CouRaGeouS Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives

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Journal's Genesis

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"The Journal's Genesis" is an edited version of the "Editors' Introduction" from the journal's first volume. We are choosing to include it here because it documents the magical journey the students of ES 107: Chican@/Latin@ Lives class took in envisioning the publication of their written work.

That moment in class when students understand a new idea, one that illuminates their world a little more, one which allows them a deeper understanding of their lives—that moment—is sheer magic. We are lucky to get a glimpse of it when it happens, as if looking at the firmament and catching a shooting star off to the side of our gaze. For students, the moment excites them so much their eyes get big, they lean their bodies closer to the front of the classroom, slightly lifting themselves off their seats. We teach for those moments.

The genesis of *CouRaGeouS Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives* was one such event. The singularity of this moment is that it was collective and organic, a veritable meteor shower. It struck the students, as lightning making contact with the earth, full of energy, unpredictable, and powerfully beautiful—all at the same time.

This is how it started. In 2014 Humboldt State University had been recently designated by the U.S. Department of Education as a "'Hispanic' Serving Institution." Intending to meet the curricular needs and intellectual interests of a growing Chicanx and Latinx student population at HSU, the administration approved a new course: *Ethnic Studies 107: Chican@/Latin@ Lives*. Students read literary work by U.S. Chicanx and Latinx writers, and we discuss salient themes of identity, privilege, and the individual and collective resistance to the multiplicity of our intersectional forms of oppression.

Marginalized communities understand language as a tool of power, thus language is emergent, in constant flux. It has the potential to be self-proclaimed and more inclusive of all the beautiful and complex diversity of the communities it attempts to describe. When naming the course we chose to use "@" at the end of the nouns Chicano/Latino as a way to challenge the Spanish language's patriarchal linguistic convention where the masculine noun can be used to label the whole community. The "@" symbol was intended to be read as an "a" and an "o," and include both the feminine and the masculine together.

Important critical interventions, however, have asserted that gender and sex are not binary categories. The traditional use of the masculine noun to also mean "everyone" renders invisible all people who are not identified as masculine or male, that is—all women, all gender non-conforming people, and people whose gender identity is not binary. This understanding has compelled the Latinx community to use language and be more inclusive by shifting the spelling from Chican@/Latin@ to Chicanx/Latinx. Using an x at the end of the noun honors and includes people who locate themselves at various points along the spectrum of gender identity while also including those who do identify as female or male. Everyone can be X. Though the name of the class is institutionally spelled with a "@," in this journal we will use *Chicanx* and *Latinx* to denote the singular or plural and inclusive sense of the words and their meaning can be understood in context.

In spring 2015, students of ES 107 were expected to respond to a prompt related to the assigned readings with a freewrite at the beginning of each class. The prompts were personal and sought to help the students make connections between the readings and their own lives. They were also broad enough to allow all students a point of access into the conversation, regardless of the constellation of their multiple identities. After fifteen minutes of writing students had the opportunity to share what they wrote with the whole class. Early into the semester, it was clear that students could not wait to write, could not wait to share, could wait to listen to what their peers had written about their dreams and hopes, the stories they survived, and the tales they hear and

tell. With great courage, the students wrote about their always complex, frequently beautiful and often painful lives. The students showed kindness to their peers and affirmed the authors' strength and courage. Bearing witness to their peers' intimate and silenced stories cascaded into more and more students wishing to share their writings with their classmates.

A couple of weeks into the semester the students bemoaned they could not listen to more stories because of our time constraints. They paused, their lips slowly curved upwards. Corn kernels subjected to heat, their ideas and questions popped simultaneously. "What if… we post the freewrites on Moodle so all of us can read them?" "What if we make a pdf file that we share?" "What if we posted the pdf file on the CRGS website, on the internet?" "If we posted on the internet, everyone everywhere could read our stories!" Full of vigor, the students argued tenaciously, more accurately, they demanded that I help them share the stories of their lives—in their own words, in their own language(s), and importantly, in their own voice, en su propia voz—with the world.

They wanted to write for the whole world to read. They wanted their friends and family members to know—the ones who did not have the opportunity to pursue higher education—that lived experiences are factually valid knowledge. They wanted other students—students like themselves, the ones who got to college, perhaps one that is far away from home, the students who feel homesick before their families have the time to drive away—to know they are not alone. Ultimately, they wanted to speak for themselves, to challenge the stories about their communities spun by someone else. They wanted to tell it like it is, la pura neta. "Why not, María? Can we do this?" Inspired by their enthusiasm we said, "Of course! Why not? ¿Y porqué no?" ¿Quién dijo que no se puede? It was pura magia.

In doing so, we cracked a fissure in the ivory tower, the place where the worth of one's life is affirmed by the knowledge that is produced there; the place where such knowledge has not, until the last four decades, included the stories that resonate with the lived experiences of the majority of the students in the class.

Reminiscing about her writing during graduate school, writing that eventually led to her book *A House on Mango Street,* a book the students read, Sandra Cisneros recalls,

> *I was trying as best as I could to write the kind of book I'd never seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even my professors could write. (A House of My Own, 127-8)*

Literature by, for, and about Chicanx and Latinx lives is growing, and numerous authors have forged crucial paths of inquiry relating to the experience, status, and condition of our communities within the U.S. Our voices code-switch and the stories reflect the heterogeneous nature, hybridity, and complex history of Chicanx and Latinx in the United States. In our class, we read stories written by accomplished and eloquent authors, by talented and creative poets, and storytellers. These published voices speak to the experiences of Chicanx and Latinx students' lives. The voices that reveal the arduous trajectory from their barrios to college, and the insights into what it means to be a person of color, in a predominantly and historically white university, are loudly absent. The students of the *Ethnic Studies 107: Chican@/Latin@ Lives* class yearn to write such narratives; the kinds of stories that their professors, indeed, cannot write. We, the teachers of ES 107, wish to support their writings and publish them to boot.

On Language: The journal is a venue committed to honoring the authors' voices, language(s), and forms of expression and to recognizing their non-academic voices. The students are the peer-editors of their peer writers. The editors of this journal edited the work again, for clarity and consistency. In the Chicanx and Latinx community the issue of language is fraught with a sense of belonging, internal colonialism, and oppression. Following the U.S. invasion of Mexico in 1846, and the subsequent territorial annexation of the southwest, newly established institutions did not recognize legitimacy of Spanish. English was, and is, the language of the power—in the courts, in the schools, and the labor market. People of Mexican descent did not have access to jobs because they could not speak English. Spanish speakers were tried

in courts of law where they could not defend themselves because the lingua franca was English. Children heard whispering in Spanish in the playground could be subjected to the violence teachers committed by smacking their knuckles with rulers. Worse yet, Spanish-speaking students were not receiving the full benefits of an education when the instruction was delivered solely in English.

In California, bilingual programs that sought to address this unequal access to education were legally dismantled in 1998, when 62% of California voters passed Proposition 227 in statewide primary elections. Wanting their children to have better opportunities, to experience less discrimination, to salir adelante, many parents chose not to teach their children Spanish. While Spanish language seems to be beaten out of our tongues, our communities include an ongoing influx of immigrants crossing the México/U.S. border, from all over Latinoamérica, assuring Spanish endures silencing, in our barrios, in our tongues, our music and our stories, alive and clear.

For these reasons, we deliberately chose not to translate, not to have a glossary, not to italicize—in order to avoid highlighting the preeminence of one language over the other. Then again, we retain the right to choose to do so, sometimes. Gloria Anzaldúa has named the borderlands as a place in-between, one that is much more than a geographic one, but also a cultural, historical, and linguistic one as well. She reminds us that we are a hybrid people, with "forked tongues," and who direly need languages that speak to our plural experiences. Thus, Chicanx and Latinx speak Spanish, English, Spanglish, Caló, Tex-Mex, Pocho, code switch and any combination of all of the above.

> *Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (Borderlands, 81)*

Our purpose is to encourage the students write in their own voice, style and language; influenced but not directed by the diverse

authors they read. In the process students reflect upon and articulate what is important to them about their own lives, in the context of the dominant narratives and counternarratives they analyze throughout the semester.

A central course theme is the importance of claiming one's own voice and the authority to speak. This journal makes this theme vividly real to the students. Importantly, this academic journal relies on non-academic voices. We feel strongly that retaining the language of choice of the author is the most inclusive way to articulate the contextual linguistic complexity among Chicanx and Latinx peoples.

El bautismo, the naming of the journal, was a series of deliberate choices. CouRaGeouS, as an adjective, acknowledges the students' courage inherent in both the writing of their intimately personal stories and choosing to make them available to the world. Students are learning that stories create communities, offer perseverance and resistance, and at times, can save lives. The spelling of the CouRaGeouS, with specific letters capitalized, identifies the journal with the department where we teach and where the Chican@/Latin@ Lives course was created: Critical, Race, Gender and Sexuality Studies (CRGS). A Journal of Counternarratives explains what the journal endeavors to include: stories, based on lived experiences, that challenge, correct, amend, or complete the dominant narratives about Chicanx and Latinx communities.

Cuentos. Cuentos is the necessary Spanish word to signify the source and context of the journal's creation—the Chican@ Latin@ Lives class. Linguistically and semantically, cuentos is a tremendously versatile Spanish word. As a noun, a cuento is a "story." In the context of academia, personal stories have not historically been recognized as important ways of knowing. Cherríe Moraga challenged that notion with what she called "Theory in the Flesh" (*This Bridge Called My Back*, 25).

This journal foregrounds cuentos/stories as an important source of knowledge that the students already and uniquely possess when they first walk into the classroom. As a verb, cuento is the first-person, singular form of saying, "I tell (a story)." Yo cuento, is

an emphatic assertion of "I am the one who tells the story, the story-teller." Cuento, as an intransitive verb, is a claim in first person that "I count, I am important, and I matter." "Yo cuento cuando cuento cuentos que cuentan, y mis cuentos cuentan" employs a variation of the word cuento six times, "I matter when I tell important stories, and my stories count."

This project closely mirrors the concept of Papelitos Guardados, which is introduced in *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. The authors assert that papelitos guardados evoke the process by which we contemplate thoughts and feelings, often in isolation and through difficult times. We keep them in our memory, write them down, and store them in safe places waiting for the appropriate moment when we can return to them for review and analysis, or speak out and share them with others.

> *Through encouragement, the papelitos guardados are turned into Testimonios (shared stories); where reflection, healing and empowerment are borne through community engagement and support. Testimonio has been a powerful tool in movements of liberation throughout Latin America because they offer an artistic form and a methodology to create politicized understandings of identity and community. Within the classroom, students often shared how the literature and reflective assignments prompted them to critically reflect, often for the first time, on their personal identities, their communities, and the institutions they interact with.* (*Telling to Live*, 1)

As editors and on behalf of the students of the Ethnic Studies 107 classes of 2015, we invite you to join us, escúchenos contar nuestros cuentos, listen to our stories. Welcome to the inaugural edition of *CouRaGeous Cuentos: A Journal of Counternarratives*.

¡Bienvenidos!

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