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Piloting the Counter-Memorias Digital Testimonio Project: Blackness in U.S. Latinx and Latin American Racial Politics

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Abstract

The vision for the Counter-Memorias Digital Testimonio Project is to create an online non-custodial archive of video-recorded testimonios and pedagogical resources centered on the memories and experiences of women from Latin American and Caribbean diasporas living in Southern California. The project centers on those with social identities traditionally excluded from homogenous conceptualizations of latinidad, including, but not limited to Afro/Black, Indigenous, Asian, Central American, Muslim, Queer, Trans, and multi-racial/ethnic identities. In doing this, the project seeks to reformulate the Latin American oral history methodology of testimonio to engage the voices of those often excluded from U.S. Chicana/Latina theorization of the genre, while critiquing colonial power relations. As a part of this process, the project de-centers Western digital archives methods by employing the everyday technologies used by diasporic migrant women (e.g., mobile phones and WhatsApp) to forge networked connections with loved ones. Currently, in its pilot phase, this essay focuses on the process of recording the project's first testimonies, which come from two Garifuna women, a grandmother and a granddaughter. Garifuna (or Garinagu) are an Afro/Black Indigenous people descended from Carib and Arawak peoples and West Africans who escaped colonial enslavement during a shipwreck in the 15th century near the Caribbean Island known today as St. Vincent. The intervention made here is an attempt to highlight the stories of those who have been systemically erased, guided by the principles of reciprocity and redistributive relations to achieve social transformation even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In this regard, I hope that our testimonio process will enact new modes of storytelling that move us further toward a translocal ethical-political strategy of liberation.

Keywords: Black; counter-memorias; digital; Latin America; Latinx; testimonio

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Introduction

> I don't look like the poster child, you know? I don't look like...the other [non-Black Central American] people. And we don't do all the same things and stuff. Like even when my Big Mama...I was one of the last ones she taught how to make our traditional tamales. We use banana leaf instead of the corn husk. And a lot of...our process is different. And the sizes are definitely different…they chunky and they stuffed man (laughter). …Even when it came to…our sweet ones. She [Big Mama] would get the stick of cinnamon and wrap it in the blanket and reach for the hammer and hand it to me and stuff, you know? She would talk to me in Spanish. …As she got older and older in her

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> years, she spoke less and less English…but I never even knew what Garifuna was until 19. Coming home from college on the break, and my grandma is having a family meeting about where we come from. And this is the first time really hearing of this whole Garifuna thing (laughter). (Heads, 2022b, 1:57-3:19)[1]

Jylynn Heads is a vegan chef, food and "land-Black" activist, and single mother in her mid-20s. She grew up Christian but now questions the teachings of Christianity. She is tall and thin. We met for the first time on October 19, 2021, to video-record her testimonio or life story (see Figure 1). She wore hoops and a fitted purple tank top, and matching shorts. Her hair was up in thin twists that fell softly alongside her cheeks. Jylynn had requested that we meet in person rather than virtually to establish a human-to-human connection. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this ever more challenging. However, we are in Southern California, and Octobers are (increasingly) warm, so we decided to conduct the interview outdoors in front of the city hall in Claremont, California.

Figure 1. A screenshot from Jylynn's video testimonio recorded in front of Claremont's City Hall (Heads, 2022a).

We nourished our new relationship with exchanges of gratitude, *respeto* (respect), and gifts—practices passed down to us from our ancestors. I gave thanks to Jylynn for trusting me with her story, and in response, she expressed gratitude to me for listening and sharing her story with others. Jylynn had just come from one of the outdoor produce markets where she sells her self-pressed organic juices. She brought two for me to choose from, strawberry lemonade and a green juice blend. I chose the green juice given the known healing properties of dark leafy greens. I took a sip—a delicious blend of citrus, sweet agave, and earthiness from the vegetable greens. I again expressed gratitude to her for this powerful medicinal gift. I, in turn, handed Jylynn a $100 (USD) bill for the time and energy she spent on telling her story, and because the redistribution of financial resources to all project participants should be a standard practice in community-based research.

Jylynn then introduced me to Ah-Sjhánay, her 2-year-old daughter. Ah-Sjhánay is innately curious and keenly fearless. During our interview, we took turns holding her in our laps, and each time we did, she quickly wiggled herself free to explore her new surroundings further. A skilled multitasker, Jylynn kept a vigilant eye on Ah-Sjhánay throughout our interview, giving her

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daughter autonomy to investigate her environment while calmly stepping in when Ah-Sjhánay took her boundary-testing too far, such as when she used her mouth to explore the gardens in front of City Hall.

I connected with Jylynn through her 80-year-old grandmother, Cynthia Lewis, whose testimonio I had recorded a few months before our meeting. Jylynn was in Southern California visiting family and using the opportunity to sell her self-pressed juices when Cynthia told her about the work I was doing with the Counter-Memorias Digital Testimonio Project (which I will refer to as Counter-Memorias moving forward). Jylynn was interested in having her story recorded and shared publicly, and Cynthia encouraged me to reach out to Jylynn before she returned home to Dangriga, Belize, where she currently lives with Ah-Sjhánay.

Jylynn's contribution to the project is motivated by her desire to provide insight into her experiences as a Black Garifuna and Latina. In this, we share the desire to express the full complexity of our diasporic translatinidades to bring to light our distinct stories, exert our agency, and create deeper bonds of solidarity. Here, I borrow from the practice-driven theorization of "trans-Latinidades" by blind Latinx activist, attorney, and scholar of decolonial Latinx theory and critical disability studies, Alexis Padilla. Padilla (2021) uses the term "trans-Latinidades" to emphasize the multitude of boundary-crossing Latinx identities, or latinidades, that opens up the possibility for radical Latinx relationality, solidarity, and agency. I also draw on Mari Castañedas's (2018) use of "diasporic trans-latinidades," which she uses to refer to the translocal migrations of Latinxs and Latin Americans.

While we have a common desire to share our stories, our subjectivities emerge from different diasporic trans-latinidades informed by our own specific intersectional experiences with race, ethnicity, culture, language, migration, nationality, and geography.[2] The excerpt from Jylynn's testimonio opening this article, for instance, demonstrates her experiences negotiating her complex and multiple subjectivities as Black and Latina, as well as her newly developing identity as Garifuna. In Paul Joseph López Oro's (2021) "matrilineal love letter" to Indigenous Black women, he describes Garifuna (also referred to in the plural form Garinagu) as a Black Indigenous people whose ethnogenesis lies in a 15th century Caribbean Island in the Lesser Antilles, known today as St. Vincent (p. 248). They are descendants of Arawak and Carib peoples and West Africans who escaped Spanish enslavement during a shipwreck near what is now known as St. Vincent. As such, López Oro (2021) identifies Garinagu as being "born from marronage and resistance to European colonialism" (p. 248).

After centuries of colonial resistance, British forces exiled Garinagu to the Honduran coast in 1797, which led to large transgenerational migrations to Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The second-largest migration of Garifuna took place in the mid-20th century following the economic decline of the United Fruit Company in Central and South America. In search of work, Garifuna settled in major U.S. port cities from New York to Los Angeles. In this way, Garifuna embodies multiple and overlapping subjectivities that are simultaneously Black, Indigenous, Latin American, Central American, Caribbean, and, in Jylynn and Cynthia's case, North American.

My own subjectivity emerges from my position as a cisgender, mixed-race woman of color and diasporic settler. More specifically, I am the daughter of parents from vastly different, even contradictory, worlds. My mother immigrated to the U.S. in her early 20s from México and is of Indigenous Rarámuri (more popularly known as Tarahumara) and Arab descent. My father is a white settler of Anglo and Celtic descent. I was born and spent half of my childhood on occupied

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Tongva land (also known as the Los Angeles basin). When I was seven years old, my father moved our family to a predominantly white town in south Santa Cruz County—the ancestral lands of the Oholone people. While I am no longer practicing, I grew up Catholic per my mother, who took us to *misa* (mass) for Catholic holidays like Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday.

On the one hand, my skin color has been described primarily by white people, but also within my family as "tan" or "dark." For example, when I went to a white dermatologist for a rash two summers ago, he repeatedly referred to my skin color as "very dark." And when I was young, my mother referred to me as "*chocolatito*" (little chocolate)—a term of endearment that evokes internalized racist connotations. Indeed, my mother has internalized the anti-Indigenous racism she experienced growing up in the 1970s as a dark-skinned girl in México and later in the United States. While my mother reinscribed dominant racial formations by calling me chocolatito, I also see it as a way to embrace my darkness in a way that was not done for her.

On the other hand, I have also been referred to as "*güerrita*" (white girl) or "*gringa*" (white foreigner) by some Méxicans and Méxican Americans. While typically referring to light-skinned people, these terms can also be used to refer to someone born in the United States or assimilating into U.S. culture. The events of 9/11 further opened me up to Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism, especially in places with large Muslim and Arab populations like Canada and the U.S. Midwest.

My academic privilege comes from my location in institutions of higher education that have provided me the luxury of pursuing my passion and accessing the resources and knowledge to actualize the work I am passionate about. But despite my relative privilege compared to most Latinas, I continue to occupy a space at the margins of academia. My projects have been underfunded and undervalued by grant-funding institutions because my practice of scholarship has not conformed to disciplinary expectations. Furthermore, the hidden labor of doing community-centered and project-based research means that I am chronically exhausted and emotionally burnt out.

In this way, I embody what Chicana ethnographer, Sofia Villenas (1996), describes as having "a foot in both worlds; in the dominant privileged institutions and in the marginalized community" (p. 714). Queer Chicana poet and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2002)[3] describes the messy state of living among different worlds as "*nepantla*," a Nahuatl word that means "in the middle." Anzaldúa (2002) coined the term "*nepantlera*" in the essay "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento...inner work, public acts" to describe what AnaLouise Keating (2006) characterizes as "a unique type of visionary cultural worker. Nepantleras are threshold people; they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system" (p. 6).

As I forge a praxis on the margins of institutional formations, an essential part of this praxis is to interrogate not only dominant archives models but also the reclamation of archives for contrary purposes. As a self-reflexive endeavor, I locate myself within this research to acknowledge how I may inevitably reproduce the parts of colonialism I seek to change.

The Problem with "latinidad"

Following the release of the video depicting the police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, worldwide protests erupted against police brutality, pervasive racism, and complicit governments. Many showcased their solidarity with Black people, their suffering, and the Black

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Lives Matter movement through hashtags and slogans like "Palestinian for Black Lives" or "Asians for Black Lives." Many non-Black Latinxs, especially from younger generations, also came out strongly in support of the movement for Black Lives. They often approached this activism from a model of Black-Brown solidarity through phrases like "Black and Brown Unity" and "Latinxs for Black Lives." These slogans, while well-meaning, were quickly met with vocal criticism from young, Black, and Indigenous writers, activists, and academics who brought attention to how such statements position all Latinxs and Latin Americans outside of the realm of Blackness, further perpetuating the erasure of Afro/Black descendants, as well as others who fall outside the hegemonic borders of latinidad.

This is especially true in Southern California, where the Central American diaspora is largely non-Black. Anti-Black sentiment among non-Black Central Americans in Southern California is reflected in Jylynn's testimonio, in which she describes the contrasting racial landscapes between Compton and her family's villages in Central America:

> When I go to two of these countries [Guatemala and Honduras] where I'm from on my mom's side, and everyone looks like me…I'm thinking, that's what everyone is supposed to look like. But then when I come back [to Compton] and I interact with those other [non-Black] people who are from these same countries, and then I'm ostracized and outcast and told I'm "not one of us." And all these other kinds of like...really...truthfully traumatizing things and stuff ((Heads, 2022b, 1:19-1:43).

Indeed, the concept of latinidad has a long history rooted in anti-Blackness. As articulated by philosopher and literary theorist Walter D. Mignolo (2005), the idea of latinidad, or latinitée, was advanced by France in the second half of the 19th century as a response to European imperial conflicts and U.S. racism that served a particular function in redrawing imperial difference. In *The Idea of Latin America*, Mignolo (2005) defines latinidad as a colonial construct created by "White Creole and Mestizo/a elites, in South America and the Spanish Caribbean islands, after independence from Spain…to create their own post-colonial identity" (p. 59). As a Eurocentric colonial construct, "Latins" were supposed to be "White Creoles" or, at the most, mixed-race peoples, who were "Europeans in mind" (p. 86), not Black or Indigenous. To Mignolo (2005), "Latin" America is not so much a subcontinent as it is the political project of and for Creole-Mestizo/a elites.

In a historical overview of the term mestizaje, Hooker (2014) notes that the term is the precursor to "Brownness" that emerged alongside latinidad. While these terms are all applied in different locations, they are inherently linked to each other as mechanisms of negotiation with and in approximation to white supremacy. Mestizaje refers to racial and cultural mixing of Amerindians with Europeans. It originated in the colonial era to refer to a racial category of the *castas* or caste system and became the dominant political ideology of modern national identity, unity, and social progress in 20th-century México, parts of Central America, the Andes, and among U.S. Latinxs with roots in these regions.

Throughout "New Spain," claims of mestizaje were meant to indicate a bond against Spanish settlers with exclusive rights to high political office and to legitimate Creole equality at home and in Europe. Other classifications of mixture in the caste system were not exalted, and the status of "mulattos" and others were not reconsidered. Mestizaje thus functioned to reduce cultural, linguistic, and political diversity in nations like México and to authorize the privileged status of the ruling elites. The original conceptualization of mestizaje emphasized assimilation

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and appropriation of Indigenous and Black cultures and the promise of progress and justice throughout Europe. Peter Wade (1995) highlights the clear eugenicist implications of mestizaje in *Blackness and Race Mixture*. Wade (1995) explains that immigration policies in the early 20th century promoted the *blanqueamiento* (whitening) of the population through a massive miscegenation of European immigrants in hopes of eventually erasing Blackness and Indigeneity from the nation.

Beginning in the late 1960s, as part of a more significant effort to "cut the Gordian knot with Europe," Chicanx and U.S. Latinx social critics, artists, and creative writers reformulated mestizaje (Mignolo, 2005, p. 64). The earliest Chicanx articulations of mestizaje were a strategy of affirmation, liberation, and identity. Chicana and Latina feminists in the U.S. re-conceptualized the term as a form of resistance against racial hierarchies. Most notably, Anzaldúa (1987; 2003) used mestizaje as a coalitional form of consciousness opposed to dominating powers and oppressive racial and social hierarchies. In the 1990s, other Chicana/Latina feminist scholars like Emma Pérez (1999) and Chéla Sandoval (1998) revealed how a new mestizaje offered a politic for mobilizing oppositional forms of consciousness for equity that exceeded modes of assimilation, reconciling for the multiple social positions and perspectives as discussed by Anzaldúa (1987; 2003).

Positive accounts of Latin American mestizaje in the U.S., such as those noted above, have been met with productive scrutiny in the 21st century. Political thinkers such as Hooker (2014) and Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2001) argue that the uncritical adoption of mestizaje contributes to the silencing of present-day Black and Indigenous People. For instance, Hooker (2014) explains that "much of Latino political thought's 'borrowing' of concepts from certain strands of Latin American thinking on race has not been sufficiently self-critical" (p. 1). According to Hooker (2014), these reconstructions ignore transnational dimensions of debates about race in the Americas. Still, they also might have ethical and political consequences on racial justice discourse in Latin America.

Others, especially young Afro/Black-Latinx writers and activists, have called for the "canceling" of latinidad in personal essays, podcast interviews, and social media posts (Harris, 2022; Hinjosa & Varela, 2021; Martinez, 2019; Noel, 2019; Salazar, 2019; Simone, 2020). For instance, Alan Pelaez Lopez (2018), an Afro-Indigenous formerly undocumented poet, artist, and public intellectual born in México City, coined the hashtag #latinidadiscancelled on their Instagram feed in 2018. The hashtag quickly went viral, which curator and art critic, Tatiana Flores (2021), attests to "the sense of alienation from and frustration with the term many people felt" (p. 67). Indeed, Pelaez Lopez's declaration stemmed from their tendency to self-identify as undocumented rather than Latin American as "the language that [they] had for [their] diasporic experience never felt like it belonged to the discourse of the Latin American experience" (as cited in Flores, 2021, p. 7).

In this way, we remain keenly aware that many Black and Indigenous individuals from Latin America do not identify with nor wish to be part of this "imagined community" (Anderson, 2016). In response to this evidence, Flores (2021) poses the critical question: "If scholars and the public at large understood Latin America not as a cartographically bounded area of Spanish speakers south of the U.S.-México border but as the anti-Black construct that it is, would they continue to embrace the term latinidad and its cognate Latino?" (p. 66). I reflect on this question as I theorize diasporic translatinidades to illuminate the complexity and multiplicity of the Latin American diaspora in the U.S., while interrogating the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous constructs

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of latinidad. In doing so, I recognize the limits imposed by employing the term and the risk of reinforcing the authority of white/European authority. Even as I try to use the term for contrary purposes, it is nonetheless enmeshed with the relations of power and dominance that I strive to reject; in this regard, it both resists and complies with "official" narratives of "the Other" (non-white). The intervention made here is an attempt to highlight the stories of those who have been systemically erased, guided by the principles of redistributive relations to achieve social transformation even in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. In this regard, I hope that our testimonio process will enact new modes of storytelling that move us further toward a translocal ethical-political strategy of liberation.

The Counter-Memorias Testimonio Project

Centering difference to build an active network of solidarity is at the heart of Counter-Memorias. This initiative emerged from *pláticas* (informal conversations) between myself and other members of the ImaginX en Movimiento (IXeM) Memory Collective around our own specific intersectional experiences with race, ethnicity, culture, language, migration, nationality, and geography that do not fall neatly into the ethno-racial identity category of "Latin"x. In 2019, I started at IXeM, a grassroots digital archiving project in collaboration with fiction-writer and graphic designer Aldo Puicon; media arts high school teacher Cassandra Gonzales; and experimental filmmaker Laura Perez, to support the digitization projects of personal media collections by individuals of Latin American diasporas.

We began by digitizing a few VHS tapes, 8mm, and Super 8 films in our own personal collections and those of friends. Through word-of-mouth, we started to get inquiries from those in our community about how to digitize family home videos and upload them to YouTube. IXeM's larger goal is to re-envision the digital archive not as a detached virtual storehouse of accumulated "data," but as an interactive site of human agency that could realize the liberatory potential of archival work. The impetus for this project is to provide a collaborative space that expands solidarity, enacts new ways of being together, and builds new skills and capacities through collective "memory work" (Gould & Harris, 2014, p. 1). In the essay "Memory for Justice," Gould and Harris (2014) frame memory work as a tool for actively building a liberatory future. The memory worker, they explain, includes anyone who explores, engages, and uses memory to reckon with past human rights violations, injustices, violent conflicts, or war (Gould & Harris, 2014). In response to larger systems of historical oppression and erasure, we are called to work collaboratively to forge bold and creative ways to share resources and social space for political and personal connection in the face of institutions that are insufficient, exclusionary, or exacerbate archival erasure.

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Figure 2. A screenshot of the Counter-Memorias website homepage (Counter-Memorias Digital Testimonio Project, 2022).

The early interactions between the project's facilitators and advisors on apps like Zoom and WhatsApp organically interwove our life stories—particularly around race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—revealing our multiple translatinidades. In creating our own social space to come together, share, and listen to each other's lived experiences, we recognized the importance of testimonio as a crucial means of bearing witness to lived realities that would otherwise be lost to history.

In this way, the impetus of Counter-Memorias is to center individuals of Latin American and Caribbean diasporas in Southern California with social identities that have been traditionally excluded from homogenous conceptualizations of latinidad by adopting the feminist research methodology of testimonio, a Latin American oral history tradition that seeks to construct a discourse of solidarity. Our vision for the project is to create an online archive of video-recorded testimonios and a pedagogical resource centered on the intersectional and transmigrational experiences of Latin American and Caribbean diasporas living in Southern California. We specifically center those traditionally excluded from homogenous conceptualizations of latinidad, including but not limited to Black/Afro, Indigenous, Asian, Central American, Muslim, Queer, Trans, and multi-racial/ethnic identities.

As a part of this process, we retool digital media technologies[4] used by many diasporic migrant women (e.g., smartphones and social media) as resources to develop collective identities and networked relations. To do this, we seek to (re)formulate the methodology of testimonio to include the voices of those often excluded from U.S. Chicana/Latina theorization of the genre. Moreover, this process occurs within a digital archives praxis that moves away from accumulation. Instead, it prioritizes redistribution and reciprocal relations to build solidarity across differences, collect and generate knowledge holistically, and move further toward collective liberation. In the last year since this project was launched, we have (re)generated meaningful connections, built *confianza* (trust), and enacted a relational practice of community

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where we remain committed to continued dialogue, collaboration, collective care, and redistribution of material and affective resources.

Our archival process draws on critical feminist and anti-colonial digital archives that reimagine the archive as a site of connection, exchange, and community-building in the present. An excellent example of such an archive is the Women Who Rock: Making Scenes, Building Communities (WWR) project directed by Michelle Habell-Pallán and Sonnet Reman at the University of Washington in collaboration with faculty, graduate students, community members, and scholars of gender, race and sexuality in music and social justice movements. Habell-Pallán et al. (2018) describe a collective process of building an online archive focused on musicians and activists who are documenting their own histories and have been excluded or pushed out from "official" archives.

To decolonize and transform the power structures and silences of the archive, the WWR collective defines the digital archive as "a trace of relationships forged through collective archiving or *archivista* [emphasis added] praxis" (Habell-Pallán et al., 2018, p. 69). Fusing archivist and activist practices, they describe an archivista praxis as rooted in "*convivencia*" (coexistence) that provides "a method for moving forward within a network of human relationships that connect people and communities working on related projects with similar aims" (Habell-Pallán et al., 2018, p. 71). The robust archive includes an annual, participant-driven community engagement conference and film festival; undergraduate project-based coursework that includes in-home production and recording; an oral history archive; photographs; and a WordPress site that includes dozens of oral history videos, performance recordings, and mini-docs shared through Vimeo. In describing their collective process, the authors emphasize the value of "living process over finite product" (Habell-Pallán et al., 2018, p. 68). Indeed, feminist archivista praxis shifts archives from that of colonial-capitalist modes of accumulation to "collaborative networks of production, performance, and [re]distribution" (Habell-Pallán et al., 2018, p. 69).

The method of convivencia is similarly adopted by Chicana feminist scholar, María Cotera, and filmmaker, Linda García Merchant, in their creation of the Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Collective. This online archive brings together a transgenerational community of scholars, activists, archivists, and students to produce knowledge by and about Chicanas collaboratively. In "Nuestra Autohistoria: Toward a Chicana Digital Praxis," Cotera (2018) explains that scholars working with the project leverage their connections to the academy and its infrastructure (e.g., digital tools, grants, and graduate and undergraduate students who wish to pursue research on Chicanas) to create discourse on 1960s and 1970s Chicana feminism from within and outside of the university.

The digital archives praxis developed by IXeM and adopted by the Counter-Memorias project builds on the critical re-definitions provided by the several feminist archives outlined above and the early pláticas between members of IXeM on our collective values emphasizing human connection (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). At the center of our praxis is a re-visioning of archival development as a collaborative project driven and sustained by a *mycorrhiza*-like process of redistributive care. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), mycorrhiza (my-cor-rhī-za) refers to "a symbiotic relationship between the mycelium of a fungus and the roots of a plant." Plant ecologist and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall-Kimmerer, describes mycorrhiza as a nutrition-gathering process in which fungi support and redistribute mineral nutrients in the soil to plants and trees, exchanging oxygen for carbohydrates. Through

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this reciprocity, "life as we know it can flourish" even in the harshest environments (Wall-Kimmerer, 2015, p. 34). This ecological example of redistributive relations in the natural world has been helpful in conceptualizing the digital archive as a site of solidarity-building cultivated through an archival praxis rooted in the long-standing practice of mutual aid across the Americas to provide material resources, emotional support, and a space for political and personal connection in the face of institutions that are insufficient, exclusionary, or exacerbate archival erasure.

(Re)Constructing Testimonio

Grounded in the collective history of resistance, testimonio as a genre emerged in the 1970s from a critical Latin American oral tradition aimed at challenging oppression and bringing attention to injustice by centering the voices of non-dominant groups (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). In the article "*Testimonio:* Origins, Terms, and Resources," Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012) emphasize the construction of a discourse of solidarity as the main feature of the testimonial text, maintaining that testimonio is a result of collaborative liberation efforts and the geopolitical resistance movements to imperialism in the Global South. In the U.S., generations of Chicanx and Latinx scholars and writers have used and reshaped testimonio as a tool to express marginalization resulting from race, gender, and sexuality, but also as a means of agency (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Roque Ramírez, 2005).

In their book, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios,* The Latina Feminist Group (2001) explains a traditional approach to testimonio as a process in which the person bearing witness to intense repression or struggle tells their story to someone else who then transcribes, edits, translates, and publishes the text elsewhere. While testimonio is a critical method for feminist research praxis, they acknowledge that the traditional practice of the genre can reproduce hegemonic relations of power that maintain social hierarchies between the researcher and the subject. To mediate the power relations between themselves and their subjects, *Telling to Live* presents a series of essays that creatively merge "the spirit of testimonial disclosure" with various forms of autobiographical writing (e.g., feminist ethnography and autobiographical fiction and non-fiction) and traditional literary genres of poetry and short stories (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001, p. 20).

A critique of hegemonic relations of power in testimonio-making, however, must also extend to the colonial logics that constitute U.S. Latinx and Latin American ethno-racial formations reflected in traditional Chicanx/Latinx testimonio practices, which have primarily focused on the theorization and bridging of "Brown bodies" (Anzaldúa, 1990; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). This discursive practice racializes Latinx bodies as uniformly "brown," contributing to the erasure of Blackness, Indigeneity, Asian experiences, and other marginalized racial formations that constitute Latin American and Caribbean diasporas. As political theorist Juliet Hooker (2014) argues in the essay "Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race," the essentialized discourses of "Brownness," which she describes as vestiges of colonial logics and nation-building projects from ideas of *mestizaje* in Latin America, have significant implications for who, and who does not, matter within social and political discourses of U.S. latinidad.

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Process

In the following pages, I will describe my own personal process recording the testimonios of Jylynn and Cynthia as a case study to articulate some of the principles shaping the contours of a digital archives praxis of redistributive relations that draws on feminist and anti-colonial critiques, as well our own lived experiences. While the recordings stand on their own as critical cultural productions expressing specific diasporic translatinidades, this collaborative process, which primarily uses testimonio as a methodology, is framed by a common desire to build solidarity and to produce and exchange knowledge through our differential lived experiences. In this way, the process of creating an ethic and politic that centralizes relationality becomes entwined with the product.

I began the testimonio process by working with Cynthia and Jylynn to develop a set of specific questions that would guide the stories they each wanted to tell around their transmigratory experiences as Garifuna women spending time between the West Coast of the United States and the Central America countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and, in Jylynn's case, Belize. Cynthia was the first contributor to the project. I began by sharing a set of questions borrowed from the "How to Do Oral History Guide" provided by the Smithsonian's Oral History Program (n.d.).

The questions and topics they suggest are generic, indirectly asking questions around socio-economic status (e.g., "How did your family get around?," "Tell me about the house you grew up in.," "Did you attend college?") and an assumed migratory status (e.g., "Where did your ancestors come from?," "When did they come to the United States?," "Did your family name change when your family immigrated to the United States?")(p. 7-10). Gender is the category most directly addressed, but only as it relates to higher education (e.g., "Tell me about any gender challenges you encountered in college.") (p. 8; 10). Sexuality, as an identity category, is omitted entirely.

With these observations in mind, I met with Cynthia at her home to review the guided questions. As we went through the list, we modified, added, and discarded questions to better reflect her lived experience as a Black-Indigenous Latina. For example, we added questions around topics that were important to Cynthia, like religion, spirituality, and ancestral home remedies, as well as her experience working as a nurse practitioner during the AIDS crisis, which provided insights into how she negotiates various complex and contradictory sets of beliefs, values, and practices.

Jylynn and I developed a similar process for her testimonio, with some modifications to accommodate her busy schedule, including using her ease with digital technology to our advantage. Our primary method of communication was WhatsApp, a free instant messaging app that plays a vital role among many diasporic communities, as anyone with a smartphone and Internet connection can download it and reach people across national and international borders. I emailed Jylynn a copy of the questions we developed for Cynthia's testimonio for her to review on her own. Jylynn called me through WhatsApp from a Starbucks when she finished reviewing the list and together, we modified the questions to reflect her own specific experiences. Jylynn was enthusiastic to get started and told me that her experiences have much to offer current discourses on latinidad. She shared that she is particularly interested in discussing the shaping and reshaping of her identity, including how she navigates racial, ethnic, and cultural differences across multiple transnational borders.

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As a small collective on a micro-budget and limited time on our hands, we primarily use digital media technologies that are available to us through our own personal and professional networks or are little-to-no cost with a low learning curve. We also take into account social context and the technological resources used by migrant women of Latin American and Caribbean diasporas, such as smartphones, social media, and WhatsApp, to exchange information and disseminate knowledge within the preferred networks of our collaborators. In other writing, I have referred to this method as "digital *rasquachismo*," a socio-political praxis that retools everyday technologies to provide creative solutions and new pathways for Black and non-Black Latinx memory work when resources are limited (Hicks-Alcaraz, 2020).

Both Jylynn and Cynthia preferred that I record their testimonios in-person rather than virtually to maintain a human-to-human connection.[5] In Cynthia's case, we conducted her testimonio in her house in Harbor City, Los Angeles. She usually lives alone, but on the occasion that I came to record her interview, her daughter and grandson were living with her until their house in Wilmington, the same house Cynthia grew up in, was finished being remodeled. With ample room in her living room to conduct the interview, I used my own camera and audio equipment that I had purchased in previous years for personal projects. My toolkit included a Sony HXR-NX30 palm-size NXCAM camcorder (now discontinued), a camera tripod, and a handheld Zoom H4n audio recorder.

To record Jylynn's testimonio, I used a simpler toolkit to call less attention to us while recording in front of Claremont's City Hall. The toolkit I put together consisted of my personal iPhone 11, a smartphone tripod I purchased online for the interview, and my Zoom H4n audio recorder. I used proprietary platforms and applications to edit, transcribe, store, and share Jylynn's testimonio. For example, to edit the camera footage, I used the iMovie application on my personal 13-inch MacBook Pro. I edited the two-hour interview down into shorter video segments ranging from 2 to 13 minutes. I titled them according to a specific theme or set of themes to help viewers find information quickly and easily, as illustrated in Figure 3.

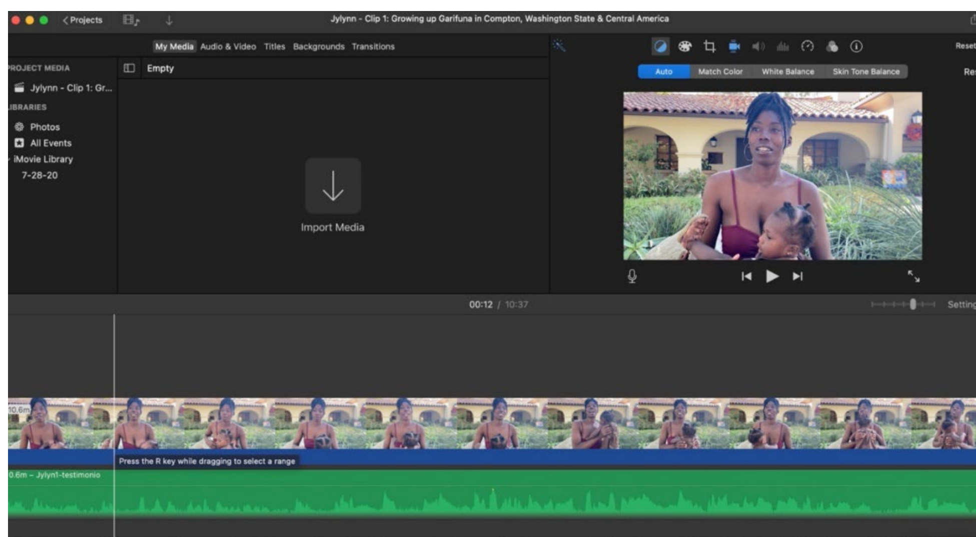

Figure 3. Image of a video recording from Jylynn's testimonio edited on iMovie ("Jylynn - Clip 1 - Growing up in Compton, Washington State & Central America").

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Once I finished the editing process, I uploaded Jylynn's testimonio to Vimeo (see Figure 4). Vimeo is a user-friendly video-sharing platform that offers several subscription-based tools and features, as well as various privacy options that provide greater control over who can watch and see videos. Founded by a group of filmmakers in 2004 with the goal of creating a platform that better met their streaming needs, Vimeo is geared toward a small but wide-ranging community of content-creators, primarily filmmakers, graphic designers, and animators.

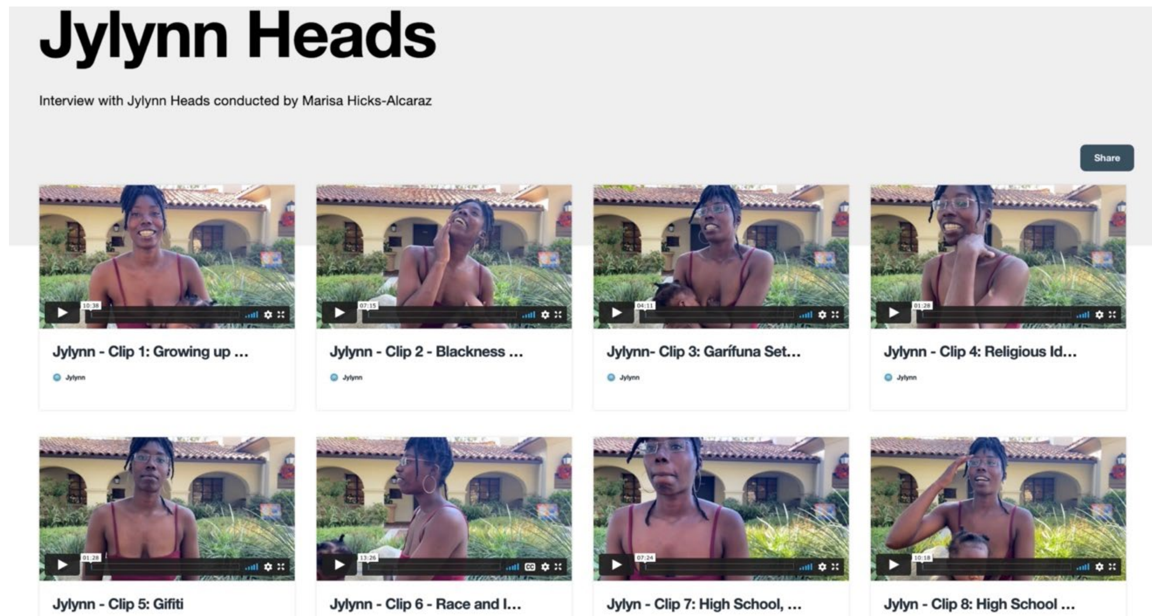

Figure 4. Image displaying Jylynn's video-recorded and edited clips on Vimeo (Heads, 2022c).

To upload Jylynn's testimonio to the platform, I opened a basic account using her email[6] and a generic password that she can later change. A basic account is free and can store up to 5GB of content. With Jylynn's permission, I uploaded the nine short video clips according to topic (a total of approximately 80 minutes) to the account and made them available to the public with some privacy and distribution restrictions, including removing the ability for users to download or embed the videos directly to third-party sites. A basic account also allows users to make videos private through password protection.

Additionally, Vimeo allows creators to apply a set of Creative Commons licenses[7] to their work at their discretion. Jylynn and I chose a Non-Commercial No Derivatives license, one of the most restrictive licenses offered by Creative Commons. This license will allow others to use Jylynn's videos and share them with others as long as they credit her, but it will not allow users to change the videos in any way or use them commercially. While downloading is permissible under the Creative Commons license, we removed the ability for people to download the videos directly from Vimeo and instead encouraged folks to contact Jylynn or Counter-Memorias for reuse or redistribution directly.

Although far from ideal, Vimeo's privacy policy regarding personal information collected, used, and shared by the company, in some circumstances, offers greater user rights than other popular

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video-sharing platforms. For instance, as a Vimeo user, you can opt-out of sharing your personal information with third parties (Vimeo, 2022, "With Whom We Share Your Data" section). If you decide to delete your Vimeo account and its content, including its videos, you can do so without the company's retention of that content (Vimeo, 2022, "Data Retention" section), unlike YouTube, which retains server copies of videos that have been removed or deleted (YouTube, 2022, "Duration of License" section). According to YouTube's terms of service, the platform also has the right to monetize your content, which includes displaying ads on or within content or charging users a fee for access, without payments to content creators (YouTube, 2022, "Right to Monetize" section). Vimeo, on the other hand, does not feature ads and instead monetizes from paid subscriptions to provide additional hosting capacity and customization options. Moreover, residents of California are subject to additional protections under California's Consumer Privacy Act, such as the right to know the personal information Vimeo collects, their purposes for collecting the information, and the types of third parties that receive information (Vimeo, 2022, "California Users" section). Additionally, California residents have the right to delete personal information Vimeo has about you, as well as the right to opt-out of the sale of your personal information and to request information about whether the company has sold your personal information (Vimeo, 2022, "California Users" section). However, Vimeo also has several glaring limitations. Storage on a basic non-subscription account is limited to a fixed 5GBs and only allows creators to upload 500MB of content weekly. In this case, however, I was able to "hack" the weekly storage limit by temporarily upgrading Jylynn's account to a "Plus" subscription using a 30-day free trial that allows creators to upload up to 5GB of content a week, allowing me to update all nine videos (totaling 5GBs) at one time. Once I had compressed and uploaded the videos, I canceled the subscription.

Additionally, while Vimeo gives creators the option to not allow downloads or embedding of videos onto other platforms, there is no way of preventing people from using a third-party app to download or screen-record uploaded content. Vimeo also has the right to terminate accounts at any time through a 30-day written notice. Common reasons for terminating a creator's account include account inactivity and copyright infringement (which is decided by Vimeo). This makes it necessary for creators to create and store multiple copies of content on other storage devices such as a hard drive, thumb drive, etc. As such, we save a copy of a testimonio to our own hard drive, for safekeeping purposes only, and another copy on a thumb drive that we give to the contributor.

But while digital technology and online platforms can be necessary and potentially powerful tools for social justice, they can also be a source of disempowerment, extraction, and exploitation. For example, using proprietary communication tools such as social media enables diasporic women to forge interconnected networks with family and friends across time and space. Digital humanities scholars like Jessica Marie Johnson (2018), Moya Bailey (2015), and María Cotera (2018), for example, speak to the vital role digital tools play in the survival and life of those who have experienced marginalization or discrimination, including "insurgent archives" on Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Vimeo.

Yet, digital technologies are also a double-edged sword that must be handled with care. Critical media scholars have pointed to the ways Facebook and Twitter, as well as other Internet technologies such as search engines, provide new opportunities for mass data collection by the state and private companies, as well as for deepening and reifying stereotypes and discrimination of groups that already face discrimination in Western societies (Benjamin, 2019; Fuchs & Trottier, 2015; Noble, 2018). Therefore, an essential part of this process is to acknowledge that

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we may inevitably reproduce parts of colonialism that we seek to change. We navigate this conflicted terrain by acknowledging the flawed nature of the technological resources we employ while remaining committed to achieving transformational change by using the values of redistributive relations, such as respect, reciprocity, collaboration, and accountability to guide our efforts. Though not an answer, it is a step forward.

Moving on to the transcription process, I am currently using a web-based open-source app called oTranscribe (https://otranscribe.com/). While exceedingly time-consuming, the app makes it easy to transcribe recordings by allowing users to pause, rewind, and fast-forward audio or video files without taking your hands off the keyboard. Importantly, oTranscribe does not store uploaded audio or video files nor copies of user transcripts and instead temporarily saves edits to the user's browser. Counter-Memorias facilitator, Dani Bustillo, and I worked together via Zoom to transcribe Jylynn's testimonio. This process served not only as a space for collaborative transcribing, but also as an essential space for Dani and I to share stories of our embodied experiences with race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, fostering a deeper bond in the process. Once we finish transcribing the interview, we will review the transcript with Jylynn for accuracy and to (re)confirm consent.

While the project aims to democratize the archive by increasing the visibility and voice of marginalized groups, it also supports their efforts to regain control over how their cultural materials are used and what stories are told about them. A part of this process is reconfirming consent through the various stages of the project because consent is an active and on-going (re)negotiation between parties. This includes the right to withdraw their consent from the project at any time. As a non-custodial archive, Counter-Memorias does not require that contributors give up their ownership and any copies to the archive, unlike dominant archival agreements which require contributors to grant the repository a perpetual right to copy, distribute, publicly perform, and display their content. Contributors to the Counter-Memorias archive retain rights to their own memorias, with the option of permitting us to hold a digital copy strictly for safekeeping. To use, distribute, or display copies beyond the Counter-Memorias website, we must request and be granted permission from the contributor on a case-by-case basis. We believe this is the most ethical engagement model with community partners, as it resists colonial notions of ownership and creates opportunities for horizontal collaboration.

Moving Forward

Counter-Memorias is sustained by the transgenerational relationships among community members, students, and faculty. Future work involves nourishing this solidarity by redistributing material and emotional resources available to us (e.g., time, empathy, generosity, knowledge, skills, care, kindness, networks, and funds) to transform the status quo. Communal relations ground our processes of testimonio-making, a very hands-on technical project that requires that we rely on one another to do the work of developing guiding questions that are specific to contributors, video-recording oral histories, editing them into short clips, transcribing audio files, designing the website and filling it with content, language translation, carefully selecting appropriate digital technologies and developing plans to mitigate their risks, navigating Southern California's explicitly segregationist freeways to meet contributors in person, and more.

Creating an archive without funding is not easy, but it has also given us the freedom to experiment and make the path as we go. It is both thrilling and terrifying. Rather than moving toward an end product, this project will intentionally remain ongoing. As articulated by political

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thinkers such as Robin D. G. Kelly (Arablouei & Abdelfatah, 2022), Audre Lorde (2007), and Angela Davis (2016), we must embrace the long struggle toward liberation, which cannot be done without community. With no room for complacency, meaningful change requires a commitment to the collective remaking of our vision, rethinking of our values, and continuing struggle for liberation.

Endnotes

[1] The full testimonio of Jylynn Heads is available on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/showcase/9450415.
[2] The concept of "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black legal scholar working in the field of critical race theory, in her foundational 1989 essay entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Crenshaw developed intersectionality as a framework for challenging discrimination in the law. More specifically, it challenged what was a largely accepted "single-issue" approach to inequality in the U.S. legal system. Crenshaw used intersectionality to highlight the ways in which inequalities in the law can be compounded for those who possess multiple and overlapping marginalized identities. Although the genealogy of intersectionality was developed to address a particular problem in the law, it has been applied in many other settings outside the legal system and today is of central significance in cultural and scholarly conversations around equality, inclusion, and social justice.
[3] In referencing the work of Anzaldúa, I simultaneously acknowledge her valuable contributions to Chicana feminist critical thought and the important criticism against Anzaldúa's erasure of Blackness in her theorization of Chicana/Latina experiences. See: Ariana Brown (2021), Juliet Hooker (2014), and María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2001).
[4] Digital technology refers to electronic technology that collects, stores, processes, and shares information. Digital technologies include social media, computers, laptops, smartphones, Internet, hard drives, and so on. As digital humanities scholar Tara McPherson (2009) explains in "Introduction: Media Studies and the Digital Humanities," "technologies are not neutral tools" (p. 123). They are powerfully influential social systems. "It is thus imperative," McPherson (2009) argues, "that we be involved in the design and construction of the emerging networked platforms and practices that will shape the contours not only of our research, but of social meaning and being for decades to come" (p. 123).
[5] Technology has its limits, after all, plenty of them.
[6] In the future, we plan to create "fake" emails to open new Vimeo accounts to prevent the site and other data collecting services from extracting information tied to the personal emails of contributors.
[7] A Creative Commons (CC) license is one of several public copyright licenses that enable the distribution of copyrighted material. A CC license is used when an author wants to give other people the right to share, use, and/or build upon work that they have created. Authors have the flexibility to choose from several types of CC licenses that offer different terms of distribution.

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