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## Editors' Introduction

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# Editors' Introduction

That moment, when students in a class understand a new idea, one that illuminates their world a little more and allows them a deeper understanding of their lives--that moment, is sheer magic. We are lucky to get a glimpse, 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—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 together we discuss salient themes of identity, resistance, and oppression.

Marginalized communities critically analyze language as a tool of power and constantly seek a new language that is self-proclaimed and more inclusive of the beautiful and complex diversity within it. When the course was created @ was used to challenge the patriarchal linguistic convention in Spanish where the masculine noun can be used to label a whole community, thus erasing people who are not identified as masculine or male. The @ symbol is read as an “a” and an “o” including both the feminine and the masculine together. Important critical interventions, however, have asserted that gender and sex are not binary categories. This understanding has compelled language to shift the spelling from Chican @/Latin @ to Chicanx/Latinx as it honors and includes people who identify at various points along the spectrum of gender identity. We will use the Chicanx and Latinx to

denote the singular or plural sense of the word and its meaning can be understood in context.

In spring 2015, students were expected to respond to a prompt 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 vague enough to allow all students a point of access into the conversation regardless of the constellation of their multiple identities. When the writing was over, a few of students could volunteer and share what they wrote with the whole class. Soon, it was clear that students couldn't wait to write, couldn't wait to share, couldn't 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 fellow authors and affirmed their strength and resilience. Bearing witness to their peers' intimate and silenced stories, more and more students wished to share their writings with the class.

A couple of weeks into the semester the students bemoaned they couldn't listen to more stories because of our limited 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, then everyone, everywhere could read them!" Full of vigor the students argued tenaciously, what's more they demanded, that I help them tell the stories of their lives, in their own words, in their own language(s), and importantly in their own voice, *en su propia voz*.

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 valid knowledge. They wanted other students, students like themselves, the ones who got to college, 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 would be cracking a fissure in the ivory tower, the place where the worth of one’s life is affirmed by the knowledge that is produced there, 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 Sandra Cisneros recalls,

I was trying as best as I could to write the kind of book I had never seen in a library or in a school, the kind of book not even my professors could write. (Cisneros, 127-8)

Literature by, for and about Chicanx and Latinx lives is growing, and numerous authors have forged critical 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 and complex history of Chicanx and Latinx in the United States. We have stories written by accomplished and eloquent authors, by talented and creative poets, and storytellers. The published voices that speak to the experience of Chicanx and Latinx college students’ lives, the voices that reveal their arduous trajectory to college and 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.

On Language. The journal is a venue committed to honoring the authors’ voices, language(s), and forms of expression and do so in a non-academic manner. 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 teachers smacking their knuckles with rulers. Worse yet, Spanish speaking students were not receiving the full benefits of an education when the instruction was delivered in English.

In California, bilingual programs seeking to address this unequal access to education were legally dismantled in 1998, when 62% of California voters passed Proposition 227 during the 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. An ongoing movement of immigrants across the Mexico/US border bi-directionally keeps Spanish in our barrios, in our tongues, music and 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 may choose to do so at times. Gloria Anzaldúa has named the borderlands as a place in-between, one that is much more than geographic, but also cultural, historical, and linguistic as well. She reminds us that we are a hybrid people, with "forked tongues," and 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 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. (Anzaldúa, 81)

Our purpose is to have 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 counter narratives 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 will make this theme vividly real to them. Importantly, this academic journal will speak in multiple 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.

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 making them available to the public. Students are learning that stories create communities, offer perseverance and resistance, and at times can save lives. The spelling of the *CouRaGeouS*, with certain letters capitalized, identifies the journal with the department where I 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 the Chicanx and Latinx communities. The naming of our identities is an ongoing and evolving process.

*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 word. As a noun, a *cuento* is a "story." In the context of academia, personal stories, are not historically recognized as important ways of knowing. Cherrie Moraga challenged that notion with what she called, "Theory in the Flesh" (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 25). This journal foregrounds *cuentos*/stories as an important source of knowledge that the students already and uniquely possess. 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*

evoked 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. (Acevedo, 1)

Through encouragement, the *papelitos guardados* are turned into *Testimonios* (shared stories); where reflection, healing and empowerment are born through community engagement and support. As the authors note, *Testimonio* has been a powerful tool in movements of liberation throughout Latin America in the manner that 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, community, and the institutions they occupy.

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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