-class origins and concerns about working in the academy. These reflections and concerns arose in our writing and our face-to-face meetings. Here, although we drew from Espino et al., we did not reproduce their exact structure; whereas Espino et al. had a large group of dialogue partners, we only had each other.

We also engaged in discussions and readings about other relevant work on testimonios in education (e.g., Burciaga, Delgado Bernal, & Flores Carmona, 2012; Cervantes-Soon, 2012; Prieto & Villenas, 2012) so that we could properly situate this work within the literature. Our discussions and readings also guided our development of collaborative testimonios that could be both personally healing and theoretically useful. Our identities are deeply rooted in the languages of strategic resistance, holistic manhood, and struggle within the larger architecture of discipline, marginalization, and displacement. We also used this testimonio approach to recapture stories, emotions, and a sense of community, which are often silenced by the cultural expectations of the academy. Finally, echoing Flores and Garcia (2014), "our testimonios have allowed us to move beyond speaking from the voice of the singular" (p. 156). We excavate our community memory in our writing and solidify our brotherhood, one in which we collaborate in becoming men both inside and outside of the academy. Vulnerability is at



the center of our writing and our ethic of self-care. Thus, below, we offer brief portraits of the authors before presenting our testimonios.

### **Brief Portraits**

Juan F. Carrillo is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He is also the founder and director of the UNC Chapel Hill Latin@ Education Research Hub (LERH). Carrillo is a Chicano, and was born and raised on welfare in the barrios of South Los Angeles, California. He earned a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Texas at Austin, with a concentration in Cultural Studies in Education and a Mexican American Studies Graduate Portfolio. His parents are Mexican immigrants and earned a third-grade education in the state of Sinaloa. He is a first-generation college graduate and his scholarship is situated within areas of cultural studies in education, the identities of academically successful Latino males, and schooling and identity in the New Latin@ South.

Jason Mendez currently teaches at University of Pittsburgh and is a faculty fellow in their Center for Urban Education. He is also a recent recipient of the Penn Avenue Creative Fellowship. He received his Ph.D. in Education with an emphasis in Curriculum, Culture, and Change from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill School of Education. Mendez's scholarly interests include urban education, Latin@ studies with an emphasis on Puerto Rican identities and experiences, critical race studies, cultural studies in education, arts as social justice, critical pedagogy, and qualitative research. Particular foci of his work are counter narratives, post-critical ethnography, and narrative theory. Jason is a native of the South Bronx.

### **Testimonios: Juan F. Carrillo and Jason Mendez**

In this section, we share our testimonios, including our original answers to the three questions outlined in the Methods section, and our responses to each other's answers. We aimed for stream of consciousness, a type of vulnerable writing that bears witness to our struggles, our hopes, and the systemic obstacles and contradictions within our journeys. We open our souls.

#### **Prompt 1**

How do our identities as Latino males with working-class roots impact our perspectives and experiences in the academy?

*Juan F. Carrillo*

I was raised on welfare and born in a county hospital in Los Angeles, CA. I come from a place where we hid in the backseat of a car to get into the drive-in movies. My father would cover us up with sheets. Everything seemed to be an outsider thing. In that place of marginalization, I got a sense of thick emotion, raw dimensions of humanity and inequities in society. I was not prepared for the college life in any competitive sense. In fact, to go back a bit, my first day of college at the University of Michigan was surreal. I looked under my desk for books. I had no idea I had to buy books. After I figured that

out, I went over to the student union and signed up for a Visa card, got a free shirt, debt, and my books. That was freshmen year in the 1990s. Going from a 1br duplex in Compton, CA, to Harry Potter buildings at the U of M was really, really messing with me back then. It was so quiet and I was entering, for the first time, the “establishment.”

This past Christmas it all kind of came back. I visited my father and he was there, on the ground, dealing with a two-week drinking binge. We did not have one solid conversation for the 7 days I was there. To him, I am not a doctor; I am someone who can get him another beer. I am the son that left.

As a Latino male scholar in a hyper-competitive and sanitized university world, I see my father on the ground asking for one more beer as I try to get on Google Scholar to find another article. He is sobbing, talking to ghosts. I am a ghost too. I buy into narratives of achievement. I am inside, yet fractured and negotiating where the pillow really is [where home really is]. But that is the thing, in gaining something, we have loss; we have ongoing ambivalence and incomplete sentences. I have people inviting me to social justice meetings at Whole Foods while so many families are no different than my own—they can't afford organic paper towels. All of this carries over to my teaching, to my scholarship. I don't like the clean story. I don't like linear and polished. I actually don't like sitting in my office. What I have is a set of contradictions and conflicts that narrate my desire for some utopia, some larger, more critical and transparent vision of becoming. It's not easy, there are layers and layers of history. I've also long tried to be vulnerable in my writing; I just don't know any other way. Some people always put the writing into theoretical frameworks. I think the source is more stream of consciousness. I think it is interesting that the academy wants me to be thankful. Grateful. We've made it. We have not made it. We just moved somewhere else. People were let down for the sake of my being here. Birthdays were missed. And then we are evaluated by many people who never had to sleep on the floor or deal with drive-by shootings. So power feels tragicomic sometimes, too funny and surreal in its real obsession with decontextualization. The power stick is used by entities that kept all your cousins out of where we are.

I smuggled my *trinkets* into the establishment  
I don't need papers for that  
I guess I smuggle with a credible birth certificate  
I immigrate  
In  
Here  
Playing the songs I know  
As people say: *actually, this is the song you should play*  
And I bring those AM/PM gas station hamburgers  
Into the fancy dinner where we recruit new faculty  
I get to eat  
And remember the old and new worlds, mingling, conflicting, burping  
Laughing at each other  
Perhaps  
I know

The joke  
 Could be on me  
 As I look for stray cats from the barrio to teach me about  
 How to get home  
 Did I stray too far?  
 Cats never ask for directions  
 And Sea Turtles go home too

*Jason Mendez*

Broken glass everywhere  
 People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care  
 I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise  
 Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice (Mel, 1982)

My dad and I driving around the South Bronx in his souped-up 1983 Nissan Datsun blasting Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five's classic "the Message" is how I wish to remember him. It seems fitting to write this section on what would have been his 58th birthday. It has been six years since he passed from a battle with brain cancer. I can still remember vividly that Sunday night watching TV as my wife came down the stairs with a troubled look on her face. I asked, "What's wrong?" "Your dad passed away," she replied. The months leading up to Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009, were extremely difficult. My father's health deteriorated at such a fast pace. In a matter of weeks, we went from watching Miguel Cotto beat Joshua Clottey in Madison Square Garden to watching the Yankees play the Red Sox in an assisted living facility, as he lay in a wheelchair incapable of walking, speaking, feeding himself, using the restroom, etc.

Although my last moments with my dad were with him lying in a wheelchair (still with a Yankee fitted cap on), it's the boxing-loving, music-blasting, diddy-bopping, Bronx Boricua I will talk about with the three grandchildren who will never get to know him as I did.

For four years, my dad loaded up the car and drove to Mount Olive, North Carolina, to drop me off for undergrad. As he walked back to his car for the return trip, he would turn around and say, "Do good in school" or "Study hard." He was never good with words, but his cliché attempts to articulate the obligatory "fatherly" words of wisdom meant more than any eloquent inspirational prose. He tried and I was happy with that. My dad, a hard-working working-class guy who would take the number 6 train from Hunts Point to his plumbing job in the city (Manhattan) wanted me to achieve more than he was able to. He, like many of the Boricuas on the block, personified Pedro Pietri's (1974) *Puerto Rican Obituary*:

They worked  
 They were always on time  
 They were never late  
 They never spoke back  
 when they were insulted

They worked  
They never took days off  
that were not on the calendar  
They never went on strike  
without permission  
They worked  
ten days a week  
and were only paid for five

I, like my father, am not just from the South Bronx; I am the South Bronx. During the commencement ceremony for my doctoral program, I walked across the stage to receive my PhD wearing a Yankees cap. It was not to represent the baseball team I supported, but to signify that I came into the academy South Bronx and I am still South Bronx. My dad, no matter where he moved, never lost connection to home. As a professor, I continue to rock that Yankees fitted. As I navigate the academy, an institution deeply rooted in systemic white supremacy, I, as a South Bronx Boricua, wrestle with maintaining my commitments to home and success in the academy. Compromise is not an option. I must win!

### **Responses to Each Other's Prompt 1 Testimonios**

*Juan F. Carrillo*

Jason, I see the power of roots in your testimonio and the role of movement as you fight to claim/remember the struggle. Your father reminds me of my own. I feel like I am in the backseat of the car as he is dropping you off at college. My pops went to the bus station with me and we got on a bus and slept in a tiny dorm bed. I can't remember the artist or song name, but it said something like "what is not wanted is killed." It may have been about abortion, but it reminds me that we were babies, raised in sacred wombs and nurtured in places that are informing us forever: our ethics, our relationships, our approaches to our teaching, our sense of ourselves. Our pain, our glory, our hopes ... they go back first, not forward, for important information. And that is why home matters; it is the holistic GPS. In the academy, your Yankees hat is an artifact that can be explained rationally. For you, it is soul, alma. It leads to the graffiti, food, dichos, history, legacy, music, that sound, that feeling, it's embodied. My favorite students wear "hats" like that—they spit from a place I can identify—I smell the sewers and I see candles lighting up their source. It feels "genuine." You are right; compromise is not an option. I thank you for sharing your thread of connection. We will do this, two homeboys so far from home, yet we know home is here, inside; we carry the water with reflections of our fathers and abuelitas. We will never shortchange them or us.

*Jason Mendez*

So don't you forget (no way) your youth,  
Who you are and where you stand in the struggle (Marley, 1977)

Juan, speaking of water, I remember the first time I met you. It was about two years ago when I invited you to give a talk at an event I hosted. During your talk, “I can’t sell out: Mexican-Origin Scholarship Boys and the Politics of *Home*,” you told this story about the time your dad took you to a Beverly Hills-area neighborhood for an orientation party for incoming freshmen. You said your dad’s old Ford Fairmont overheated in front of the huge house where the party was happening. You, in your baggy pants and bright colored shirt, and your dad used some random *manguera* [water hose] to cool off the radiator. I can picture that whole scenario, two Latinos in this ritzy Beverly Hills neighborhood looking out of place. Similar to us in the academy, but that’s beside the point. The point is that our dads did what they could to get us to where we need to be. Sometimes I wonder: If they had known what we have experienced, would that have changed their efforts? I am not sure about your spiritual beliefs, but I think a higher power crosses our paths with certain people who we need to help sustain our dreams and commitments. Take us for example, this Chicano from L.A. becoming friends with this Boricua from the South Bronx, all taking place down south. I know we are friends and colleagues, but I see you as a mentor as well. Your commitments as an educator, husband, dad, and intellectual reinvigorate my spirit. I have gone through so much bullshit in the academy that some days I just want to walk away. However, this testimonio is not about my experience; it is about my curiosity regarding yours. What made you want to play this game? What drives you? Whose voices do you lean on during those times when you doubt your agency? Where did your voice come from?

### **Prompt 2**

What does it mean to belong in the academy?

*Juan F. Carrillo*

I often notice how comfortable White scholars are in these spaces. They have held on to the design of it all, or most of it. So, I get advice, about how to act, how to navigate. But why do I have to navigate? What does that tell me? It signals, in part, the outsider status of my family, of my community, of my historia. First, 3rd-year review, then tenure, then more and more stuff that seems so disconnected from those early morning conversations with my parents over chorizo and coffee. It feels sometimes overwhelming, even sad. I have no insecurity about what I bring to the table. I have a larger, almost idealistic and innocent pain around what could have been—or what could be. I am a Latino man, surrounded with rituals that try to narrate my disappearance, my silence. Recently, I attended a faculty dinner for a prospective candidate for a position at my university. When everyone started talking about food trucks owned by hipsters in the area, I began to see the faces of the Latino-owned loncheras in Los Angeles, the brown folk struggling to keep food on the table, selling food to factory workers like my father. I see the role of class and race, the role of Columbusing, and how we are often token people (there can’t be as many as them, you know) whose work and cultural goods are appropriated by those we exclude from working here in larger numbers. There is just that weird internal self-dialogue, that questioning of what some of my colleagues may see as “normal” or “right.”

But what does it mean to belong? And who should have to adjust and why? I have students of color that bring these issues up in my office. Some are in their 20s, some could be my parents! When I go to Mexico to spend time with family, it is as though I get a reprieve from all this. I even had to move to Mexico for a few months during a faculty leave opportunity to catch my breath and reconnect. This is, of course, a great privilege that not many have. Yet, when I get back, these issues come to the fore right away.

In end, I have little to say about being constantly comfortable. It's actually the opposite, it's about navigating irresolution in alleys. I walk inside of and in between stories and in many ways, as I walk, I belong ... even if it hurts.

*Jason Mendez*

As a graduate student transitioning into the professoriate, I didn't think the notion of "belonging" would be as prominent a factor in my experience as it was as a student. Even dating back to high school, classmates were in shock that I, a Puerto Rican from the South Bronx, received scholarships for college that had nothing to do with athletics. In undergrad, a fellow student asked, "When did you come to this country?" When inquiring about a doctoral program, the chair asked, "What are you? Oh, we don't have any Puerto Rican students." As a doctoral student, a professor once asked, "Where are you from? You can teach the section on immigration in my course."

Seven years ago, when I began my career as a professor, I thought those moments of having to validate my place were over. Given the low numbers of Latina/o faculty across academia, I assumed that my value would extend beyond a diversity statistic. Although much needed, I struggled for a long time to feel a sense of belonging or wanting. This feeling of "belonging" is complicated. Some days I want nothing to do with academia and other days I love my time here. A large part of my wave of emotions has to do with the students. I have certain students who see me, a South Bronx Boricua, as an example of the possibilities of what they may become. Other students I have to win over. I have to spend the first weeks of class performing smartness to appease their apprehension of having a young urban faculty of color. It's like a never-ending series of job talks to demonstrate I am qualified to teach them.

From program completion requirements to daily micro and macro aggressive bullshit I have had to experience, I "earned my spot, nobody ain't put me here" (Philips, 2001). For me, the question of whether the academy wants me in here is far more important than whether or not I belong in the academy. However, it is difficult to meaningfully explore that question because I immediately get labeled as "pulling the race card" or being the angry person of color. Why must I continue to perform to prove that I belong? Doesn't my PhD legitimize my position in the academy? I mean I didn't buy that shit online. I completed a real doctoral program at a top university, I attended real courses, I did real research, I completed a real dissertation, and I even defended it with a real committee comprised of real faculty. I am fed up with having to authenticate myself simply because I do not look the part of an "intellectual." For too long I became comfortable with being uncomfortable. ¡Ya Basta!

## Responses to Each Other's Prompt 2 Testimonios

*Juan F. Carrillo*

Jason, I can definitely connect with your take on the academy and belonging. I know that you, that is, all of you, is othered and you have to deal with all sorts of trauma. This is both tragic and painful. It is, as you mentioned, also inspiring for you to be in there. Some students hold on to what you are, why you are who you are, and in your struggle they position their own trajectories and hopes. That is a real damn shame, though, in some ways, all the unnecessary loss of joy and even health. The stress can be overwhelming. You don't look the part because the establishment pushed out your brothers and sisters from being side by side with you. I struggle with all this as well. You are needed in this space in some ways, but at what costs? I am thankful for my little son. I see him in the swimming pool and it all makes more sense, the politics and distress in the academy gets pushed aside.

I think what is kind of sick, too, is that there is a web of incoherence. Some folk we thought should know better also get "caught up." These spider webs are no joke. They create value rubrics, place them on us, and expect everyone to obey. Obey or get treated as not good enough. Theory is helpful but the body knows more than theory; it's constantly "feeling" this out, healing and clashing with the toxic issues of marginalization.

I thank you for sharing this and I am also hopeful that our bond will continue to school us on how to be present on our own terms.

*Jason Mendez*

Juan, I'm sitting in the middle of a crowded café trying to draft a response to your prompt. It's an interesting paradox trying to articulate my feelings about belonging in a place where I don't feel I belong. I don't drink Iced Caramel Lattes or eat Asiago Steak Paninis. I used to write in Chinese take-out joints. The smell of pork fried rice and rib tips got my creative mojo going. This reminds me of my first class during my doctoral studies. I had just finished my MA at a HBCU [historically Black college/university] and now was working on my PhD at a PWI. The professor brought some snacks for the class: smoked salmon, sushi, nuts and grains, and bottled waters. I immediately felt out of place.

I never felt I did not belong until I entered White spaces. When I started working on my MA at a HBCU with my mentor, Dr. James E. Osler II, his first words to me were, "I read your transcripts. You are a phenomenal student." Up until that moment, I doubted if I could be successful in graduate school, but his words made me feel I belonged. This was a stark contrast to my doctoral program experience. I went from seeing 2-3 white people in the entire School of Education to now representing the entire Latino demographic. In my classes, I was silent. I hated talking in class because it always felt like a performance of smartness. What you have read. Who you can quote. The theories you can pull from. People dropping words like "recapitulate" or phrases like "This book is a quick read." No the hell it's not. I need time. I need help to understand. But I blamed

myself for not being smart enough and lagging behind. I allowed others' smartness to define my own. I struggled for so long. Still do.

When I met you we connected because we were not in a competition to outdo each other as Latino scholars. We supported one another's work. Although you represented that LA life, you reminded me of the South Bronx. You were like one of my boys from the block where we would sit on the corner of Manida and Spoffard and talk about anything and everything over a bag of chips and quarter water.

Our smart phones were a virtual corner. I could text you about work, sports, or life and not worry about the intellectual persona most academics are consumed with. You reminded me that I belong. I needed that. I was in a toxic university environment that treated me as invisible. I needed someone to see *me*.

### **Prompt 3**

What are your perspectives on not selling out?

*Juan F. Carrillo*

For me, not selling out as a professor is situated within a lot of microaggressions and comments that I have heard around me. It was brought to my attention that a colleague once told a student that she should not cite too many Latin@ scholars because she may unfortunately be framed as a Latina scholar. This was said in a way that was framed as a demeaning identity that she needs to avoid. Also, I felt the tension when a faculty member said something about ESL being the most important issue in education and another professor saying something along the lines of, "Most important to you." Then, I also recall a comment by a faculty member at my university who said that Latin@s need to publish in real journals, and not just "ethnic ones." Here I am, an assistant professor, the only Latino male at the time, taking this in. I'm Chicano. I am proud of it. I am not going to apologize for bringing that into my scholarly identity and making that lens the universal for me. Some Whites may have their notion of the universal, what they consider to be real journals and what counts as merit and truth. But I also have mine. Sometimes we connect and agree; sometimes we do not. A lot of this really stings and sometimes keeps me up at night. Our brotherhood has helped me make sense of all this. I am also grateful that my dean has pretty much told me to keep speaking truth to power and to narrate my own journey; he has my back. So that helps. But I also have the kinship of the word. I read the work of scholars I admire and I am reminded what this is all about. It's easy to sink into a dark place. When we talk, I get back the face, the face I recognize from the Polaroids of my childhood in the barrios of Los Angeles. I like that face. I want to keep most of that. That innocence, love, passion, clarity, and even that melancholy. When we talk, I am reminded of my tíos and tías who were not part of the coffee shop, techy, gig economy. They wore uniforms, with their names on them. Minimum wage. Factory work. Assembly line. They came back to the house after a long shift. Also, now that I am stepping into a director role for a new Latin@ education research hub at my university, I have another way to remain committed to not moving away from my core values, questions, and commitments. I do not want to turn my back on my tíos and tías.



You know, that essence that I am proud of. What about you, Jason? What can you tell me about this issue?

*Jason Mendez*

*Can I help you?*

*I'm fine. Thank you for asking.*

*Can I help you?*

*No. I'm good. Thanks for asking.*

*Are you a student?*

This was not the first time I have had this interaction. Years ago, I went through this same line of questioning with the same White woman in the same faculty and staff lounge. Her intentions were never to help. She wanted to verify if I *belonged* in this particular space. Her passive aggressive interrogation was an attempt to surveil my body in a space she considered exclusive. In my eyes, this was a microaggression. However, some folks who I shared this experience with or even witnessed the interaction believe it to be a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding that could have been avoided if I simply would have shown my “papers.”

But I refused.

I knew what was happening from the jump and resisted the subjection of myself to this woman’s false sense of authority. (Ironically, she is the staff support person for my courses.) However, whitesplaining argues that I perpetuated the incident (pulling the race card); I was trying to entrap this woman, and I need to get the chip off my shoulder. I’ve been told on many occasions that people assume I am a student because I look young and that I should think of it as a compliment. My response is that if being profiled as a student is a compliment then why does it feel so shitty? The problem is she never profiled me as being a student. She profiled me as being a body at the bottom of some sort of university caste system. A body over which she felt she could exert power and discipline.

As I reflect on this experience, I am reminded of Pedro Pietri’s (1974) *Puerto Rican Obituary*:

They died broke  
They died owing  
They died never knowing  
what the front entrance  
of the first national city bank looks like

The academy is an exclusive place, and many Boricuas have died never knowing what it looks like inside. But moments like this quickly remind me that, although I have earned the right to be inside, I will always have to prove I belong.

I could have just given in to this woman's interrogation, but this was bigger than the faculty lounge. Instead, I chose to explicitly name what was transpiring. Remaining silent would have been to sell out. I think of selling out as the moment I become comfortable being subjugated. Selling out is when I not only believe the whitesplaining but begin to do it myself. Selling out would be forgetting "who you are and where you stand in the struggle" (Marley, 1977).

Never that.

Turn my voice up!

### **Responses to Each Other's Prompt 3 Testimonios**

*Juan F. Carrillo*

Your experiences reminded me of getting on an airplane for the first time at age 18. I was scared to death. I left the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, on my way to see my parents who had just moved to Phoenix, AZ. It was the Christmas holiday. A Spanish linguist sat next me and talked to me about his "postdoc." At the time, I had no idea what he was talking about and had no clues about one day becoming a professor. I was a kid. The fear that I felt on that plane made me realize something surreal about the road I had started. I was craving a look into my father's hand—the wrinkles, and the manual labor was there. I wanted the smell of the cookout, Mexican style. My grandma was in those hands, my struggle was there. I left the airport recently. Round trip flight. I got home (I think), I accepted the travel, the journey—knowing I would "get back." I run into my home and I do not check the mail for 8 days. Silence. Meditate. What would Charles Dickens say? The lady that approached you had the chance to engage the wrinkles in your hands. Memory, place, and the road you have traveled. But no, the sheriff policed the body that was not like hers. It's sick out there. You know that. I know that. It's also, at times, many times, via our students, liberating. The poetry and vulnerability that you share is the light of hope for me. It's Church. Thank you. It's Sunday—where do you go after these incidents? Where is Church for you? Maybe this is part of it. Writing. I do wonder what happens to you right after these things happen. How do you engage your family, your community, and yourself after this type of stress? I also wonder if every faculty member of color needs to have a mindfulness coach, a therapist—paid for by the university. Adults. Adults are doing this. The puzzling dynamic of it all. Adults ... should know better—but that would be too simple, too dehistoricized and naïve. We are here, Jason. It's a weekend. I am going to stop writing so that I can take my kids to the park. Bring your kids. Let's go look at the train and have our children get on it. They will wave at us as they go in a circle around the park. Let the river bring on the kayaking stuff. Let the butterflies respect the sky. I am not going to eat seeds in a zip-lock bag and run 5 miles. I am going to get you and me an In 'N Out Burger. You want a coke with that? I am going to hug my wife. She is about to wake up. Love, outside the cult is just fine.

See you at 11:00 a.m. near the north parking lot and tell that lady that you also go to the park and “stuff” like that.

*Jason Mendez*

Reading about your traumatic experiences in the academy forces me to relive my own.

I can't though. Too much hurt.

The mental and emotional violence we constantly experience is too much to bear. Writing with you is bittersweet. I love when our stories intersect, but I am also reminded of a place that sucked the life and integrity out of my work. That's why I am leaving. That's why I want you to eventually leave. We know far too many faculty of color with health issues because of the stress associated with trying to be a successful professor. It's not worth it. I didn't get a PhD for this shit. I now deal with PTSD because of the institutional racism and microaggressions I have encountered. I get nervous for you. I don't want you to get sucked into the game. When I read about you not being able to sleep I think about Emi and Natalia. I know you do it for them. I do it for my seeds. It's part of being a revolutionary parent. I also think about my past students, especially my Latin@ students, and I know I must continue being in this violent place for them. Your Latin@ Education Research Hub (LERH) is very Freiran. I am excited to be a part. Anything about liberation I will stand for and with. LERH is basically a space to establish our own set of rules. Remember LEHR decenters whiteness and will make your colleagues extremely uncomfortable. Now let's see if those supporters will remain. An old professor once too told me I'm too South Bronx for the academy. I say the same for you. You are too EL-Lay for the academy. Our commitments to community, especially to those we consider home, are far more valuable than any mainstream success.

### **Analysis**

As previously stated in the Methods section, our open and focused coding process of data analysis resulted in the development of three key themes. In this section, we analyze the themes that emerged from our testimonios: (1) roots and identity, (2) finding our place, and (3) “outsider” status.

### **Roots and Identity**

Our working-class roots in the South Bronx and barrios in South Los Angeles inform our identities in the academy. By reflecting on our stories, we gain strength and gather information to help us navigate the academy. We often share memories of our youth with each other to honor our families and learn from the lessons that were nurtured in our communities of origin. In fact, our working-class homes serve as a life orientation compass that provides information for necessary action and helps us to critique myths and social constructions that injure our souls (Carrillo, 2010, 2013b). Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), in a letter to his son, makes a similar argument by articulating the role of family

history, roots, and the knowledge that comes from this resource in critically examining the present:

This must seem strange to you. We live in a “goal-oriented” era. Our media vocabulary is full of hot takes, big ideas, and grand theories of everything. But some time ago I rejected magic in all its forms. This rejection was a gift from your grandparents, who never tried to console me with ideas of an afterlife and were skeptical of preordained American glory. In accepting both the chaos of history and the fact of my total end, I was freed to truly consider how I wish to live... (p. 12)

The process of writing our testimonios provided us with a space for interrogation, a space to be heard, and a space for mutual support, while also moving our aims beyond survival and towards actionable opportunities for healing, growth, and empowerment.

### **Finding Our Place**

What does it mean to belong in the academy? We are still working through this dilemma. The competitive and individualistic aspects of the academy push us to search, together, for other ways to exist in and interact with a cultural space that often feels toxic and alienating. Moreover, as Osajima (2009) indicated, faculty of color are quite few and separated across units at many universities. This context limits opportunities for faculty of color, including those in our own universities, to share similar stories and experiences. Nonetheless, we have used tools, such as smartphones, to connect and engage in holistic discussions around the issues that we face.

For us, the issue of finding comfort in the uncomfortable within the academy is an area of debate. Jason is burned out by the approach of intellectualizing discomfort, whereas Juan is curious about the very ways in which discomfort has become the space in which he exists at work. Discomfort has led to health concerns due to stress and anxiety. This is an issue examined in Urrieta’s (2009) description of Chican@ activist educators who fight against selling out and are strategic in “playing the game” that is often subtractive and toxic. In our ongoing communication, we name our struggles, find our place, and share our strategies for opening up possibilities for change in the academy and in ourselves.

### **“Outsider” Status**

In the academy, we face tensions around how to fit in and simultaneously speak out about the oppressive conditions that we often experience. We stand out, and as Jason reminds us, we are asked for our “papers.” This notion of constantly having to provide visual documentation to justify our presence in the academy is a powerful lens. As academically successful Latino males, we have had to meet the requirements of Whiteman institutions to obtain academic papers, such as maintaining high grades. Yet, our bodies continue to be suspicious, and today our curriculum vitae must continually demonstrate that we are doing what “they” say we should be doing.

Juan also struggles in his work life, where publishing in journals that are ascribed as being too “ethnic” is often viewed as less prestigious. Moreover, Juan refuses to sell out

and instead continues to pursue his passions, commitments, and interests related to Latin@ education. He does not compromise his values in his work. Fortunately, Juan has found allies within his role as professor, and he plans to continue his work through a research center that he is developing and directing at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

## **Conclusion**

### **Implications for the Role of Homebodied Intellectual Manhood**

Our testimonios have allowed us to explore the role of home and the body in narrating and unmasking our notions of success and wholeness. We believe that homebodied forms of manhood engage vulnerability in ways that serve as a resource for growth and reflection, support our commitment to social justice, and offer us tools for addressing the multitude of challenges we face in academia. Our centering of vulnerability and home takes place in our bodies as we name and act on the suffering that we experience. As Latino male faculty continue to face various stressors in academia, a homebodied intellectual manhood approach is one way to be honest, lucid, in community, and critically hopeful about how to face various forms of violence. Similar collaborations can happen within a campus or, as was often our case, by leveraging technology across state lines. University leadership can help by supporting these organic bonds in ways that Latino male faculty see fit, instead of shaping the boundaries of diversity training and assistance. In other words, it is important that administrators listen to and act on the needs of Latino male faculty so that their desired ecosystems of work, identity, and full cultural selves can develop and flourish.

Finally, our experience with collaborative testimonios highlights the power of stories and collaborative support systems. Centering vulnerability has been integral to this work, which for us entails using community memory and *reflexión* to make sense of the conditions that impact our daily lives. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that our stories are shaped by systemic conditions that also need to change. As such, we concur with Noguera, Hurtado, and Fergus (2011) that “policy interventions should be designed to construct environments that benefit multiple constituencies” (p. 4). Systemic change is necessary so that faculty of color can enjoy more fulfilling and less isolating experiences in their work lives.

In the end, we share our testimonios as an act of love and solidarity. Baldwin (1985) reminds us that:

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word ‘love’ here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth (p. 375).

We hope that this article is one small step towards this type of love, daring, and growth within scholarship that focuses on men of color, and more specifically, Latino male faculty. Sometimes we do not afford (or have) enough time and space to determine

what is happening to us. Internal dialogues often get stuck inside ourselves, leading to anxiety and other health issues. As faculty and scholars of education, as well as writers who are moved by the healing potential of words, we conclude with Roberto Bolaño's (2008) message that we are not academic machines but vulnerable human beings with sensibilities and questions about the places in which we work and the kind of people we are becoming:

You asked what was happening  
and I didn't tell you we were on death's program  
but instead that we were going on a journey,  
one more, together, and that you shouldn't be afraid.  
When it left, death didn't even  
close our eyes.  
What are we? You asked a week or year later,  
ants, bees, wrong numbers  
in the big rotten soup of chance?  
We're human beings, my son, almost birds,  
public heroes and secrets. (p. 64)

#### Author Biography

**Juan F. Carrillo** is an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill School of Education and he is a Global Studies affiliate faculty. He earned a PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, with a concentration in Cultural Studies in Education, and a Mexican American Studies graduate portfolio at the University of Texas at Austin. His primary academic home is within the Cultural Studies and Literacies program at UNC Chapel Hill. His research focuses on Latin@/x education, the identities of academically successful Latino males, and the schooling experiences of Latin@s in the new south.

**Jason Mendez** is an educator, author, and interdisciplinary theater artist. He received his Ph.D. in Education with an emphasis in Curriculum, Culture, and Change and a Graduate Certificate in Cultural Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His interests include urban education, social foundations of education, critical race studies, cultural studies, arts as social justice, Boricua identities, and South Bronx culture and history. His scholarly work focuses on males of color and traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations in postsecondary education. Jason is also the co-founder of Sons of the Boogie, an arts-based company dedicated to South Bronx art, history, and culture.

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