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Bridging Youth & Community: Digital Testimonio with Maria Baeza

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Abstract

In the Spring of 2021, a collective of graduate/ undergraduate students at California State University, Los Angeles Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies and under the guidance of Dr. Alejandro Covarrubias developed the GRITO Series Project. This project was a periodic webinar that collected the testimonios of Chicana Elders with a live virtual audience. The target audience for this project was the youth and ranged from middle school to college students. The word *grito* in Spanish means to "shout" or "yell," but was used both metaphorically and as an acronym for the project. Metaphorically, GRITO symbolized a re-surfacing, mining, and emphasis of intersectional testimonios that have been historically subverted because of colonial cis-heteropatriarchal practices in academia. As an acronym, GRITO represented the phrase "Getting Revolutionary & Intersectional Testimonios Out." Our project focused on the experiences of Chicana/ Latina organizers of the 1960s and 1970s. This article will outline the method employed by the GRITO Series project of democratizing generational knowledge using testimonios as method, product, and pedagogy with a sample intergenerational conversation with Maria Baeza, a critical leader in the development of the Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies at Cal State LA. This article includes a transcript of episode 4 of the GRITO series with Maria Baeza.

Keywords*:* testimonios, oral histories, Chicana/o Movement, intergenerational, Ethnic Studies, curriculum, democratization of knowledge, Maria Baeza, intersectionality, K-12 pedagogy

> "As a process, testimoniar (to give testimony) is the act of recovering papelitos guardados—previous experiences otherwise silenced or untold—and unfolding them into a narrative that conveys personal, political, and social realities. One's testimonio reveals an epistemology of truths and how one has come to understand them. Testimonio bridges or serves to connect generations of displaced and disenfranchised communities across time." (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364)

Introduction

Gloria Arellanes, our fearless revolutionary mother, once cautioned a classroom of high school and middle school students that "when an indigenous elder passes, so does a library of knowledge." The students then realized that every comment, phrase, and word carried a significant purpose. What Gloria was sharing could not be found in a book, archive, or movie. It was the unfiltered truth about her experience as a Chicana Brown Beret during the Chicana/o Movement of the 1960s. Students did not annotate, take notes, nor did they record. They were active listeners and without even knowing, they were practicing and embracing indigenous epistemologies and knowledge

production. This article will outline the method of democratizing generational knowledge using testimonios as method, product, and pedagogy with a sample intergenerational conversation with Maria Baeza, a critical leader in the development of the Department of Mexican American Studies at Cal State LA.

Method

In the Spring of 2021, a collective of graduate/ undergraduate students at California State University, Los Angeles Department of Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies and under the guidance of Dr. Alejandro Covarrubias, developed the GRITO Series Project. This project was a periodic webinar that collected the testimonios of Chicana Elders with a live virtual audience. The target audience of this project was youth and ranged from middle school to college students. The word *'grito'* in Spanish means "shout" or "yell," but was used both metaphorically and as an acronym for the project. Metaphorically, GRITO symbolized a re-surfacing, mining, and emphasis of intersectional testimonios that have been historically subverted because of colonial cis-heteropatriarchal practices in academia. As an acronym, GRITO represented the phrase "Getting Revolutionary & Intersectional Testimonios Out." Our project focused on the experiences of Chicana/ Latina organizers of the 1960s and 1970s. The GRITO Series includes a collection of ten different interviews collected and broadcasted live over the course of one year with the purpose of democratizing knowledge. Amongst those included are Gloria Arellanes, Victoria Castro, Maria Baeza, Maria Elena Gutierrez, Diane Holguin, and Rosalio Muñoz. The GRITO Series project hosted the UMAS/MEChA Reunion for the Cal State LA chapter on May 5-6th of 2022. This reunion involved a Youth Conference in the spirit of Cal State LA's Community Day in the 1960s, in which UMAS members organized a campus visitation day for the East LA Latina/o Community. The 2022 Youth Conference invited schools in East LA, El Sereno, and South LA to visit on campus and meet organizers from the Chicana/o Movement and to listen to their testimonios.

California's Assembly Bill 101 requires all High School Students to take a one-semester long Ethnic Studies Course beginning with the class of 2029-2030, making the Golden State the first to develop and approve an ethnic studies requirement (Fensterwald, 2021). Almost immediately, doubt about qualified teachers and lack of resources loomed. As a result, the California Department of Education published the Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum in March 2022 providing lessons, guidance, and resources for future and current teachers. The model curriculum covers a variety of subjects, including African American Studies, Chicanx Studies, Asian American & Pacific Islander Studies, and Native American Studies. There is a "Migration Stories and Oral History" lesson plan that invites students to interview their family and discover how migration has impacted their local histories (CA Dept of Education, 2021). Although oral histories are practiced in Ethnic Studies, they exist more as a research tool for other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and history (Márquez, 2019). Ethnic Studies research methods aim to deconstruct power relationships in theory and in practice, wherever inequality exists, it must be addressed. Oral histories are a non-critical reflection of specific historical events, that aim to "fill gaps in archival records" (Márquez, 2019, p. .94). On the other hand, Testimionios are the "participant's critical self-reflection, set in socio-historical realities," creating community whilst highlighting intersectional perspectives (Márquez, 2019, p.95). Testimonios give individuals agency to share their lived experience and collective struggles without being delegitimized as biased. In Ethnic Studies, testimonios function by disrupting the problematic nature of interviews or oral histories and are multi-functional because they are a "process (methodology), product (inclusive of text,

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video, performance, or audio), and a way of teaching and learning (pedagogy)" (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 364). Counterstories can shatter complacency, challenge the dominant discourse on race, and further the struggle for racial reform (Yosso et al., 2001, p. 95). In centering the voices of those most impacted, counterstorytellying fosters new possibilities in disentangling the complexity if systemic racism through the use of autobiographical, biographical, and multiple-method stories/ narratives (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Espinoza, 1990; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal; 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Maria Baeza

The modern-day Civil Rights Movement brought about the rise of many leaders who fought against institutional oppression. The Chicana/o Movement was no exception. Maria Baeza is amongst the many leaders that we interviewed with a live virtual audience. She is one of many Chicana leaders who has gone unrecognized for her contributions during the Chicano Movement. Maria Baeza was involved in foundational college organizations during the height of the movement such as Mexican American Student Association (MASA) at East Los Angeles College and United Mexican American Students (UMAS) at Cal State LA where she became the Vice President. Most important of all, her active involvement at Cal State LA lead to the development of Mexican American Studies in the Fall of 1968. The following testimonio is from Episode 4 of the GRITO Series with Maria Baeza where she recounts her experience at East LA College [ELAC], Cal State LA, organizing with UMAS, and gender discrimination.

Figure 1. Maria Baeza Opening Ceremony: CSULA UMAS MEChA Reunion. 2022. Photograph by Victor Orejel.

GRITO Series Episode 4: Maria Baeza (Full Episode @ https://youtu.be/LxoztbPE710)

Dalia Carmona: Can you tell us about your involvement in MASA at ELAC and how did you become the secretary of MASA?

Maria Baeza: Well, actually, you know, when I got out of high school, this is so typical. When I got out of high school, I had, I knew how to type and how to take shorthand and all this. So obviously I was going to go be a secretary, but I wasn't very happy with that future. So, I started taking a couple of evening classes at East LA and I finally decided that I would be a full-time student and so becoming a full-time student, I had to figure out how I was helping out my family. So, I started working and on a part-time basis and I met other students who, coincidentally, we took the same history class with Dr. Miller. And she was a historian, a Mexican historian and really enjoyed Mexican history, so she wanted to know about us, you know? Who were we? What did we want? Why were we there? So, she would ask these very important questions that made us think. Never from a point of making a judgement. At one point, she said, why don't you guys get together and

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organize yourselves? There are so many young kids in school that would benefit, so we did. We got together about 10 people. There were two older students that had been in the military. One of them was Carlos Hunter, the other one was Juarez was his last name and then another woman and I Virginia Gonzalez. So, we started organizing. But we did not only organize our little group, we also organized as to. What could we do in the Community? That idea that we had to be in the Community work in the Community, we started a Tutoring program. And I happened to choose my program at Lincoln High School. So, and then others went to Garfield and so we divided up. Our group wasn't that big and we were called Mexican American Student Association. We recognize each other on campus and we try to recruit other students to this organization and we did, we were successful. I think one of the reasons, there were two main forces that helped us. One was the Vietnam War and the other one was the presence of the organization of the United Farm Workers. We could see that many of the people that we went to High School were in Vietnam and there was a consciousness process that was being witnessed by us through the farm workers. So, I think we began to take consciousness of the idea that we needed to give back to the Community that we could. We were only freshmen and at East LA, but that we had a role to play and that we were Mexican. This is another thing. I mean that we weren't calling ourselves Americans of Mexican descent. You know that we were calling ourselves Mexican, Mexican American. And we weren't hyphenated. That was very important to this group of people.

Figure 2. CSULA UMAS Founders, 2022. Photograph by Destiny Rivas.

Dalia Carmona: How many Mexican American students were at ELAC during this time?

Maria Baeza: You know, I cannot tell you, I have not gone back to look at. I knew a lot of them because we used to sit together at lunch in the cafeteria at this long table, and we would, you know, exchange jokes. You know what we were doing, or assignments or whatever. I concentrated on the people that were in MASA, but also there were other people that I interacted with in class that I tried to recruit to MASA.

Dalia Carmona: Earlier you mentioned Dr. Miller. How did she help students organize?

Maria Baeza: Well, you know, like I said, she asked very probing questions, but her questions made us think. Also, in her class she talked about the Mexican Revolution and what people in Mexico were able to accomplish through their efforts through revolution. So, I think that without even knowing or being really conscious of that. We understood that we could also contribute in this way, but also not only did she give us information about Mexico and that, but also, I remember very clearly, she brought a Los Angeles, *New York Times* article that had a cover on it and it said "The Giant Awakes" and they were reporting on a number of activities that were taking place in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, and California, with the United Farm Workers. So, somebody I don't remember who the other was, thought that there was a relationship of all these different groups

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that were getting together to ask for and demand many of the things that were enjoyed by the majority population like housing, health, education.

Dalia Carmona: Yes, thank you for sharing. We're going to be moving on to your Cal State LA years and specifically with UMAS. Can you tell us how you became a member of UMAS and how was your experience like being the Vice President of UMAS?

Maria Baeza: When we came on campus, we already had little bit of experience in the Community. So, what we wanted to do was to continue with that. We didn't want to leave on the one hand the experience we had in setting up the tutorial program. So, we wanted to continue with that. So, you know, as you get into an organization and you say, OK, what's happening here, who's doing what? You know what's their purpose? Well, we understood the purpose. We wanted to advance Mexican Americans in the community. And so, we wanted to make sure that the majority population and community also knew who we were. Because there was some lack of information about Mexican Americans or Mexicanos. They were very strong stereotypes that influence policies and behavior of the power structure towards Mexicanos, so we wanted to also be known for what we did and we understand that we had we had something to do with defining who we were. When we first start on campus, I joined UMAS because it was an easy [transition], I had come from MASA. We had already Monte Perez and Phil Castruita had come on campus and they had told us that their group was UMAS and it was called United Mexican American Students, so we should unite with them instead of, you know, carrying our own organization and having two. You know? 10 people here and 20 there. So, we said wonderful. That's a good idea. So, we joined forces and I became very active in setting up different- I had that the experience of going through the different schools to figure out how we could identify students who needed tutoring. At the same time, I got a job with, along with another student, Oscar Martinez, who was part of UMAS and we got a job going into the schools. It was part of the War on Poverty Program, and we got a job going into the high schools to talk to teachers and counselors about increasing the enrollment of high school students into the college and that was an incredible experience because it really, you know, gave me an insight or gave Oscar and myself an insight into what was the high schools like. I had not gone to a public high school. I had gone to Sacred Heart of Jesus. So, I wasn't really well acquainted but going and speaking with the counselors and teachers, who obviously had their own biases, “Ohh no.We have very few of our students are eligible.” Then we would follow up with parents we would go to the parent’s house and say “Hey we heard that you that your daughter or son is college material. What would it take for this person to apply? We have a program called Equal Opportunity Program,” and we would explain and so from that experience we organized a day on Campus for students to come on campus, high school students to come on campus and go through the EOP process and have a number of students talk to them and see that they were not that different from us. We had been where they were and so that was a very exciting time. At the same time, what was happening on campus, we had the Teatro Campesino with Luis Valdez and that was a very

Figure 3. Maria Baeza Speech to Middle School & High School, UMAS/ MEChA Reunion, 2022. Photograph By Nichelle Garcia.

important turning point because I think that many of the Mexican students, what we now call Chicano students had not really tuned into UMAS. Out of that experience, we were able to accommodate to seek out other students who became interested in our efforts and what we were trying to do. And I'm sorry I'm going on, but you asked. What was also very important is that we begin to take note of the fact that we knew our community, we knew who we were, but we didn't know the history of our community, we did not know the history of our people. And no wonder many people couldn't identify. They didn't know our history, so we began to look at that and coincidentally a professor by the name of Ralph Guzman, came on campus. He began to talk about several national organizations that I had not heard of before, so as a political science major, I was really interested in the whole notion of organization, mutual assistance societies, which was what they would practice and made it easy for the integration of many immigrants, not the assimilation but integration. He also had a lot of experience in other areas. So, there was a group of us that began to work with him just to get to know him better and find out what he knew about possibilities of starting some courses at Cal State LA.

Dalia Carmona: So, in some of the Archives at Cal State LA, we found university papers and articles referring to events that UMAS had organized to recruit and promote the University to Mexican Americans in this community. As you've mentioned before. In some of these events, they were figures like Reyes Lopez Tijerina, Sal Castro, Rodolfo Corky Gonzalez and even musical artists Lalo Guerrero. Do you recall organizing these events and what were some of the details you might remember about these events?

Maria Baeza: Ohh yes, absolutely. Not only were we interested in attracting the potential students to Cal State LA. We sat in the middle of East LA, this huge Mexican community and there were, I don't remember, think that what we knew there was 100 students. And maybe there were 200 and maybe we didn't know the rest, but we knew that there were 100 students that we could identify as being Mexican American. So, we wanted the community to also feel that Cal State LA was theirs, as well. I mean that we belong there. So, when we brought Lalo Guerrero, I was the mistress of ceremonies, the mistress [laughed], the woman. Anyway, I remember, you know, Lalo Guerrero was very well known in the community and so in introducing him, I said to him, I said, “You know, this is an old person. Es un amigo viejo de la Comunidad.” When he comes back, he says, “No. No estoy tan viejo” [Laughs]. He reminded me that he wasn't that old and so I had to apologize to him. For calling him “Viejo” [Laughs], but anyway. We had other musicians come. Yes, we did have Corky Gonzalez. And but I can say more about that while we. I personally loved his poem, “I Am Joaquin”. I thought it was... But then with time, I lost my enthusiasm for his wider Philosophy, especially in regard to women.

Dalia Carmona: Yes, we have a section regarding Gender and Chicana Feminism, which we'll be going into, but I have a couple of other questions regarding your Cal State LA years. In the archives, we also found many documents and newspapers that discussed UMAS and BSU coming together and organizing. Do you have any, like any recognition of UMAS and BSU in collaboration with each other?

Maria Baeza: Yes, I belong to a committee. That committee that brought together the Black Student Union representatives and UMAS representatives. Our task was to #1 agree amongst ourselves about a process by which we would get the university to recognize the need for black studies and Chicano studies. OK, so that was a process. What was it odds maybe was the timetable.

I think part of the problem here was that as Mexican American studies, there was very little background on what we what was available to be taught from that perspective, whereas the Black Studies group had much more advanced, you know, the history of black education in this country is reinforced by their colleges, by the fact that they already had formed a whole group of intellectuals, and we were, you know, in the process of developing our intellectuals. And not only that, but one of the things that our group was also involved with was with identifying who would be available. We went about a very systematic search for Mexican Americans in higher education, whether it was in literature, sociology, political science, and so our schedule of proceeding towards Chicano Studies was a little behind the Black Student Union. To be honest with you, we, at least personally, I felt that we negotiated well. But there were a lot of the black students who, because of the circumstances, they were way ahead of us in some respects. So, we started out with the idea of perhaps having more core courses and then eventually we work towards wanting to have a full program, but that happened after I left. I had very good relationships with the Black Student Union, I was very friendly, but I understood where we were in our development.

Dalia Carmona: Thank you. We're gonna be moving on towards your ideas or thoughts on gender and Chicana feminism. So, I'm gonna start off by asking you. Are there other individuals, specifically women, who you believe had not had the leadership recognition they deserve during the Chicano movement?

Maria Baeza: Wow, that's a big question. In the Chicano movement as a whole.

Dalia Carmona: Or maybe students that you had the chance to organize with that you believe deserve to have that recognition as student organizers.

Maria Baeza: From Cal State LA you basically have identified most of the at least my cohort group, I mean Maria Elena Gutierrez, Vicki, Gloria Arellanes. There were all these people that were there. But you know at the same time, there were women that as UMAS at Cal State Lake and UMAS at UCLA, there was a couple of women that I think stood out. One of them was Susan Rocha. I don't know if you have ever heard of her. Susan Rocha. Then there was, I forget their names, but they were very, very active in UCLA's MEChA. I'm sorry. I don't remember their real names.

Figure 4. Cal State LA Students & Maria Baeza, UMAS/MEChA Reunion, 2022. Photograph by Destiny Rivas

Dalia Carmona: No worries. Now that you mentioned Maria Elena Gutierrez, do you recall the role of Maria Elena within the organizing?

Maria Baeza: Ohh yes. Well, she was very central to helping us understand the process. She worked for a period in the administration, so she understood very well the process of equal opportunity programs, budgets, because she worked with Provost budgets and also she knew who was who because of correspondence, but she also developed her own, you know her own very strong personality within the organization. So, I remember her as a very powerful person within the

organization. There was another woman, Lillian Roybal. Her father was Eduardo Roybal, who was a congressman for many years and represented East LA. I want to tell you about Lillian because I had a very beautiful experience talking about Ralph Guzman. Ralph had been invited to go into the Fresno Valley to one of the high schools. And he invited Lillian and myself to go talk about UMAS student organizations and we went up with him to Fresno. We talked to the students and we told them what we did, what we studied, how we got interested in, why were student organizations important and what they could do and Unbeknownst to us, these students that were that were asked to come to the auditorium were separated from the Anglo students and the Anglo students were not asked to come to our talk only the Mexican students. And the Mexican students were not happy. They felt they were being discriminated against. Our message got lost in the struggle or misunderstanding whatever it was. But our message was lost, and for that we were very sorry. But on the other hand, Professor Guzman also took us into La Esperanza, where Cesar Chavez was on a hunger strike. I want to tell you that I came away from that experience even more reinforced in the idea that we had to struggle for social justice and that really convinced me that we had to work very hard to advance social justice, equal opportunity in women's rights for some reason, because I think that experience with a high school students opened my eyes as to how people are manipulated and even in that very small little medium, people are manipulated and in this case we were manipulated and only talking to these Mexican students, which we wanted to but not at the price of keeping others out or making the students themselves feel discriminated against.

Dalia Carmona: I wanted to ask you; how do you think your gender affected your activism?

Maria Baeza: Well, I think it did. You know, we've talked about this the other day. I was talking about how my father was very encouraging in terms of my studies, in terms of my working, and in terms of my being active. He had no problem with that, but you know in retrospect, I think my father was OK with all of that, but he didn't want me to be sexually active or even have a boyfriend. You know, every time I brought somebody home. Like I would bring somebody home to study. Albert Juarez was one of them. He would just like, “Is this the guy that's going to take my daughter away?” all that came back to me. The other thing is that. There was always this feeling, I guess among some of the women in the group that some of our guys that were in the same group were always like On the make. Not because they were serious, but because they wanted to, you know we were influenced by what was happening outside. We had what we came to call the hippie movement, you know, free love, but I think that some of the guys thought that their machismo or whatever was involved in forming temporary relationships with women. What they wanted was to take them to bed, you know. And I think once I began to think about how what that was like at the time. I think I began to understand a lot of things. To realize in retrospect on the other hand, I did not have a problem being a Vice President or secretary. It was something that that I had developed along being in grammar school in high school, that was not a concern, but I think there was a difference. Women, young students, the students were seen different. Was this a beautiful woman? Was this somebody? That you that you could use as an object. Is this somebody who you want to be arm and arm with? Are you gonna be proud of this woman? You know all of those things that really played into our relationships very subtly. But they were there.

Dalia Carmona: What was it like to come of age as a woman during the Chicano movement?

Maria Baeza: I had blinders on. I mean, I knew I had to finish at East LA. I knew that I had to go to Cal State LA, get jobs. I finally got a job that I liked and that was being a bank teller at the Bank of

America, so I knew what my hours were so I could work my classes around that and my women's activities around there. I didn't have much of a social life, to be honest with you. It was work, study, and activities on campus. My weekends were dedicated to catching up. So, I can't tell you that I had a wonderful social life. I found that many times I was not taken seriously because I was Mexican. You could tell I was Mexican. You know, I had an accent when I spoke English. I still do. But you know that you knew, and I felt that sometimes I was not taken as serious about my studies. Well, my Comments in class, especially when I talk about Mexicans, you know, and Mexican history, there was not validated as much as someone else who was talking about their experience. But that didn't stop me from talking about it.

Conclusion

For schools across California and the country, oral histories are used as the method of choice for students to explore their family's individual histories. Unfortunately, oral histories are non-critical recollections that are limited to specific historical events. Testimonios follow the spirit of Ethnic Studies for being multifunctional, nontraditional, and social justice oriented. They function as a method, product, and pedagogy for Ethnic Studies educators. Students will gain critical analysis and communication skills through testimonies, their transcriptions, and the development of research questions. of historical events through historical interpretation. The intergenerational testimonios of leaders during the Civil Rights Movement can be transformative experiences for all students. Students currently have the opportunity to read a book or watch a movie about social justice leaders for educational purposes, but putting students face to face with an organizer like Maria Baeza and having the opportunity to ask a question brings the subject matter to life. The virtual and in-person projects conducted by the GRITO Series team prove how important intergenerational testimonios can be for students battling modern issues with sexism, ableism, racism, xenophobia, etc.

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