

# FEMTORING TRENZA: EMPLOYING A PLÁTICA ~ TESTIMONIO APPROACH TO CO-CREATE KNOWLEDGE AND SURVIVE ACADEMIA

**Río LOPEZ**

New Mexico State University

**CLAUDIA YOLANDA CASILLAS**

New Mexico State University

**JUDITH FLORES CARMONA**

New Mexico State University

**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51734/vq2y4y52>**

## **ABSTRACT**

The three of us share how our praxis of plática methodology and our divulging of feminista testimonios allowed us to co-create knowledge and challenge the corrosiveness we have experienced in academic spaces. We center the foundational work of Women of Color scholars who have paved the way to discuss the role of community building and solidarity in higher education. This work weaves testimonios that speak to our lived experiences with femtoring (feminista mentoring) as foundational to our survival and navigation of academia's trenches. Further, we discuss the co-construction of knowledge resulting from our reciprocal femtoring relationships, naming solidarity, accountability, and concrete examples of transformative practice as foundational elements that comprise the trenza [braid] of femtoring. Through pláticas, we name the systemic barriers that have historically marginalized us as scholars whose identities/ways of knowing challenge hegemonic, epistemic, and pedagogical canons. We explicitly discuss how these forms of oppression fragment the mindbodyspirit. Further, we uplift femtoring as a practice of solidarity, accountability, meaning-making, and shared conocimiento [knowledge], allowing us to resist academic violence—staying mindful of our practice as professors and scholars.

## **Recommended Citation**

Lopez, R., Casillas, C., Flore Carmona, J. (2024). Femtoring Trenza: Employing A Plática ~ Testimonio Approach To Co-Crete Knowledge And Survive Academia. *Rio Bravo: A Journal of the Borderlands*, 25, 17-33

## **INTRODUCTION: A COLLECTIVE APPROACH**

Our article has three main purposes. First, it outlines the contextual systemic barriers that exist in higher educational spaces (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga and Flores Carmona 2012; The Latina Feminist Group 2001). Second, it shares concrete examples of our direct experience with femtoring—a feminista praxis of mentoring. Third, it brings forth salient issues from a plática/conversation during our panel at the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference in 2021, in which we wove and expanded our notions of femtoring and the required tools to survive in academia. We are three scholars, however, our embodiments and experiences of Mexicanidad and our positionality are not the same. We have found femtoring essential for our survival and growth, especially during pandemic times. In this work, we uplift femtoring as a practice of solidarity, accountability, meaning-making, and shared *conocimiento* [knowledge]. This has allowed us to stay accountable and mindful of our practice as professors and scholar activists. In this paper, the three of us, share our:

stories about living on the borders of [coming from] various classes, nations, regional cultures, languages, voices, races, ethnicities, migrations, sexualities, creative abilities, academic disciplines, and even cultures of resistance.... we sketch out the genealogies that have informed our individual paths to personal achievement. The complicated structures of inheritance and identity formation, legacies of colonial and patriarchal subordination influence our lives.... They have shaped our resistance and fueled our cognitive desires, the will to knowledge and comprehension.... More subtle but pivotal influences come from our families, friends, communities, and life events that have also helped us negotiate the markers of our achievements and validate our right to pursue our goals. Our genealogies of empowerment draw on these early lessons as the blueprints for a thriving process of self-created and self-defined freedom and independence. (The Latina Feminist Group 2001, 25)

During the fall semester of 2021, we co-facilitated a panel at the NWSA's virtual conference. Our conversation centered on the power of our relationship as colleagues and femtors as foundational to our navigation in academic spaces—as doctoral students and faculty members. We titled our presentation “*Conocimiento Colectivo*,” which directly translates as collective knowledge, as after many years of working together and supporting each other, we saw the value of collectivity and relationships as critical tools to survive and resist the entrenched terrains of academia. Specifically, we discussed academia's values on patriarchy, lack of representation for students of color, the climate of violence, and gaslighting from the moment we become graduate students. Further, in our experience in higher education as graduate students and faculty, we realized that these spaces dwell on individualistic values, divide and conquer tactics, meritocracy, competitiveness, inflating egos, and mediocrity (Rodríguez 2016; Oluo 2020). In this work, we employ González et al's concept of femtoring, which challenges the “male-centered western etymology of mentor[ing]... Identifying as femtors and mentees gives us visibility as women, and thus empowers us while challenging the historical legacy and academic mentors/mentees being men” (2015, 148). When

we read and think about this concept, we understand and employ it as it applies not only to cisgender women but to individuals that embody dissident identities. Further, given our lived experience we know that the guidance and collaborative work with senior advisors is foundational for the completion of our degrees, pursuit of employment, and survival.

For this article, we draw from our collective memories as femtors—mentoring grounded in feminista awareness and consciousness. We highlight how our relationships allowed us to transgress and survive systemic barriers, acknowledge our privilege, and transform our pedagogies and relationships. We center the meaning-making process that stemmed from our work together during NWSA, the cultural roots of our values, and how these facilitated and resulted in our connection as sister-femtor-colegas. Presenting our process and approach, via our testimonios, to scholars and community members allowed us to share concrete and conceptual ways in which we enact a femtoring praxis in higher education. We share this work in an effort to prevent the fragmentation of the mindbodyspirit, in academia and beyond.

### **PREVENTING FRAGMENTATION**

Drawing from the work of Women of Color who denounce and recount testimonios of violence and systemic oppression (2015, 148) documented in Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann and González's *Presumed Incompetent* (2012), Clelia Rodríguez's *Decolonizing Academia* (2018), and the 2014 Chicana/Latina Studies journal issue on institutional violence, we name the fragmentation of the mindbodyspirit, individualistic culture, epistemic violence, and foundational white supremacy in universities as elements that denote corrosiveness in academia. Some of the consequences of such violence in academic spaces are ingrained in values of competitiveness instead of solidarity and epistemic values that uplift and favor Eurocentric ways of knowing. For example, Rodríguez talks about the white gaze in academia, and how Indigenous and BIPOC knowledges are valued when they are {extracted} and regurgitated by white researchers, who convey this knowledge in a format that is palatable for accolades and the academic sphere. She writes "you need my opinion, my data, my story, my daily struggles to expose your brilliance. The presumption of your competence overshadows mine because your hands are dirty underneath your perfect manicure and sanitized gloves" (2018, 4). Herein, we recount our stories and make meaning of our lived experiences in academia recognizing that institutions of higher education in the US were not created for or by folks that look or have backgrounds similar to ours (Flores Carmona 2021). Yet, we recognize our privilege as documented individuals and how these interlocking identities play out in higher education. Hence, in the next sections we share about our process in retelling our testimonios through *pláticas~testimonios* (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016). We then share about our femtoring relationships and conclude by sharing how we braided our practices to arrive at what we term as femtoring (feminista mentoring) praxis.

### **THE POWER OF PLÁTICA~TESTIMONIO**

Adopting a Chicana/Latina feminist perspective in educational research is more than just adopting a theoretical lens, becoming familiar with the literature, learning corresponding methods, and

analyzing data. It embodies who we are and requires us to grapple with our activist-scholar role, embrace alternative ways of knowing, and confront those aspects of ourselves that render us the colonized or the perpetrator, particularly if we are working with marginalized communities (i.e., the immigrant, the queer, youth, and people of color), even if we are from these communities. (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016, 102)

Plática can be directly translated as “talk” or “chat,” due to the informality attached to it, yet it is a practice that goes beyond chit chat; plática allows individuals to share space and reflexivity through a meaningful conversation and has its roots in family and community traditions; or what Delgado Bernal (2001) refers to as pedagogies of the home. Chicana/Latina scholars have carved a space in academia for this practice to be legitimized, as it centers on lived experiences. “Our family pláticas allow us to witness shared memories, experiences, stories, ambiguities, and interpretations that impart us with a knowledge connected to personal, familial, and cultural history” (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016, 99). This approach facilitates the recount and analysis of testimonio as it is a process of reciprocity and shared vulnerability (Flores Carmona, Hamzeh, Bejarano, Sanchez and Ashmawi 2018).

Testimonio as a methodology/pedagogy, allows individuals to divulge their experiences with marginalization and oppression (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012; Calderon-Berumen and Espinosa Dulanto 2020; The Latina Feminist Group 2001). The Latina Feminist group proposed the exchange of testimonios between/among women in academia to co-construct their conocimiento [knowledge] as a “powerful method for feminist research praxis” (Anzaldúa 2005, 3). As colleagues who recount our experiences with the challenges we face as educators, we have been co-constructing knowledge in multiple ways and this is connected to our consciousness raising and awareness—essential in our feminista mentoring praxis.

Although we are situated in different educational environments, geographical locations, and sociopolitical realities, our conversations are often filled with recounts of interactions with students, our identity and positionality in our community, and the role of critical-self reflexivity. Our confianza [trust] facilitates vulnerability and space for each other to share fragments of our testimonio and make meaning together. Sharing has also informed and bridged our practice across institutional and metaphorical borders, and we continue to theorize from the flesh (Moraga 2015)—weaving our collective trenza of conocimiento with the intention and goal of healing. Yet, Anzaldúa reminds us that, “With the constant messages of the dominant culture, we have a struggle with the many borders we must cross” (2012, 200).

## **INSTITUTIONAL AND METAPHORICAL BORDERS**

“The body speaks in languages left unread. Indeed, the body encodes the agravios, the assaults that sometimes lead to numbness and alienation, to depression and despair, to a desire for an endless night of sleep.” (The Latina Feminist Group 2022, 263)

Our bodies have kept the record of exhaustive work in academia and scrutiny of our work. Our bodies physically react to the buildup of stress and heaviness that come with working in institutions

that dwell on capitalism and patriarchy. We have gotten sick and depressed, we have fallen into the rabbit hole of constantly wondering whether we are good enough, measuring ourselves with the metrics of academia. We reflect on the complexities of working and writing together at times of chaos and loss, in which each one of us is facing challenges related to work, immigration, health, and family. We talk over Zoom about how our responsibilities and workload have kept us away from our family and how we can hear inbox notifications, nonstop. Flooding emails from people demanding time and space from us, demanding a space in our agenda as our Outlook calendar is an open window to our availability. We talk about the borders that we are often trying to cross, how we need to repackage our language and make it palatable for students, colleagues, and supervisors. We struggle just by thinking, what would happen when and if we say “no”?

No, I will not take on your DEI workload.

No, I will not be your token employee.

No, I will not share my philosophy statement so that you can extract from it instead of developing your own.

No, I will not review the “cultural component” of your article and tell you what you are missing.

No, I will not change my language and writing to adjust to your comfort levels.

No, I don’t think it is a good idea to invite and pay a “deconstructed” white man to take my class so he can convince white students to examine their racism.

No, you are not culturally responsive and anti-racist because you hired me, a white Latina.

No, I will not take notes while you direct and set the tone for this meeting.

No, I will not be in charge of the technical aspects of this meeting.

No, I will not teach your class for free.

No, your white students don’t need a water break after listening to a presentation about ableism and white supremacy.

No, I don’t want to serve in the doctoral committee of your bigoted student who claims to have a target on his back because he is a white man.

No, I am not interested in reviewing the research proposal of your student unwilling to examine their white savior complex.

No, I am not interested in leading your “culturally sensitive growth mindset” workshop.

No, your “kindness” is not enough.

When we attempt to cross these institutional borders, we are labeled as problematic; suddenly all the hype about our presence turns into an issue, *una piedra en el zapato* (Flores Carmona and Rosenberg 2021). Our permanence and sense of belonging at the institution is not tangible; we are subject to complicity and adaptability. Oftentimes, we have said yes because we weigh the consequences of the white gaze, of being perceived as lazy, not being team players, or collegial. When will it be good enough? We were socialized and trained to say yes and to not speak up. Accountability is part of our mentoring relationship, and in our conversations, we remind each other of the importance of saying no, not only for ourselves, but for the students we work with.

The institutions we work at, both academia (Judith and Río) and formerly in corporate EdTech (Claudia) dwell in white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy. hooks (1986) refers to these

as interlocking systems of domination. By stating this, we recognize our own role and complicity in colonial practices, as they also live ingrained within us. We are accustomed to attributing value to canons of perfection and productivity that have been historically demanded from us. We too, embody privilege in multiple ways related to race and skin color, socioeconomic status, language, documented status, and professional power at our institutions. Yet, we have experienced the fragmentation of our mindbodyspirit. Patricia Williams (1987) terms this as spirit murdering. In her work, Williams sheds light on the oppressive and violent impacts of racism and white supremacy, particularly for/on Black women. As Latine scholars, we understand the complexities and different realities that we face in academia, as well as the privileges we hold. Williams' work and Tijerina Revilla's conceptualization of spirit protectors support our framing for how our experiences and our testimonios led us to define our femtoring praxis grounded in feminist thought and practice.

Someone who enacts femtoring understands that "to end patriarchy (another way of naming institutionalized sexism) we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism until we change our minds and hearts, until we let go sexist thought and action and replace it with feminist thought and action." (hooks 2000, ix) Working in higher education, for Río and Judith, means that we will be examined through the white gaze because institutions expect us to serve excessively and volunteer in spaces where we are expected to educate colleagues who supposedly hold horizontal relationships with us.

We have experienced alienation from colleagues who only want us in their spaces when we are serving them, enriching their knowledge, being their tokens. The three of us have been pushed to engage in reverse mentoring, to educate supervisors and individuals with power over us on issues that connect to our identity and work. We are asked to dumb down our work and present it as palatable and appeasing (Stewart 2017). Engaging in pláticas has allowed us to share fragments of our testimonio, and to hold space for each other's knowledge, experience, concerns, and pain (Flores Carmona et al. 2018). At different points in our careers, we have been asked to re-package our knowledge, to re-write research proposals, and to explain the relevance and validity of testimonio in academia to white colleagues. Committee members, and individuals who hold some sort of control over our transition in promotion, doctoral defense committees, and other constraining systems in higher education.

### **OUR JOURNEY: TRENZA/BRAID OF FEMTORING RELATIONSHIPS**

Education, research, and other scholarly traditions have emerged from or been framed by debates relating to human nature. The separation between mind and body, the investing of a human person with a soul, a psyche and a consciousness, the distinction between sense and reason, definitions of human virtue and morality, are cultural constructs. (Smith 2013, 50)

We, Claudia and Río, met each other during our doctoral program at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the US Southwest; we were at different stages of dissertating. Both of us had worked with Judith—Claudia's Chair and my dissertation committee member. We both employed testimonio methodology. Unfortunately, and even at HSIs, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and some

academics refuse to regard this approach as a valid/legitimate methodological and pedagogical tool. Although the work we conducted was qualitative in nature, testimonio methodology and Chicana/Latina frameworks were often questioned and contested by faculty members and review board members. We were asked to overly explain testimonio and to “make a case” for its worth in the academic world. We had to defend testimonio and decision-making for employing this work instead of “narrative inquiry” or “phenomenology.” We were pushed to complement our work with qualitative “objective” scientific methodologies that were valid to their gaze and understandings. Enrolling in Judith’s multiple qualitative inquiry courses and culturally responsive education classes opened a world of possibilities for us. In these classes, we were presented with the work of Chicana/Latina scholars who paved the way for this type of work to transgress the rigid canons of research and education. Learning about testimonio methodology allowed the three of us to continue writing our testimonios, draw from our lived experience and incorporate critical self-reflection into our framework as researchers and educators. These interactions also strengthened our connections as co-collaborators, as femtors to and with each other, and centered lived experiences shared via pláticas that led to us divulging testimonios. More importantly, we became sister-colleagues that support one another and inspire each other to not merely survive but thrive in academia.

### **THE SISTERHOOD OF SURVIVAL: CLAUDIA’S TESTIMONIO**

When I first entered the doctorate, I was assigned an advisor whose mistreatment left me perplexed. What I thought was an adequate relationship became an uncomfortable and humiliating one that left me confused and disheartened. By name the HSI I attended was meant to serve me, a first-generation Mexicana-Americana. Instead, I felt violated by her seething words and dislike of me. I kept my head down and followed the program requirements—eventually she left the university. I remained without an advisor for some time until finally seeking out Judith. I was startled by her genuine curiosity and heartfelt responses to my experiences as I kind of stumbled my way through the doctorate.

In my early years in the program, I lost my father to cancer and less than two years after, my mother left her physical body, too. The following year, a dear tío passed and my dear father-in-law with whom my wife, our son and I lived—also died. I became ill with some autoimmune issues. Throughout the doctoral journey, I experienced more loss with the passing of more family members and a dear friend. I had been ready to quit and without the aid and support of a femtor, not only would my work remain hidden but I would be lost. I am reminded that indeed, “nadie lo hace sola” (Flores Carmona 2019) and Río shed light on my doctoral journey, offering their sharp mind and open heart to read me as they read my work. I could be honest and open, healing while revealing.

We are all survivors of something! Namely the colonization of the mindbodyspirit and the frequent microaggressions (Delgado and Stefanic 2013) to the macro level and to our health. Whether it’s the creation of my queer family or the expectations of who or what I will become based on my location [the Borderland] and gender. I employ Anzaldúan (2015) thought and the epistemology

of the imagination she describes with the concept of “idear” in order to read and write myself into being. I created my autohistoria teoría (Keating & Anzaldúa, 2015), the blending of cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling and poetics towards transformation, healing, and the reconciliation of my fragmented Self. This was a direct result of the femtoring relationships with Judith and Ríó.

My testimonio would not have been possible without the pláticas that began with Judith who then created/fostered/supported/held a beautiful space for Ríó and I to process as we worked to unravel and reconcile our research experiences in our doctoral programs. I was in awe of both of them and marveled at my inclusion. Our pláticas facilitated my writing process which Anzaldúa described as, “...a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, working from the inside out” (Anzaldúa 2015, 6).

### **MY MOTHER’S SOBREVIVENCIA AND BORDER CROSSING**

As I connected more deeply with Judith and Ríó, I felt more in tune with my cultural intuition and the pedagogies of the home I could now name (Delgado Bernal 1998; 2001). Our pláticas reminded me of the many moments my tías and precious mother had in which they shared consejos regarding their children, their husbands, business matters and various family affairs including the acquisition of the “very important papeles” they often spoke of. Since my mother had made the crossing to el Norte at an early age, she was the guiding force for many. These papeles: green cards, visas, citizenship, I knew early in life held a value my mother understood and facilitated the procurement for so many family members. As I lingered and listened, I learned that women in my life had a source of power that was infinite and expansive and that my elders carried this knowledge not only in their minds but in their aching huesos. Their feet also carried this knowledge from years of standing at the stove, carrying and soothing babies, chasing children, working the land, shaping and walking rows of earth with seeds that would become family meals. This cultural knowledge imparted through these pláticas (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016) revolved around the deep connections my tías and mother made during her lifetime of the relationships with each individual and collective group. I felt the collective responsibility my mother navigated. I learned the familial responsibilities and obligations at an early age that the women in my life took charge of. The traditions of my lived experience could be appreciated in a new light; I felt a greater pride I knew was missing.

I am reflecting deeply on my doctoral journey as I write this and recall the moment of awakening when first reading from *Telling to Live* (2001). It was shocking and painful to read the words and to be invited to unearth my own papelitos guardados. I think about the pláticas Judith carved out time for and patiently walked with me on my journey, oftentimes carrying me. I did not know I could reveal what I held in my mind and body. My femtor, Judith, my professor, advisor and confidant acknowledged me in an unexpected way. These pláticas became treasured moments where the words of my story jumped out of my mouth before I could censor them. We would meet, share a moment to enjoy a meal and talk. Our pláticas centered around my research interests and wonderings but they were intensely personal moments that always left me feeling surprised; why



of the imagination she describes with the concept of “idear” in order to read and write myself into being. I created my autohistoria teoría (Keating & Anzaldúa, 2015), the blending of cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling and poetics towards transformation, healing, and the reconciliation of my fragmented Self. This was a direct result of the femtoring relationships with Judith and Ríó.

My testimonio would not have been possible without the pláticas that began with Judith who then created/fostered/supported/held a beautiful space for Ríó and I to process as we worked to unravel and reconcile our research experiences in our doctoral programs. I was in awe of both of them and marveled at my inclusion. Our pláticas facilitated my writing process which Anzaldúa described as, “...a gesture of the body, a gesture of creativity, working from the inside out” (Anzaldúa 2015, 6).

### **MY MOTHER’S SOBREVIVENCIA AND BORDER CROSSING**

As I connected more deeply with Judith and Ríó, I felt more in tune with my cultural intuition and the pedagogies of the home I could now name (Delgado Bernal 1998; 2001). Our pláticas reminded me of the many moments my tías and precious mother had in which they shared consejos regarding their children, their husbands, business matters and various family affairs including the acquisition of the “very important papeles” they often spoke of. Since my mother had made the crossing to el Norte at an early age, she was the guiding force for many. These papeles: green cards, visas, citizenship, I knew early in life held a value my mother understood and facilitated the procurement for so many family members. As I lingered and listened, I learned that women in my life had a source of power that was infinite and expansive and that my elders carried this knowledge not only in their minds but in their aching huesos. Their feet also carried this knowledge from years of standing at the stove, carrying and soothing babies, chasing children, working the land, shaping and walking rows of earth with seeds that would become family meals. This cultural knowledge imparted through these pláticas (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016) revolved around the deep connections my tías and mother made during her lifetime of the relationships with each individual and collective group. I felt the collective responsibility my mother navigated. I learned the familial responsibilities and obligations at an early age that the women in my life took charge of. The traditions of my lived experience could be appreciated in a new light; I felt a greater pride I knew was missing.

I am reflecting deeply on my doctoral journey as I write this and recall the moment of awakening when first reading from *Telling to Live* (2001). It was shocking and painful to read the words and to be invited to unearth my own papelitos guardados. I think about the pláticas Judith carved out time for and patiently walked with me on my journey, oftentimes carrying me. I did not know I could reveal what I held in my mind and body. My femtor, Judith, my professor, advisor and confidant acknowledged me in an unexpected way. These pláticas became treasured moments where the words of my story jumped out of my mouth before I could censor them. We would meet, share a moment to enjoy a meal and talk. Our pláticas centered around my research interests and wonderings but they were intensely personal moments that always left me feeling surprised; why

does this incredible scholar even care about me and my story? As I came to learn about qualitative research and the importance of studying the lived experience, I began to formulate new ideas for research based on my own teaching experiences; I was granted permission to connect on a personal level. Making my lived experience the focal point of my work in my doctoral program generated such an unsettling response in me. So, as I unearthed and opened and read my *papelitos guardados*, I became bound to continue to resolve the unresolved as my dear femtor taught me.

I drank eagerly from the well of knowledge Anzaldúa offered, the invitation granted through my dear femtor, Judith. The written words, I felt, were written for me that included the body, the mind, the spirit seared through my cerebro to forge the cohesion of the mindbodyspirit that mySelf needed. Anzaldúa allowed for the body and the spirit to be part of the learning journey of the doctorate. I found healing in naming the silencing I had experienced and was able to reconcile and heal mySelf through my *autohistoria teoría* (Anzaldúa 2015). I learned of the seven stages of *conocimiento*, morphing and shedding my skin, and relying on the Coyolxauhqui Imperative to heal (Anzaldúa 2013). I entered into *Nepantla*, the liminal and transformative site to write, to discover, and perceive to “produce(s) knowledge and *conocimiento* [insight]” (1) guided by the Coyolxauhqui imperative, “...calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost, the act of mourning the losses that haunt us. (Keating and Anzaldúa 2015, 2). The pieces of my heart I leave at my parents’ grave, I collect and carry as I continue to work to reconcile and reclaim mySelf continuously through my *testimonio*. At NWSA, I shared images to describe my doctoral journey; shards of glass in a whirlwind to bring to mind the brokenness I felt by reliving experiences I unraveled. I reclaimed mySelf through my *testimonio*. Another image shared was that of the *Kintsugi* in which the artistic philosophy of using gold to fill in broken pieces of pottery can be understood as the healing power of the re-membering I was enacting.

### **RÍO: GETTING THROUGH THE FOREST**

Academia has given me understanding, language, and skills. However, I have also experienced harm and violence. I rarely questioned academia’s expectation of me changing, getting better, producing more, becoming more fluent, or working on my English to make it more palatable for students and colleagues. I filled my schedule with activities, projects, writing, and teaching because I fell into the rabbit hole of endless tasks to prove my worth to my committee members. I did exactly what the institution expected and overworked myself. My family time was almost non-existent. Whichever time I had for my family, friends, and community was clouded by anxiety and guilt. I had learned how to quantify my worth in terms of time and productivity using the metrics of academia. Halfway through my doctoral journey, I collapsed. As I spoke about this at NWSA, I shared the image of a foggy forest, one in which I felt lost and as I was walking around in circles. I imploded during graduate school and became severely depressed. The disconnect from my family and ill father was unbearable.

Claudia and I met while simultaneously writing ourselves and piecing our *testimonio* together. We spoke about the challenges we encountered working towards our degrees while struggling with our mental health and the systemic barriers in front of us. Because of the *confianza* environment

that we co-created, we were able to share our stories, talk about our lived experiences inside and outside the university, specifically as they informed our testimonio work. We talked and theorized from the flesh (Moraga 2015), named our pain as it impacted our work in higher education. In this relationship, we cultivated solidarity. Along with our femtor Judith, we read each other's work, listened to each other's challenges, discussed very much-needed boundaries between our time and the university. The three of us were working on our writing, and although these were different projects, we were able to find intersecting themes and learn from each other's approaches to Critical Race Feminista epistemologies. Judith was one of my professors and committee members. Our pláticas were, and still are, a breath of fresh air for me during this journey. Her pedagogy pushed me to unlearn and commit to self-reflective practice. Our femtoring relationship continued beyond the graduate student-professor institutional bond and through my transitions into academia as a professor.

Judith and I had shared about the displays of “brotherhood” and white supremacy in one of my graduate courses while working at a “liberal” predominantly white school. On multiple occasions, my students expressed their resistance towards readings that shed light on systemic violence, white rage, privilege, and power. Some examples included statements such as “I feel like I am walking on eggshells,” (when talking about race and racism), “I am a man of faith, but also a mandated reporter of the law” (while talking about immigration and undocumented students and their families, “I am hesitant to share my thoughts, but when I voice them I am talking to you, my brother,” ( a white man addressing another cisgender white man in the Zoom call while having a conversation on identity and situatedness). These rants and comments appeared in our discussion boards, group discussions, and throughout the assignments. “It is your class; take it back,” those were Judith’s words during one of our pláticas regarding this taxing course. Judith’s advice did not allude to power dynamics or authoritarianism—that places the instructor as the sole decision-maker but to the relevance of pushing students to think beyond their comfort and, most importantly, to identify when and how whiteness is weaponized. My femtor sister-colegas generously shared their valuable time.

In collaboration and solidarity, we processed and supported each other, as García-Peña describes as “accompaniment” or “acompañamiento” which challenges the canons of isolation and competitiveness in an institution. Instead, acompañamiento “relates to the idea that social change is a process that is not given but emerges from the people” (2022, 73). Accompaniment allowed space to share and listen through each scenario, process, share similar experiences and ways in which we have interrupted racism, microaggressions, and white rage in our practice. We processed together then and continue to do so now. Following Judith’s example, the focus of the class and the priority of the work had to be equity, and of course, the Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other students of Color that were in the space, and who were doing critical work.

### **JUDITH’S GENEALOGY OF EMPOWERMENT**

I can trace my “genealogy of empowerment” (The Latina Feminist Group 2001, 25) to matriarchs in my family: my mother, who was the first to come to the United States in 1985, and my

grandmother, a strong *mujer* who was widowed by age 40. I am a first-generation student and scholar. I know that institutions of higher education in the United States were not created for or by folk that looked like the three of us. On the contrary, higher education has been created for and by white elite men. Policies and practices that are the foundation of higher education go against the very concept of being *feministas*, being collaborative, being a collective. These practices and the foundation of higher education also is contradictory to what Hispanic-serving alludes to—even at HSIs we are not able to center our epistemologies and pedagogies.

Nadie lo hace sola/nobody does it alone, and Río and Claudia have been as much my teachers and femtors as I have been theirs. We have stood up against the oppressive systems that have tried to literally erase us from particular academic spaces—spaces that have tried to push us out of academia. You have read Río and Claudia’s testimonios and they have given me too much credit. It is learners like them who give me strength to fight back, to speak up, to speak back. Río with their fierce and profound intellect and Claudia with her powerful and sharp words—they have no idea of how much I have learned from them. Gracias. Your pain and intellect, your insecurities and fierceness—all melded together in your outstanding dissertations and in your current roles as administrator and pedagogue. Even though both of you struggled to complete your doctoral degrees—your dissertations are a testament, a testimonio itself. A testimonio of overcoming epistemic racism and of attempted epistemicide (Boaventura de Sousa 2005). You survived and thrived.

Our femtoring pláticas and connections have sustained our mindbodyspirits. It is amigas, colleagues like you who have femtored and empowered me along our respective educational trajectories. This includes our learning from the sisterhood and femtoring reflected in anthologies such as *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (The Latina Feminist Group 2001) and *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology* (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, and Villenas 2006). It is also about creating and nurturing colectivas that enact a *feminista praxis*—like the national organization *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS). In critically reflecting on our encuentros and pláticas, we are each highlighting the essence of our femtoring, founded in strong sisterhood, reciprocal and intergenerational femtorship, and deep care for each other’s *feminista* humanity (Burciaga and Tavares 2006). Your testimonios, Río and Claudia, remind me that even though the corrosiveness of academia has attempted to murder our spirits (Williams 1991), in every plática and testimonio sharing, we have created and sustained spaces that have allowed us to be our whole selves, mind, body, and spirit. Like the three strands needed to braid a beautiful *trenza*, the three of us are interconnected in a tight bond that will continue to grow and extend our genealogical femtoring tree—our genealogy of empowerment.

### **DISCUSSION: BRAIDING A FEMTORING FEMINISTA PRAXIS**

It is critical to understand that femtoring does not mean helping each other to move up the ladder. Said practice is common and highly problematic; it already occurs among spaces in which white feminism predominates and the main goal of mentoring is limited to achieving power that

cisgender men hold, and to marginalizing individuals whose identities differ from the dominant groups. As we mentioned above, this practice also goes beyond the connection between two cisgender women as the femtoring should transgress the gender binary. Dr. Manal Hamzeh, one of our dear femtors talks about this in her lectures, femtoring too challenges colonial conceptions of gender (Personal Communication). Further, our understandings of femtoring do not equate uncritical approaches to “[cishet] women in positions of power.” Instead, it pushes us to collectively question the power structures that minoritize and push non-dominant identities to the margins.

In a Eurocentric, male dominated space such as academia, femtoring relationships and practices work to undo power hierarchies and to put into practice a feminista politics. Femtoring, for us, has meant the development of relationships grounded on critical pedagogy, solidarity, accountability, and transformative practice. We exchange knowledge that has uplifted us when our mindbodyspirit has been shattered to pieces while identifying, naming, and challenging systemic violence. It has been an ongoing exercise of critical analysis and self-reflexivity whose scope must reach beyond personal gain or surviving and escalating ivory towers. “Like the trenza, when we are able to weave together our personal, professional, and communal identities we are often stronger and more complete” (Delgado Bernal 2008, 135).

### **THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF FEMTORING.**

We highlight and uplift the pedagogical value of femtoring throughout our journey as sister colegas, spaces such as NWSA, and in this article. Our femtoring relationships have allowed us to share tools for survival in hostile environments—to share and show how to enact similar pedagogies. This is one way of enacting a femtoring praxis. With students of Color, we have open conversations acknowledging their whole selves and understanding that their lived experiences, like our own, are influenced by their identities and the power structures of higher education. Further, as Claudia mentions in her testimonio, the pedagogical scope of femtoring reaches beyond academic spaces and has permeated her work as an educator. Through femtoring, we can establish transformative pedagogies that challenge the dominant narratives in our work environments and community spaces.

Río and Judith's femtoring relationship has influenced their pedagogical approaches and engagement with Chicana/Latina feminista frameworks. They have been in each other's classrooms presenting our work and engaging with each other's learners, including pre-service teachers, students at the Honors College, and graduate students in the humanities. Not only have they shared their knowledge, but they have developed co-learning opportunities around testimonio methodology/pedagogy. For instance, co-designing and facilitating a workshop for community members from both sides of the Mexico-US border. This work presented an opportunity for both to think about trauma-informed considerations around testimonio work and generate several options and prompts open enough for participants to discuss their lived experience to the extent of their safety. The success and learning process that stems from our work permeates our pedagogies and work with students in higher education, specifically when we center on testimonio pedagogy.

## **SOLIDARITY.**

Through pláticas, we offered support to each other during challenging times caused or exacerbated by the pressures of higher education. Platicar para sobrevivir. Claudia accurately names it as she cites Flores Carmona's emphasis on solidarity, "Nadie lo hace sola" (2019). Our femtoring relationships are grounded in solidarity, our understanding of each other's struggles even when our experiences are different. We hold space for each other and together make meaning of our experiences with systemic violence, microaggressions, struggle, grief, and loss. Our solidarity and dynamics allow us to enact and practice feminista politics, because as bell hooks writes, "there can be no such thing as 'power feminism' if the vision of power evoked is power gained through the exploitation and oppression of others" (2006, 6).

We understand and value our relationships beyond our "membership" to the institutions that employ us. Not working for the same institution does not impede us from connecting, collaborating, and supporting each other. For years, we have accompanied each other during challenging times related to our educational, academic, professional, and personal journeys. While academia wants to keep us isolated and divided (Burciaga and Tavares 2006), we build coalitions with each other and like-minded colleagues in order to resist.

## **ACCOUNTABILITY.**

A relationship grounded in confianza and solidarity has allowed the three of us to hold each other accountable and share constructive criticism. Our shared trust allows us to have pláticas in which we share situations at work and openly embrace constructive criticism and feedback. However, it is important to note that we don't always agree. Because of the trust we have with each other—we can arrive at a teachable moment or to new understanding. Often, feedback stems from pointing out critical issues that we are overseeing or are clouded by our intersecting identities, positionality, or privilege. These pláticas allow us to grow as scholars, educators, and as community members. Said openness to grow and regard each other's feedback as an opportunity to unlearn has facilitated our connections with students and co-workers. That is, we can model femtoring and pedagogical approaches in horizontal relationships and dialogue, upholding this practice as key to our collective growth.

## **CONCLUSION: FEMTORING MOVES US TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE**

A feminista femtoring praxis (or feminista mentoring) necessitates that we enact critical self-reflexivity to understand the power dynamics and challenge a top-down model of mentoring. The mentor-mentee dynamic usually alludes to the mentor being able to provide wisdom, knowledge, resources onto the mentee—usually a one-way relationship. The three of us argue that a feminista femtoring praxis is a reciprocal relationship. That is, through continued support and sharing of knowledge and resources, the order of authorship, the consejos imparted on the job market, on-going checking-in, and being there beyond "work" but connecting/merging the personal/professional/political. Re-telling our testimonio through pláticas has served us as a tool

to re-think our approaches to writing, teaching, and working in environments that center on education. Femtoring serves as the light for a journey wrought with highs and lows and sustenance to nourish the spirit. Femtoring runs through our roles in academia, education, and overall, our community. We also know that our consciousness raising and awareness is essential in our feminista mentoring praxis. As a result of femtoring, each one of us has transformed our praxis as we continue to learn from each other. Our solidarity allows us to remain connected with each other as we experience the heaviness of institutional violence in different ways, given our situatedness and positionality.

I, Claudia, learned to name my positionality, ground my feet in *Nepantla* (Anzaldúa 2001) as part of my epistemological understanding, and tap into my survivorship to tell my story for healing and reclamation. What femtoring offers is comfort, a space where I am uplifted in *bodymindspirit* to maintain what I call “my secret agency” that I enacted in the corporate world of EdTech and continue to do so in my current work at an HSI. The parallels of our lives while I worked in EdTech and while my *colega-amigas* are doing what I refer to as “the real work” in academia are that we deal with systems that rely on our bodies and minds to profit from. I am often conflicted in the workspace of education as a product; together we reflect on who benefits from our critical knowledge.

I, Río, learned to develop and establish a teaching philosophy grounded in Chicana/Latina epistemologies (del Alba Acevedo 2001). Namely, establishing congruency and critical self-reflection; I learned it from my femtors. Unlearning and questioning my practice and my ideologies' roots also stem from my relationship with my sister-colegas. Every *plática* is an opportunity to unlearn and unpack; our trusting relationships facilitate our communication without the rigid filters of formality that exist in higher education spaces. That is, the norms developed by and for white men. Femtoring and connectedness with my sister-colegas energizes me to engage in work that challenges Eurocentric canons and that puts students of color at the center of teaching, curriculum, and programming. My femtors have taught me to show up for myself and my students in ways that center their epistemologies and lived experiences. Through this collaborative work, we continue to learn about different ways to remove barriers in our pedagogy and presence at these institutions.

There is a saying in Spanish, “*la estudiante superó a la maestra*/the student has surpassed the teacher” and I, Judith, truly believe that. Both Río and Claudia have expanded on *testimonio* work and praxis. They continuously teach me that being critically self-reflexive must be accompanied by action. Through their writing they teach me about vulnerability as a site of resistance and empowerment. Our reciprocal feminista femtoring praxis is about telling to heal and theorizing from the flesh (Moraga 2015). As *colega-amigas* we bear witness together in academia and beyond.

## CONTRIBUTORS:

**Dr. Río López** is the director of Chicano Programs at NMSU. They are originally from Ciudad Juárez and received their Ph.D. in Special Education with a concentration in Bilingual and Multicultural Education at NMSU. Dr. López employs qualitative methodologies and Critical Race Feminista frameworks. As CP director, they engage in equity work rooted in solidarity and intersectionality to carve out spaces that ensure belonging for students from historically minoritized backgrounds.

**Claudia Yolanda Casillas** is from El Paso del Norte and her work is centered on Chicana feminist epistemologies with Borderland Theory to deconstruct and reframe deficit ideologies in school systems. Through the power of testimonio and autohistoria teoría she remains steadfast in reimagining as an instrument towards decolonizing praxis. She earned her Ph.D. in Education with an emphasis in Critical Pedagogy from NMSU.

Committed to social justice praxis, **Dr. Judith Flores Carmona** is Professor in the Honors College, Faculty Fellow for the Office of the Vice President for Equity, Inclusion and Diversity and Associated Faculty in Borderlands and Ethnic Studies at New Mexico State University. Dr. Flores Carmona is the daughter of Josefina and Vicente. She was born in Veracruz, Mexico, raised in South Los Angeles and is a first-generation college student and scholar.

**ORCID ID:** Judith Flores Carmona. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0127-5773>

**CONTACT:** Río Lopez <[aclopez@nmsu.edu](mailto:aclopez@nmsu.edu)>

## REFERENCE LIST

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2012. *Borderlands: The new mestiza: 25th anniversary*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria E. 2013. "Now let us shift... the path of conocimiento... inner work, public acts." In *This bridge we call home*, edited by Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating, 554-592. New York: Routledge.
- Bonaventura de Sousa, Santos, ed. 2007. *Democratizing democracy: Beyond the liberal democratic canon*. New York: Verso Books.
- Calderon-Berumen, Freyca, and Miryam Espinosa-Dulanto. 2020. "Enlazando/rompiendo fronteras in curriculum theory: Testimonio research's aesthetic dimensions." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 17, no. 3: 233-237.
- Del Alba Acevedo, Luz. 2001. *Telling to live: Latina feminist testimonios*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic, eds. 2000. *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Temple University Press.
- Delgado Bernal, Dolores. 2008. "La trenza de identidades: Weaving together my personal, professional, and communal identities." *Doing the public good: Latina/o scholars engage*



- civic participation*, edited by Kenneth P. Gonzalez and Raymond V. Padilla. New York: Routledge.
- Flores Carmona, Judith. 2021. "‘Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres:’ Theories and Methodologies that Center Latinx/a/o Epistemologies and Pedagogies." In *Studying Latinx/a/o Students in Higher Education*, edited by Nicole M. Garcia, Cristobal Salinas Jr, and Jesus Cisneros, 68-78. New York: Routledge.
- Flores Carmona, J. 2019. *The importance of Fem/Mentors*. *Hispanic Outlook on Education Magazine*, April. Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.hispanicoutlook.com/search-results?q=Fem~2Fmentors>.
- Flores Carmona, Judith, and Lauren Rosenberg. 2021. "Telling to heal: Mending our fractured Mindbodyspirit." *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education* 14, no. 1: 24-39.
- Fierros, Cindy O., and Dolores Delgado Bernal. 2016. "Vamos a platicar: The contours of pláticas as Chicana/Latina feminist methodology." *Chicana/Latina Studies*: 98-121.
- Gonzalez, Alejandra, Irene Lara, Carolina Prado, Sophia Lujan Rivera, and Carmen Rodriguez. 2015. "Passing the sage: Our sacred testimonio as CuranderaScholarActivists in Academia." *Chicana/Latina Studies*: 110-155.
- Gutiérrez y Muhs, Gabriella, Yolanda Flores Niemann, Carmen G. González, and Angela P. Harris. 2012. "Presumed incompetent: The intersections of race and class for women in academia." Utah State University Press.
- Hamzeh, Manal, interview by Río López, February 11, 2020.
- hooks, b. 2000. *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press.
- Keating, Ana Louise, and Gloria Anzaldúa. 2015. "Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality." Duke University Press.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 1983. "La güera." In *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 24-34. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table/ Women of Color Press.
- Moraga, Cherríe. 1983. "Introduction to ‘Entering the lives of others: Theory in the flesh’ " In *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 24-34. Latham, NY: Kitchen Table/ Women of Color Press.
- Oluo, Ijeoma. 2020. *Mediocre: The dangerous legacy of white male America*. Cypress, CA: Seal Press.
- Peña, Lorgia García. 2022. *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Rodríguez, Clelia O. 2018. *Decolonizing academia: Poverty, oppression and pain*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2021. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Stewart, Dafina-Lazarus. 2017. "Language of Appeasement," Inside Higher Ed., March 30. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/03/30/colleges-need-language-shift-not-one-you-think-essay>.

- The Latina Feminist Group. 2001. *Telling to live: Latina feminist testimonios*. Duke University Press.
- Williams, Patricia. 1987. "Spirit-murdering the messenger: The discourse of fingerpointing as the law's response to racism." *University of Miami Law Review* 42 (Fall), 127.
- Williams, J. P. 1991. *The alchemy of race and rights*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.