Abuelita Storytelling

From Pain to Possibility and Implications for Higher Education

Pedro E. Nava

In this article, storytelling between an abuelita *and* abuelito *and their adult grandchild serves as a site of intergenerational communication of teachings and knowledge. These communications include the preservation of cultural and historical memory, painful experiences dealing with internal and external forms of social marginalization, and the reimagining of possibilities. The author draws on two key educationally related stories more than thirty years apart shared by his abuelita to reveal how educational dreams and aspirations were thwarted and abetted. From these stories, implications for the use of intergenerational storytelling in the higher education classroom as a vehicle toward resisting social oppression are explored.*

Introduction

I give thanks to God that [of] all my children—not one found themselves in the extreme poverty [we experienced] when they were married and started making their own lives. Not one found themselves in that poverty that we experienced and suffered through. And we are [still] here. . . . That is why one is considerate. And I feel sadness, and one is considerate of other people that you see arrive [to this country] and they have nothing, and when there is no work and all. One

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> is considerate and feels what those people are suffering and with their children and all.
>
> —Hermila Yañez

The opening quote by Hermila Yañez stems from a lifelong reflection of wisdom and spiritual maturity that comes from raising eleven children to adulthood. As a woman deeply rooted in her Catholic faith, she thanks God for ensuring that her children were not subjected to the kind of severe social oppression she experienced. As a Mexican immigrant woman and mother, she expresses solidarity with people who have persevered through economic poverty and whose families have suffered greatly due to a lack of work and available food. In reflecting on key moments in her life, Hermila tells stories that reveal the guiding role of her education, faith, and unflinching hope for the future; her stories are manifestations of a preferential option for the poor.[1]

The purpose of this article is to explore how storytelling between *abuelita/abuelito*[2] and their (grand)children serves as a site of intergenerational communication of teachings and knowledge. These communications include the preservation of cultural and historical memory, painful experiences dealing with internal and external forms of social marginalization, and the reaffirmation of political commitments. In addition, they are an important reminder that stories can fulfill multiple roles. As Richard Delgado reminds us, most storytelling writing focuses on "community-building functions"; stories can also reveal that "what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel" (72). Furthermore, through the themes of education, faith, and hope, I connect these family stories with implications for the higher education classroom.

In this article, I draw out details between the storytelling of my grandparents, beginning with my *abuelito* and his adventurous stories of his initial migration to the United Sates as a hired agricultural worker in the 1940s and 1950s. In 2005, following his passing, I began to interview my *abuelita*. She explained to me how her father crushed her aspiration of becoming an educator, and how she dealt with this destruction of her dream in 1940s rural Mexico. Furthermore, I explore two key examples of how these lived experiences and home-based pedagogies have shaped her struggle; she also dealt with the pain of having a daughter leave home to attend college to fulfill her higher education aspirations in the 1970s. I conclude with an analysis of the two incidents and their implications for higher education pedagogy and practice.

Storytelling at (Grandparents') Home

Storytelling has been one of the primary ways that my *abuelita* and *abuelito* have communicated our family's struggles and resilience. Since I was a young child, our *abuelita/o's* home was always a central gathering place during Christmas time. Eutimio and Hermila Yañez's eleven adult children and countless grandchildren would gather during the holidays and feast on delicious food. After sharing a meal, my grandfather Eutimio would pull me in close, telling me stories of how it was when he first came to the United States. I would patiently sit and listen to the exploits of a young Eutimio coming to the United States in the early 1940s to work as a hired hand during the Bracero program, which first started during World War II with the recruitment of Mexican men to perform agricultural labor. Through these stories, I learned about the different places along the California coast where he had spent months at a time working.

In 2005, during finals week as a first-year PhD student at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA), I received the terrible news of his passing. His death was one of the first times I experienced the passing of a close family member. I struggled deeply with his absence. Following his passing, I felt conflicted and guilty for not having recorded the innumerable stories he had shared with me, especially after I had promised him I would do so. I visited my hometown a month before his passing and had planned to interview him as soon as I completed the academic quarter. At the time, the chance for a face-to-face conversation with my grandfather was complicated due to the distance between our hometown in California's San Joaquin Valley and the university.

During my return to UCLA, at the beginning of the next quarter, I shared my guilt at having not recorded his stories and my complex feelings around my grandfather's death with my academic mentor and graduate school peers. My peers—almost all of them women, and Chicana feminists—expressed their heartfelt condolences about the loss my grandfather. However, they were quick to remind me that my *abuelita* was also living and her stories mattered, too. Through this experience, I began a journey of healing by reentering the loss I experienced from the death of my *abuelito* and beginning to learn about the stories of my *abuelita*. The following questions guided my inquiry into my *abuelita*'s storytelling: (1) How do key life moments around education shape past and present thinking around pain and possibility? (2) What are the implications of these stories for higher education pedagogy and practice?

Setting and Interview Method

The data collection process was facilitated through the use of life history interviews with the narrator, my *abuelita* Hermila Yañez, a seventy-nine-year-old immigrant mother of eleven adult children. Given the intimate relationship that I have with my *abuelita* Hermila, and following the loss of my grandfather, I felt it was too long to wait to conduct in-person interviews. Instead, I opted for the use of telephone interviews and recorded them with her permission. I found this method appropriate as it allowed for long, uninterrupted conversations where my *abuelita* expanded on stories without the fear of being interrupted. Stylistically, my *abuelita* would respond to a question with in-depth, detailed narration with many tangential points. The mutual interest my *abuelita* and I shared in intergenerational communications served a healing function in the absence of my *abuelito*.

More than ten hours of telephone conversations were recorded in June and July 2008 and then again in September 2010 in person. The stories covered the following themes: education, labor, migration, engagement in children's schooling, and the role of religion and spirituality as a guiding pathway, as well as other topics. The interviews ranged from 50 to 120 minutes, with the average interview lasting for 90 minutes. We typically began each open-ended interview (as per Yow 38) with me asking my narrator (my *abuelita*) a predetermined question about her childhood, her education, or general details about her family and siblings. From there, the narrator would offer additional information about the topic she felt was important. When she would pause, I would sometimes ask probing and clarifying questions regarding dates and times as well as the context and space where the story was taking place.

I began data analysis by focusing on powerful quotes and stories in the interviews as well as writing theoretical memos. I relied on *contextualizing strategies* for the analysis of the life history interview data (Maxwell). Contextualizing strategies are strong when we "look for relationships that connect statements and events with a context into a coherent whole" (Maxwell 79).

Storytelling and My *Abuelita*

Hermila Yañez grew up in a small rural town in the Mexican state of Michoacán. She was the second oldest of ten siblings; she and her family lived in severe

poverty. Hermila's father, Daniel, did not own any land and would often work as a sharecropper for his family's subsistence. Juanita, her mother, was often sick but would work as a maid. Hermila began school at age thirteen after the family moved to the town of Villamar in 1941. Initially, the family hesitated to send the children to school since their parents worried that they would be treated badly and unfairly. In fact, were it not for a lady she met in the town who inquired as to why she and her siblings were not in school, Hermila may not ever have attended. This lady insisted she attend and offered to help purchase school supplies; she was even willing to talk to Hermila's parents if they did not want to let them go. They eventually attended for four years before the family moved to El Paso, another community about twenty miles away, in 1945.

Hermila would live in El Paso for the next few years, briefly attending school, primarily looking after her younger siblings and tutoring them after school. Then she met Eutimio, the man who would become her husband. Eutimio was only in El Paso for a few months at a time, before he went to the United States as a hired farmhand. Initially, Hermila was hesitant to see him, because she knew her parents would not approve of him since he had a well-earned reputation for having many girlfriends in the area. During his time in the United States he would write letters to her to stay in touch. Soon after they began this correspondence, Hermila's parents discovered his letters and subsequently found out that he was courting Hermila. Eutimio began sending his letters to Hermila's cousin's address.

Hermila and Eutimio married in 1948 and returned to the community of Villamar, where her father coerced a favor from a priest to do the wedding. The local priest in El Paso refused to marry Eutimio as he had yet to fulfill his one year of service to the Mexican government, which was required for all males over the age of eighteen. They lived in El Paso with Hermila's in-laws, where they both had a difficult time living in the company of his family. During this time, Eutimio had Bracero contracts to work in the United States, mostly in the Santa Barbara/Oxnard area in Southern California, but he would end up as far north as the Central Coast in the Salinas area. During this time, he sent remittances to Hermila, who would use that money to take care of her children. By 1964, Eutimio had saved enough money to petition for the legal residence of his oldest son, Jose Socorro, to be able to legally come to the United States and work. Later that year, Jose Socorro left to work alongside his father in one of his northward trips to the United States. Three years later, in 1967, Hermila saw another three children leave for the United States, as they were subsequently legalized. By this time, Hermila

and her five other children awaited their process for legalization and a northward trek to reunite with their family.

By 1969, the remaining members of the family obtained their legal residence status and came to the United States. They settled in Merced, California; apparently, the price of peaches yielded better wages in Central California in the late 1960s, and it was an attractive incentive for my *abuelito*, Eutimio, to move his family there. The family would make two more additions in 1970 and 1972, at which point they would relocate, purchasing a home in the nearby town of Planada. Eutimio worked as a farmworker, gathering all the seasonal crops in and around Merced County, picking peaches, figs, and table grapes. He also pruned and thinned the crops and drove a tractor whenever necessary. When the children were not in school, the whole family would work together to support my grandfather, picking every seasonal crop imaginable.

This hierarchical system—everyone worked under my grandfather's social security number—continued until my *abuelita* demanded to be paid separately. She gave him an ultimatum—he would pay her separately or she would no longer accompany him to work. While Hermila hardly worked outside the home, she made it clear to him that from that point forward she would be working on her own accord.

In 1982 Hermila suffered a terrible accident at work when she was picking olives. One day, while atop a fourteen-step ladder, the ladder got wrenched to the side and turned on her, and she fell from it, damaging a disk in her lower back and remained at home full time. She received disability payments because of the serious injury she suffered while working.

In the following sections I detail two key life moments that emerged in Hermila's storytelling around the theme of education and educational access. From these experiences, I gather important implications for pedagogy in higher education.

Mentoring and Tutoring Peers

A pivotal experience for Hermila occurred at age fifteen while living in El Paso and attending elementary school. At the time, she had already completed four grades of school in three years in the town of Villamar, having skipped the third grade. As a well-respected young person in her community, her decision to attend school had a broad impact; some of her friends were only allowed to attend when they learned that she would be enrolling. Since they had one classroom in the entire

town, all the students were in the same classroom and the teacher instructed each grade level. As a student of nontraditional age in Villamar, Hermila recounts learning to read and write at an accelerated rate because of her exposure to content that students in higher grades were still learning. Hermila said:

> I only studied for three years, but in those three years I was skipped to the fourth grade. I didn't complete, you can say they allowed me to skip it because I surpassed everything. I was excelling as a student. . . . I knew that the third grade had already passed through me. When they would give the assigned work to those in third grade I was already ready to take notes and learn.
>
> I was really intelligent, I was very dedicated to school. I liked looking closely, doing my homework well. . . . I was the only student who had my notes well organized, and I really liked school. I would do my homework and I liked to do it.
>
> When students were in a class a grade above me, I would stick around to listen and look and I would take the class. I would take it because I would not be busy and the teacher would not deny me, she would tell me [that I could stay]. . . . The more that I learned the more that I sought to know.

As Hermila tells it, she moved quickly through the schooling ranks as a result of her aptitude for school, excellent study habits, and intelligence. In El Paso, she was already in the fifth grade and they really did not have the kinds of classes that would continue to challenge and push her. She ended up embodying the role of peer tutor for her classmates and not actually going to school anymore. Her decision not to attend school was also the result of a negative interaction she had with some boys who insulted her.

After a few days, her teacher inquired about her absences. The teacher visited her house with the desire to speak to her parents about Hermila's returning as her assistant in the class. Hermila tells the story of her teacher's visit:

> [The teacher] said, "Look, I'm going to call a meeting with my supervisors." He made the meeting with the supervisors and then came to my home to speak to my father. "Look your daughter is this, and that, and she is helping us well. And I want her to continue to help me because I want to obtain a permit for her. I'm going to help her get a permit in the city of Los Reyes because she has been helping me. She is like a teacher's assistant to me. She is doing excellent work. You should see how well your daughter works."

Hermila related this incident with excitement; her voice rose in volume as she recounted the story.

My *abuelita* continued to recount her story, sharing that her teacher would request an assistant, and, on being told that none were available, the teacher would tell them to not worry because he already had identified one. Hermila described the subsequent exchange between her teacher and parents. The teacher said:

> Look, they will pay her. She will no longer be going as a student. She will be going as a teacher's assistant. They will give her certification so they pay her. That would be a big help for you. You will gain a lot of support. You will experience a lightening of the load because you know how hard it is to make a living. Look, in the near future she is going to find and marry someone, and this will be a help to them as well.

With a ring of disappointment in her voice, Hermila described her father's response and the ensuing exchange.

> "No!" My father said.
>
> The teacher responded, "Look, I only want you to sign. Fill these papers out and sign them so that I can take them over there [to process]. And she will see, she will get her job because she knows how to teach really well."
>
> I thought to myself, "Okay, I'm not that motivated but if [my teacher] believes in me and says that I will be fine, and that I can do it all—. If he's willing to work hard for me to teach, then all this is I'm going through will be for something good.

In describing the exchange, Hermila revealed how she had developed an increased sense of self-esteem as an educator. She gained confidence in her own abilities due to her teacher's belief and supportive attitude.

Despite the teacher's affirming message, Hermila's father was not convinced and did not want to sign the slip. Her father, Daniel, then responded:

> "No, I can't do that. Look, you know what I don't like about this? All the other teachers have meetings right? You have to go to meetings. They call you to your meetings and you leave. I don't like that my girl is who-knows-where for two or three days in a meeting." My father said no.

Hermila continued with the response from her teacher:

> He said, "Look, she will not have to go to any meeting because I will be her representative. I'm the one that will be going to these meetings, not her. She will not have to go to any meetings, except that you will have to sign the document so that she can get paid."

Sadly, Hermila was unable to obtain her father's permission to secure employment.

This was still a painful and difficult moment for her, even after more than sixty years had passed. It was a time of crying, as she was devastated at not having had the opportunity to fulfill her career aspirations of becoming an educator. This all occurred during a time when her family was very poor, and the extra monthly income earned from employment could have provided the necessary help to improve the quality of life for Hermila's family.

At one point, she entertained the possibility of just leaving and becoming a Catholic sister, and traveling the world helping marginalized communities. Had she become a Catholic sister, her great empathy for others would have been an asset, and she would have worked tirelessly to serve others in poverty. Instead, she remained at home and no longer went to school; she remained trapped in traditional spaces because of the social norms and lack of opportunities for women of her generation.

In 1948 Hermila married her husband Eutimio and commenced her primary role as a homemaker, which continued into the mid-1970s. Once she and Eutimio purchased a home and began living in the community of Planada, Hermila played an important role in the community through her church activities and other forms of civic engagement. She was instrumental in organizing *Las Posadas* during the Christmas holiday season. Overall, she was very engaged in the education of her children and acted as the parent leader for the youth group in the church. In these distinct roles, she maintained an important presence in the community as an educator and guide, through both formal and informal pathways. I wonder how Hermila's life might have been different had she been a professional educator?

Letting Go and Encouraging Higher Education

In 1977 Hermila's daughter, Amanda, was a senior in high school. As graduation loomed, the inevitable happened—she was accepted into several four-year universities and would likely soon be leaving home. Amanda was an excellent student and was excited to leave home and begin her college career. The problem for Eutimio and Hermila, however, arose when Amanda chose the University of California at Santa Cruz, which was an almost three hours' drive away, rather than the nearest four-year university in Fresno, which was just a one-hour drive. The three-hour distance from their hometown to the university seemed excessive, especially since the family did not have reliable transportation. Yet throughout these financial and economical dilemmas, what was never in dispute for Hermila was whether her daughter would attend the university; the challenging part was where.

Hermila spoke about the difficulty they had in letting her daughter Amanda leave home:

> I think [my husband Eutimio] thought that [Amanda] hardly had any possibilities of that because first off she did not have a car. Since she was going to have to move, how was she gonna come back being far away? How were we going to be able to see her every weekend? And with him working all the time and she being so far away?
>
> We were not used to having any of our children leave. They were our first children that were starting to leave. It hurt a lot. You feel many things when you have a child leave far away. And because of that, we didn't have many [material] things to be able to help them living so far away, how? "How is she going to be way over there?" is what I think he thought.
>
> And as for me, the same. It seemed like a lot [of miles away]. I would tell her, "Why don't you stay here close?" She would not stay. But because they were the first in leaving the home, they knew what they wanted to do, and where they were going to, and the commitment required over there because they were going to live alone.
>
> But it is difficult, you feel such sadness. One doesn't want to let a part of your family go so far away. But the family prepares itself. It didn't matter what and why they told her.

The agony that comes from seeing your children go away to college was heightened in Amanda's case because of the distance to the university and the additional challenge of the fact that Eutimio, her father, worked nearly seven days a week.

The anxiety around Amanda's departure was compounded by the realization that neither parent would be close enough to help or protect her should she experience any difficulties. Eutimio and Hermila were insistent that she choose a place like Fresno, and stay close. At one point, one of Amanda's siblings told their mother, Hermila, that she could prevent Amanda from leaving if she refused to provide parental permission through her signature. When Amanda realized what her brother had said to her mother, they had a strong exchange. Hermila shared the tense exchange when she tried to convince her daughter to stay home:

> [Amanda] said, "Hmm, don't even tell me! I know what you are thinking about not signing any documents. If you do not sign any documents, I do not even need you to sign them because I will leave whether you sign them or not."
>
> Oh child, this girl. I had no choice but to cheer up. I would still cry and insist that she stay but she still left. Those departures when the children leave hurt a lot, and especially so far away, you think, "Well here close by in Fresno, but all the way to Santa Cruz?"

Amanda's powerful reaction surprised her mother, as she had not expected her daughter to be willing to leave alone and without approval. The fear and hurt associated with these separations, in contrast to the long-term good for the child, was difficult for her parents. Living in such a small farm-working community virtually guaranteed their children would have to leave at some point to follow career and educational opportunities.

As Hermila realized how serious Amanda was about going to Santa Cruz, she knew that they could not keep her from leaving. In the end, Hermila came around and offered Amanda her unconditional support. She explained:

> Well they knew too that they wanted to leave and continue on with their studies and if they could no longer go to school here, how were they going to stay here in our small town. Here they could go no further. Oh God, you feel that deep

> down. That was a lot to handle for us. It was one more that we were missing in our home . . .
>
> Well we had to give her money so that she could buy a car, what else? My money from the accident at work from disability went there to her so we could buy her the car she needed. That way she would come sometimes every weekend, very happy having her car. It was a very good car. Thank God.

Hermila's struggle to come to terms with her daughter's departure should not be seen as not valuing the education of her children (Valencia 2002).

In fact, as she explained above, the money that she received as a settlement claim from her accident at work would eventually go toward purchasing a new vehicle for her daughter. For Hermila, this car was a worthwhile investment as it made it easier for her daughter to commute to and from school, which ultimately meant that she would come home more frequently, often every weekend. The initial pain of seeing her daughter leave because she was moving far away eventually turned into happiness and satisfaction; Hermila knew that her daughter would have opportunities that she herself had been denied.

A contradiction emerged when Amanda faced resistance from her parents in deciding to attend UCSC. I asked Hermila about her thoughts regarding her daughter who had sought to further her own education, yet thirty years prior Hermila had been denied by her own parents. As she began to imagine and reflect on what "should have been" in the context of thinking of her own daughter's example to exercise agency and make choices, Hermila stated the following:

> I did not have a chance and my parents were not able to help. I should have told them signature or no signature I will leave. I should have said for pay or not I will [teach] in vain if I have to. How would they have kicked me out of the house?
>
> If [my father] would have understood and signed off one of my documents to teach, the certificate I would have earned would have served me well. They would have given me the certificate so that I could have been paid. What more could I have wanted? My dad who never had a cent on him for anything from work, always sharecropping working, without a cent for anything. And we were the same. Where was I going to ask for money for something? For what? How?
>
> Don't you think that that would have really helped me? That would have helped me out tremendously. That certificate that they were going to give me,

> it would have helped. They would of paid me each month for helping out, and that certificate would have helped for other things and working in other places.
>
> Every day I was studying, I would study like if I always would have been a student.

In many ways, this moment of reflection revealed the great admiration that Hermila had for her daughter, Amanda, and her decision to pursue her goals.

While she never overtly discouraged her daughter from going to a university, there were times when Hermila seemed to dissuade Amanda from moving far away. She let her fear of not being in close proximity to her daughter to send a mixed message. However, once Amanda committed to attending UCSC, Hermila showed strong support and stood behind her daughter's decision.

There were times when Hermila imagined how her life and that of her family may have turned out differently had she been able to earn a living as a teacher's assistant. First, she would have been able to make a significant financial contribution to her household as a teenager. How might those dynamics have changed her relationship with her parents and siblings? What would it have meant for a young woman in a small rural community in Mexico in the 1940s to gain a degree of independence by being able to self-sustain? What impact might she have had in the local community where she grew up? Would she have remained in the community and married Eutimio two years later, or would she have waited longer for marriage given her newfound independence? Would she have been tempted to move to a larger town or city and seek more education beyond elementary school, and perhaps into high school? Would she have ever migrated to the United States? These are all important questions that reveal endless possibilities for Hermila had she been able to use her education to make a living.

As Hermila reflected on the role of education in her children's lives (and her own) she offered the following:

> For me, studying was a very good thing. Kind of like the stuff with the church, it was something that was very fulfilling. For me studying was very fulfilling. I was filled with joy when [the kids] were in school and they would advance in grade levels and graduate. For me it was very energizing, joyful, everything. Having the opportunity to study was gratifying in my time and later with my children because they were being successful and that was good for me.

As she had previously indicated, her two career ambitions were to become either an educator or a sister in the Catholic Church. For her, seeing her children advance through the educational system was very gratifying. Her role as a guiding adult for the youth group at her church helped fill her with joy. Hermila's educational, social, and familial experiences hold important lessons for studying the implications of lived experience and storytelling in the higher education classroom.

Pedagogical Lessons for Higher Education

Hermila Yañez's life narrative reveals several key events that have important implications for how we come to tell and understand stories. I believe the new knowledge that emerges from these narratives holds important pedagogical implications for the higher education classroom. First, our classrooms can be enriched pedagogically by tapping into our students' intergenerational stories. Second, storytelling is a powerful format for critical self-reflection and the exploration and imagination of possibilities. These assignments can be instrumental in encouraging college students to tell and retell their narrative through the lens of social analyses. In the next section, I detail how each assignment holds important implications for the education of students in the university classroom.

The Power of Intergenerational Stories

The intimate connection that my *abuelito* Eutimio and I shared around his storytelling was special. At the beginning of this article, I revealed the special bond that my grandfather and I formed as he shared stories from his time as a Bracero. In his stories, my grandfather communicated important messages to me about the value he placed on being a hardworking man, and on the desire that his family could look back and remember him fondly as trying to be an imperfect, but good, father and of being a proud Mexican, immigrant, farm-working man struggling to provide for his family.

Robyn Fivush and colleagues ("Intergenerational Self") write about the benefits of sharing of stories:

> Preadolescents who develop a sense of self as embedded in both a shared and intergenerational family context show higher levels of self-understanding and well-being compared to their peers who do not know their family history as well, suggesting that the development of an intergenerational self, a self embedded in a larger familial history, may be a resilience factor as children approach adolescence. (140)

Fivush and colleagues focus on the benefits of transmitting stories; they convey the importance of family, resistance, and solidarity through the highs and lows of life. Can the intergenerational self be cultivated and further developed in undergraduate students through the use of life history interviews with parents or grandparents?

In the higher education classroom, interviews like the ones I conducted with my *abuelita* could be integrated into the classroom curriculum as a way to structure conversations between college students and their parents/grandparents, guardians, or other loved ones. These assignments can be quite powerful, especially as students learn about prior familial histories of struggles and success. Interdisciplinary programs like ethnic studies have a long history of encouraging this type of approach as a way of helping students develop a historical consciousness (De los Rios, López, and Morrell). As a first-generation college student, I entered higher education knowing that I was the first in my immediate family to attend university. For me, stories about the importance of education stem from my father sharing that he already had work responsibilities by the time he was six years old. My father's education ended in the second grade when he learned how to read and write sufficiently for basic communication. When combined with the hard labor that my father undertook as a lifelong farmworker, the stories he shared with me concerning education revolved around the need to excel in school and thereby avoid that type of physically debilitating labor. The summer after my first year of high school, my father took me to work alongside him picking bell peppers on my own accord, thus helping to crystallize my dislike for the exploitative conditions of that type of work. From these experiences, I learned and internalized the message that the limited formal education of my family was not due to their intelligence or mental capacities, but due to the marginalization they experienced growing up poor, and without educational access in rural Mexico.

Storytelling, Self-Reflection, and Imagining New Possibilities

An important component of my *abuelita*'s storytelling was revealed when I invited her to reflect on her daughter's decision to leave for college without parental permission. At that moment, Hermila began to imagine a broad range of her own possibilities had she exercised similar agency decades earlier in order to become a teacher's assistant without the approval of her parents. As she looked back and reflected, she imagined several possible scenarios that could have played out, some of which might have eventually led to familial support. This was a particularly powerful moment as she gave herself permission to imagine new possibilities emerging from that experience. Similarly, when I teach students at the university level, I strive to create learning opportunities where they are able to reflect critically on their lived experience, especially around forms of structural violence (Ginwright) and how they may be able to resist.

A primary goal when teaching courses in urban education is to help students to problematize social oppression and see it as a by-product of our social priorities in an imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks). A note on students' attitudes—students interested in becoming educators frequently enter the field with problematic assumptions of the students and families that they are seeking to work with. They often assume that they could come in and simply "save" the students they plan to teach (Emdin). To work against this, and help develop educators with a critical consciousness, opportunities for students to explore how their ideologies potentially advance social oppression are explored (Camangian). For this to occur, I use a set of course materials that examine these intersecting forms of structural violence.

Besides course materials, one assignment I often incorporate is a parent interview and community report.[3] In this assignment, students conduct interviews (and community reports) with parents who have children in public schools; the interview allows the students to investigate, examine, and better understand, from the perspective of actual parents, how the social toxicity and long histories of dispossession in urban environments shape parental (dis)engagement in their child's schooling and/or their child's equality of educational opportunity. Findings from these reports allow students to draw critically from the familial stories they collect and use the course readings and conduct a critical analysis of how families navigate the social marginalization experience. What is often revealed in these interviews and community reports are that the families' educational aspirations for

their children clash with the reality of experiencing compounding forms of social oppression. The power of these reports lies in allowing students to take critical social theory from the course readings, locate the structural dimensions of the problems families are experiencing, and then begin to imagine new possibilities of what it means to teach and work in communities seeking to end such structural violence.

Most importantly, students are able to challenge the dominant narrative on educational inequality that continues to blame marginalized families and communities for gross educational inequalities. In creating these new counterstories (Solórzano and Yosso), students in the course leave the class with a greater awareness of working with and for community spaces.

Conclusion

The storytelling processes I have shared serve multiple functions. First, my *abuelito*'s stories served the important purpose of transmitting cultural and familial history. Second, after his passing, remembering my *abuelita* Hermila's storytelling played an important role in my own personal healing and allowed me to develop a meaningful connection with her. Third, Hermila's storytelling allowed she and I to engage in a dialogue concerning the sociopolitical issues of her time and invited a reexamination with new insights. These insights consisted of reimagined possibilities where normative expectations and power structures are questioned, and more humanizing pathways are unveiled. Last, pedagogical processes for higher education are offered that incorporate the strengths of storytelling and lived experience as a way of preparing future educators to enter the classroom space with greater critical insight.

Pedro E. Nava is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Program at Mills College in Oakland, California. The focus of his scholarship is urban and rural schooling inequality, critical pedagogy and critical race theory, immigration and education, family-school engagement, and participatory action research. Nava completed his PhD at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies in the Urban Schooling division.

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NOTES

1. The preferential option for the poor emerged from the Latin American liberation theology movement within the Catholic Church. The work of Gustavo Gutiérrez suggests that this option is a central feature that expresses concern for the physical and spiritual well-being of those most marginalized.
2. *Abuelita* is a term of endearment that means grandmother in Spanish. The masculine form ending in *o* is *abuelito*, referring to grandfather.
3. Carlos Tejeda and Miguel Zavala were instrumental in originally creating and developing this assignment.