

## Article

# Testimonio and Counterstorytelling by Immigrant-Origin Children and Youth: Insights That Amplify Immigrant Subjectivities

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to amplify our scholarly view of immigrant identity by centering the first-person narratives of immigrant-origin children and youth. Our theoretical and methodological framework centers on testimonio—a narrative practice popularized in Latin American social movements in which an individual recounts a lived experience that is intended to be representative of a collective struggle. Our goal is to foreground first-person narratives of childhood as told by immigrant-origin children and youth in order to gain insight into what they believe we should know about them. We argue for the power of testimonio to communicate both extraordinary hardship and everyday experiences and that—through this storytelling—immigrant-origin children and youth also express imagined futures for themselves and their loved ones. Through our analysis of ethnographic recordings of testimonio shared by Latin American immigrant children and multimedia testimonios created by immigrant-origin adolescents with roots in the Caribbean and West Africa, we gain a fuller understanding of immigrant subjectivities and push the boundaries of “the immigrant experience” still prevalent in mainstream discussions today.



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“Sabemos que no tenemos un solo ojo encima sino que tenemos los ojos de toda la comunidad encima. . . . Mi padre me decía: tú tienes mucha responsabilidad, muchas tareas que cumplir con la comunidad.”

Rigoberta Menchú, *me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*

“We know that not just one pair of eyes is watching us, but the eyes of the whole community are on us. . . . My father said: ‘You have a lot of responsibility; you have many duties to fulfil in our community as an adult. From now on you must contribute to the common good’.”

Rigoberta Menchú I, *Rigoberta Menchú*

## 1. Introduction

The epigraph above forms part of a longer narrative told by Rigoberta Menchú—Quiché woman and renowned leader of the indigenous movement for human rights in Guatemala—to the Venezuelan anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos. In this segment of her testimonio, Menchú recounts turning ten years old and explains that this birthday marked a turning point in her life because, in that moment, she became more accountable to her family and community. Menchú’s words foreshadow two interrelated ideas elaborated upon in this article. First, like Menchú’s testimonio, this article exemplifies a relational approach to narrative and identity. That is, the co-constructed narratives presented here are deeply embedded within multiple sets of longitudinal relationships—between the co-authors, between us and the children and youth we work alongside, and across generations including our own, those of the children and youth in our studies, and their elders. Second,

Menchú's evocation of a gaze—"the eyes of a whole community"—underscores the themes of community, responsibility, and care that are central to our analysis. Similar to Menchú's published testimonio, these themes emerged during narrative retellings of childhood, birthdays, and coming-of-age moments that were formative for the speakers whose words we present.

This article brings together two distinct research projects: an ethnographic study of citizenship and childhood in mixed-status Latina families conducted by Mangual Figueroa from 2013–2015 and a qualitative study of students' learning in an arts-based Ethnic Studies course conducted by Barrales from 2017–2019. Following in the tradition of DeGenova and Ramos-Zayas (2003), whose comparative ethnography of Puerto Rican and Mexican communities in Chicago shed light on each group's experience of race and citizenship, we draw on our two studies to "explore the radically open-ended possibilities for evaluating the claims of ethnographic knowledge when it is properly resituated in the utterly messy and conflict-ridden restlessness of everyday life, where there are always other perceptions and perspectives and never a last word" [1] (p. 27). While we designed and conducted these studies independently—having already completed data collection before we met each other—we have gained a deeper understanding of our research and of ourselves through the collaborative process of analysis and authorship that has resulted in this article. As we draw from our distinct yet complementary methodological approaches and present our shared empirical insights, we argue for engaging with rather than bracketing the unresolvable tensions inherent in the study of immigration and identity. We take seriously the claim that there is "never a last word" in the study of one's own, let alone another's, identity, even as we use an inherited lexicon of terms that attempt to stabilize dynamic identities into fixed labels similar to many of the ones that have already appeared in this article (Quiché, woman, indigenous, immigrant, childhood). We argue for testimonio as a conceptual and methodological approach that unifies our studies and returns narrative control to the individuals whom these unsatisfactory categories are used to represent.

As women of color who are both teachers and researchers in the field of education, we know firsthand that institutionally sanctioned racial and ethnic labels do not always reflect the lived experiences of those being named. In this article our concern lies not with the accuracy of the terms themselves, but in the values assigned to such categories. The history of social science in education is fraught with—arguably, defined by—the assignation of labels linked to race, ethnicity, country of origin, and language that are laden with beliefs about the superiority or inferiority of social groups [2–5]. The construction of race through educational research continues to directly and negatively impact the racialized children and youth that we work alongside [2]. Here, we are interested in amplifying the ways in which we understand the lived experiences of young people of color with immigrant origins by exploring the ways in which they represent themselves through storytelling. We begin with the understanding that "prejudice, racism, and discrimination are fundamentally interactive phenomena" and that the experiences of being racialized are expressed through everyday discourse, known as "race talk" [6] (p. 334). Borrowing a phrase from Dell Hymes (1964), we seek to move beyond the "etic grid"—the imposed sets of beliefs and terms that researchers laminate onto speech communities—in order to explore the firsthand view of immigrant-origin students as they create their own narratives using a range of linguistic, visual, and aural resources [7].

We write at a moment when educational scholars are re-imagining qualitative approaches to research in a global pandemic and when scholars far and wide have issued statements in support of movements denouncing anti-Blackness and calling for an end to racial violence in the United States (U.S.) [8]. While our work in each of these areas—as activists and educators working towards social justice and as a digital researcher (Barrales)—pre-dates the spread of the novel coronavirus in 2020, we offer these contextual details because they lend a greater significance to our work. Against this backdrop, this article seeks to move beyond monolithic views of immigrant groups and meritocratic assessments of immigrants' self-worth towards perspectives that center racially minoritized immigrant-

origin children and youth's first-person narratives. We chose not to reiterate mainstream discourses here, while also acknowledging that deficit model, xenophobic, and anti-Black ideology pervades public discourse in the U.S. and has material consequences for students, families, and communities. We draw the reader's attention to university-based public-facing projects that simultaneously document and seek to disrupt this trend (see Pollock's collaborative initiative #USvsHATE, Santa Ana's digital archive called The President's Intent, and the work of the Undocu-Edu collective within the City University of New York-Initiative on Immigration and Education) [9–11].

Given our close attention to language as data and to the ideological significance of the words that we use to denote identity in our work, we would like the reader to consider some of the decisions that we have made during the writing of this article. First, we have chosen not to italicize the word *testimonio*, so as to avoid marking Spanish as a deviation from English even though the italicization of non-English languages in academic texts is common within our field. Second, we use the term immigrant-origin to refer to the *testimonio* authors whose perspectives we examine in this article because it is maximally inclusive of young people who have themselves experienced movement between nations as well as those born and raised in one country with a transnational perspective. Finally, we believe that the commonly used terms available for referring to the U.S. are implicated in sustaining ideologies fundamental to this nation-state's settler colonial founding dependent on erasure, enslavement, and amassing land. Other terms—for example, America—evoke ongoing nationalist projects that uphold these historical legacies through accumulation and erasure in the present. This poses a problem for us because our lexicon contradicts our goals of carrying out decolonial educational research. However, since this remains an ongoing and unresolved dilemma in our adjacent fields of education, immigration, and ethnic studies, we use U.S. here to refer to the fifty states and their territories.

This article contributes to a conversation taking place in this journal that centers on immigrant youth's first-person accounts of their own lived experiences. As Dao's (2017) study of undocu/DACAmented Asian American and Pacific Islander youth has shown, *testimonio*-like narratives have a particular significance for youth who believe that sharing one's story publicly can change mainstream perceptions of the racialized groups with which they identify [12]. By centering the voices of immigrant-origin children and youth of color, our work responds to the call for this Special Issue, which refuses a deficit framing of immigrants and instead reconceptualizes the "migrant experience" through migrants' own subjectivities. In the pages that follow, we present a theoretical framework grounded in theories of *testimonio*, coupled with counterstorytelling methods, to help establish a context for our analysis. We then turn to a description of our two research studies and our methodologies. Finally, we present our *testimonio* data and close with reflections on what we have learned.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Testimonio

The story of Rigoberta Menchú—recounted in 1982 to Venezuelan-born anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos, and subsequently published by Burgos in 1985—has become one of the quintessential examples of *testimonio* [13]. John Beverley (1989) defines *testimonio* as a "novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience" [14,15] (p. 13). Menchú's *testimonio* has amplified an indigenous perspective on the struggles to survive faced by her Guatemalan Quiché community and her words have been heard by audiences across the globe. Her account describes life among the Quiché as well as her role in fighting against the state-sanctioned acts of violence inflicted upon her family and community. For nearly four decades, her narrative has been the subject of scholarly and political scrutiny as debates have raged over the authenticity of the published text, the verifiability of her first-person account, and the political significance of its content [13,16–19].

Menchú's published testimonio has itself become a site for debates about the aesthetic and political stakes involved in classifying the text as a literary genre [15]. Beverly (1989) warns against classifying testimonio as literature, citing concerns that an academic appropriation of this type of writing could actually undermine its power within popular (non-academic) cultural formations that undergird mass social movements [14]. Other scholars have described the debates over the historical accuracy of Menchú's narrative and the vested interests that readers with divergent political and national interests have in questioning or upholding the veracity of her account [16,17]. Across these debates, the narrative content—or the storyline—that has been most attended to is Menchú's chronicle of the state violence and persecution that her Quiché community endured in Guatemala and its grassroots mobilization to defend itself against imperial and colonial forces [13,16–19].

We are particularly interested in three dimensions of testimonio and we use Menchú's narrative—originally titled in Spanish *me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1985)—as a prism for exploring each one briefly in turn [13]. First, we examine the narrative content of testimonio for those themes most often discussed in the literature. Second, we consider the relational aspect of listening to, recording, and publishing testimonio. Finally, we explore the connection between testimonio as narrative and testimonio as methodology through counterstorytelling in education. In so doing, we argue for the significance of Menchú's testimonio quoted in the epigraph above, which describes her embeddedness within her family and community. Our choice of this excerpt is purposefully meant to shift the readers' attention away from the suffering and struggle often emphasized in readings of Menchú's narrative towards the depictions of everyday community life and ritual that she also describes at great length.

The majority of the literature on Menchú's testimonio focuses on the political significance of her account for understanding, amplifying, and galvanizing a movement for human rights in indigenous communities. Yet, as we can see in the opening epigraph, Menchú's testimonio includes not only descriptions of extraordinary pain and leadership but also accounts of longstanding ritual community practices that were mundane and meaningful. In her prologue to the published text, Burgos describes editorial decisions that she had to make in preparing Menchú's testimonio for print. She recounts facing pressure to decenter Menchú's description of everyday cultural practices in order to foreground the political plot line of her narrative. Referring to her decision to start the book with a chapter describing Quiché birth rituals, Burgos writes:

Me han señalado que, al principio del libro, el capítulo sobre las ceremonias del nacimiento corría el riesgo de aburrir al lector. Otros me han aconsejado suprimir simplemente la narración de estas ceremonias, o ponerla al final del manuscrito, como anexo. No hice caso a unos ni a otros. Quizá me haya equivocado si se trataba de seducir al lector, pero mi respeto por Rigoberta me ha impedido obrar de otro modo [13] (p. 18).

It was pointed out to me that placing the chapter dealing with birth ceremonies at the beginning of the book might bore the reader. I was also advised simply to cut it or inclusive it in an appendix. I ignored all of these suggestions. Perhaps I was wrong, in that the reading might be off-putting. But I could not leave it out, simply out of respect for Rigoberta [18] (p. xx).

While less visible in the secondary literature on testimonio, Menchú's stories of ritual and culture are important parts of her account preserved in the published version (even as Burgos made other deletions that she described in the prologue). These cultural accounts are subtler than the depictions of genocide which have garnered greater attention in most readings of Menchú's testimonio, yet they provide the reader with a multidimensional view of Quiché life. In this article, we follow Menchú and Burgos' lead—making analytic decisions that focus on narratives of everyday familial and community events. These events range from celebrating birthdays to sharing a meal and they provide a view of



immigrant-origin children and youth's subjectivities that go beyond dominant tropes of adversity, resilience, or assimilation still dominant in the educational mainstream.

The act of listening to, recording, and publishing testimonio raises a range of relational and ethical questions relevant to our interest in representing immigrant-origin children and youth's stories on their own terms. Precisely because testimonio entails a first-person account shared by a speaker with a wider audience, the individual who takes up the role of listener, recorder, and author assumes responsibility for representing speech that is not their own. Pratt (2001) calls this authorial relation between speaker and recorder a "testimonial contract" that involves establishing trust and relinquishing sole ownership of the narrative itself [19]. We are interested in the accountability established between the speaker and listener—the fact that, by establishing a testimonial contract, the ethnographer or recorder may find herself implicated in the political and social cause depicted.

In her descriptions of the experience of listening to Menchú's account over a period of a week, Burgos details a shift in her own consciousness: "Situarme en el lugar que me correspondía: primero escuchando y dejando hablar a Rigoberta, y luego convirtiéndome en una especie de doble suyo, en el instrumento que operaría el paso del oral a lo escrito [13] (p. 18). In the English translation this reads: "By doing so I became what I really was: Rigoberta's listener. I allowed her to speak and then became her instrument, her double by allowing her to make the transition from the spoken to the written word" [18] (p. xxi). While we may be skeptical in our reading—interpreting Burgos' account of becoming Menchú as a romanticized erasure of difference and a conflation between radical social change and the status quo [17] (p. 65)—we can also grant that this reflexive process, however limited in bringing about structural change, may constitute a shift in social relations that can catalyze change with the potential to scale upwards.

Within the fields of Chicana/Latina and Educational Studies, testimonio has gained traction as a methodological approach to research and as pedagogical resource for teaching. Qualitative researchers inspired by testimonio claim that storytelling—and counterstorytelling, in particular—can help to change negative mainstream views of racially minoritized groups. This has led to collective formations in academia, such as the Chicana Feminist group who view testimonio as influencing "a narrative format as redemption—as takers of the stories, as readers of the narratives, and as creators of the analysis" [20] (p. 526). By creating opportunities for students and professors of color to tell and record their own stories, this qualitative approach illustrates that racially minoritized individuals can and do hold valuable forms of knowledge, thereby shifting the epistemological terrain of social science research. Dolores Delgado-Bernal (2002), member of the Chicana Feminist Group, explicitly connects testimonio and counterstorytelling:

By incorporating a counterstorytelling method, based on the narratives, testimonios, or life histories of people of color, a story can be told from a nonmajoritarian perspective—a story that White educators usually do not hear or tell (Delgado, 1989, 1993). At the same time, counterstorytelling can also serve as a pedagogical tool that allows one to better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of students of color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening. In other words, an important component of using counterstories includes not only telling nonmajoritarian stories but also learning how to listen and hear the messages in counterstories [21] (p. 116).

This emphasis on the narrator's perspective and the audience's understanding underscores many of the themes raised above and locates the pedagogical function of testimonio within a contemporary U.S. schooling context.

According to Tara Yosso (2006), telling counterstories serves a dual purpose: (1) "to raise critical consciousness about social and racial justice" and (2) "challenge majoritarian stories that omit and distort the histories and realities of oppressed communities . . . [and] question racially stereotypical portrayals implicit in majoritarian stories" [22] (p. 10). From this perspective, in order to develop political awareness and challenge the status quo, individuals hearing counterstories begin to question injustice, which then leads to

taking action to ameliorate the structural inequities recounted in those stories. While it is important not to assume that reading testimonio and counterstories will necessarily lead to a change in political consciousness, the pedagogical function of these texts raises important questions about how readers with different lived experiences might be compelled to take action [23]. Here, we wonder whether bringing “attention to those who courageously resist racism and struggle toward a more socially and racially just society” [22] (p. 10) might also be coupled with less explicit “resistance” stories while still working toward a similar goal of consciousness raising.

### 3. Methodology for Studying Testimonio: Ethnographic and Multimedia Approaches

#### 3.1. Ethnographic Testimonio in Immigrant Childhood

Mangual Figueroa’s ethnographic study focuses on the everyday experiences of immigrant-origin children growing up in a mixed-status community, including individuals with various legal statuses ranging from undocumented, visa-holding (and losing), legal permanent resident, and US-born citizen. The guiding question for her study is: how do children make sense of state-imposed categories of belonging—colloquially known as *having* or *not having papers*—during their everyday lives? This research contributes to growing empirical evidence that children are cognizant of the significance of their own and others’ legal status, even when the vast majority of educational research focuses on the impact of student’s legal status on their schooling experiences in later years of adolescence and young adulthood. As an educational anthropologist, Mangual Figueroa conducted participant observation for two years—from 2013 to 2015—across three settings: a fifth-grade classroom in one dual-language elementary school; the homes of six focal families; and the public space of the neighborhood where all six focal families lived and attended school. As a language socialization researcher, she focuses on face-to-face interaction as the site for making meaning and communicating understanding regarding citizenship and belonging. As such, she audio recorded everyday interactions between the focal fifth-grade students and their families, teachers, and peers (for more on her methodology, see Mangual Figueroa, 2017) [24].

The data presented in this article draw from one particular conversation between Mangual Figueroa and the six focal students who participated in her ethnographic study. The data were recorded during a member check session that she hosted in the spring of 2014 when the students were ten and eleven years old. The students themselves asked her to schedule these member check sessions because they wanted to hear what was being recorded on the microphones that they wore throughout their school day. The girls knew that their words were significant: that Mangual Figueroa intended to listen to them in order to gain insight into the lives of immigrant-origin children more broadly. Building on the focal girls’ awareness of the significance of their life experiences, Mangual Figueroa created a testimonio-like framework for the sessions by inviting the girls to listen to their own words in order to extrapolate more generalizable lessons for their teachers and for educational researchers such as herself. The data featured in this article draws from the second of fifteen member check sessions. As she explained to the students:

So yo pensé después de conocerlas por tantos meses, yo dije . . . y ustedes me empezaron a preguntar a mí—¿Podemos escuchar el audio? ¿Qué estás grabando?— . . . Para que ustedes sepan mi interés cuando yo vine a la escuela tenía dos partes, como le he explicado al grupo en general, tenía que ver qué es lo que ustedes estaban pensando, qué les interesa, cómo es la vida diaria de una niña de quinto grado. También tiene que ver con la manera en que la cultura, la herencia, la inmigración influye la vida de nosotros.

So I thought that after knowing you for so many months, I said . . . and you also started asking me, “Can we hear the audio? What are you recording?” . . . I had two interests when I started coming to the school, like I’ve explained to the whole class, it has to do with what you are thinking, what interests you, what is life like

for a fifth grade girl. It also has to do with the culture, the heritage, immigration influences all of our lives.

This study explicitly evoked a testimonio frame of speaking for oneself and also representing a broader experience, and involved a deepening testimonial contract between Mangual Figueroa and the six focal students over the two years of the study. During the second member check session, the girls' talk about childhood and immigration before turning to a conversation about birthdays, family, and responsibility, which we explore in Section 4.

### 3.2. *Multimedia Testimonios from Adolescence*

Barrales's study began in 2016 after she interviewed her abuelita, Aida, about life in rural Veracruz, México. Through this process, she was eager to collect, share, and preserve the stories of the matriarchs in her life and continued to develop the project by creating opportunities for high-school-age artists to participate in an intergenerational storytelling archive that preserves the stories of women of color in their respective communities. This work responds to current understandings of K-12 Ethnic Studies that continue to implicitly center cis-male educators and students, leading to a lack of representation of women, femme, & non-binary people of color both in its curriculum and empirical base. As a result, this important body of research tends to overlook Ethnic Studies outcomes for girls and gender expansive youth of color [25–29]. Against this backdrop, Barrales sought out to co-create a curriculum with her students that intentionally centered women of color and celebrated, shared, and nuanced their lived experiences. For two years—from 2017 through 2019—she worked as an Ethnic Studies teacher and integrated artistic production within her classroom at a public high school serving female and gender expansive youth of color in Brooklyn. Barrales's study specifically explored the question: What do we learn about young women of color and gender expansive youth through visual arts-based testimonios? Barrales has studied the coursework, artistic process, and multimedia testimonios produced by her students and archived them in a digital community project housed at a cultural institution in Brooklyn committed to preserving the stories of Black residents.

Each of the 108 projects in the archive feature a notable woman of color in the youth artists' life. After a series of interviews, these artists began an intentional process of honoring the interviewee's story by selecting audio that highlighted what they found to be the most compelling moments from the interview. The interviews were then preserved through a stop-motion collage art piece (multimedia testimonios) that includes an audio excerpt from the interview. The projects range vastly in content and presentation. The themes documented in the projects were intentionally curated for a public audience as families and community members were invited to participate in a gallery viewing during the launch of the archive. As many of the artists interviewed their mothers, they were able to document tender moments about their birth story, family recipes, and who their mother was before bearing children. The mothers and daughters intentionally shifted their roles as interviewer and interviewee throughout the process, preserving intimate moments shared between youth and elder; matriarch and daughter; mamá e hija. Approximately two-thirds of the projects included in the archive were created by students who identified as having immigrant-origins and over 80% of the artists identified as Black. In their artist statements, most of the youth identified roots in the English-speaking Caribbean—while a smaller number identified origins in Nigeria, Senegal, México, Guatemala, Honduras, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Ecuador. For the purposes of this article, Barrales identified those projects that included themes of family, childhood, and/or traditions and that center the Black immigrant experience. Given our focus on counterstories of U.S. immigration, she did not select those projects that explicitly broached the subject of immigration from a majoritarian "American dream" perspective.

### 3.3. *Our Studies in Conversation*

Combined, the data from these two studies—Mangual Figueroa's longitudinal ethnography and Barrales's arts-based Ethnic Studies course—amplify our perspective on migrant

subjectivities. Both studies involve female-identified children and youth of immigrant-origin who hail from racially and linguistically diverse communities for whom Brooklyn constitutes a central diasporic location. The students who participated in both studies are approximately the same ages (born between 2003 and 2005) and are currently all seniors in New York City public high schools. This means that these focal participants have grown up during a time characterized by increasing political turmoil and polarization. Using national politics as evidence, the focal participants were children during Barack Obama's presidency—as the first Black president of the U.S. he both signed the executive order called the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) which gave a portion of the undocumented adolescents and young adult population opportunities to study and obtain work visas and he also deported more undocumented immigrants than any previous president on record. During their elementary and middle school years, the rise in restrictive immigration policy and murder of Black people in the U.S. led to the ongoing grassroots DREAMers and Black Lives Matter movements. More recently, during most of the period we call their adolescence, these participants bore witness to the election of Donald Trump, a rise in white nationalism, and threats to repeal many national policies aimed at upholding their loved ones' civil rights. The authors met these students during educational moments characterized by transition—Mangual Figueroa began her study in the year that the students were finishing elementary school and entering middle school, while Barrales conducted her study as the young women entered their first year of high school. Both longitudinal studies involved intensive fieldwork with the focal students over the course of two academic years and involved explicit discussions of identity and representation, making them both sites for the production and dissemination of testimonio.

Both authors obtained approval from their university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to conduct the in-depth qualitative research described above. We recognize the historical and contemporary need to protect racially minoritized populations from institutional abuse in the name of biomedical and social science research. We also find that current IRB procedures rooted in a positivist tradition of research uphold rigid distinctions between researcher and researched, expert and novice, privileged and vulnerable. Oftentimes, as an entity housed within the university itself, the IRB process focuses on protecting institutions from liability rather than shielding people from misconduct [30,31]. Our work seeks to question these imposed binaries and static roles. Here, we briefly acknowledge the importance of listening to immigrant-origin children and youth for ethical guidance that goes beyond untenable ideals of neutrality and objectivity in educational research.

In the findings section that follows, we analyze a range of communicative modes leveraged by immigrant-origin students: verbal, visual, and aural. Mangual Figueroa views language “as a system of symbolic resources designed for the production and interpretation of social and intellectual activities” [32]. Her analysis primarily focuses on the linguistic and paralinguistic resources employed during conversation in order to understand how participants' own dynamic sense of self is expressed, perceived, and co-constructed with others in conversation. We both examine the linguistic dimensions of recorded speech in order to identify those shared characteristics of direct participant account, I-shifters, and metonymy that are evident across our data [15,33]. We focus on these three aspects of speech—represented in the transcripts of the member check session (Mangual Figueroa) and of the multimedia testimonios (Barrales)—because they are communicative resources used by speakers to recount personal narratives that also evoke a collective set of experiences. The direct participant account is evident in the form of “I-statements” that suggest the individual speaker is retelling a firsthand experience. However, we also attend to shifting pronominal reference (pivots from an “I” to a “we,” for example) that we refer to as I-shifters. These changes in pronoun use are a type of “reference [that] ‘shifts’ regularly, depending on the factors of the speech situation” [34] (p. 197) and these changes are a defining feature of testimonio. By toggling between first- and third-person subject pronouns, the narrator links her personal account to the experiences of other members of her community. The shift in subject also communicates a

change in the narrative content—testimonio speakers employ this resource to indicate that they are no longer referring specifically to a personal experience but are instead conveying a generalizable truth about people “like them.” This kind of analysis allows us to understand, on the speakers’ own terms, who she considers to form part of her community or who she considers “an immigrant” similar to herself. Finally, the use of the “I-shifters” are themselves arguments that the speaker makes for her experience standing in for—being metonymic of—a broader immigrant experience. Sometimes metonymy is evident when, in a vernacular sense, one word or phrase comes to represent another: for example, when “papers” becomes shorthand for “legal documentation of national citizenship status”. In the case of our data, the names of the speakers or even their personal pronouns come to stand in for a broader community that the narrator may represent.

In the case of Barrales’s study of immigrant-origin youth’s multimedia collages, we attend to spoken as well as visual and aural artistic elements of affect. We draw on Tina Campt’s work on lost photography archives of the Black diaspora, which explores affect through a close look at images from South Africa in the late 19th century that range from rural ethnographic photographs to imprisoned people in Cape Town. Using a method of *listening to images*, Campt challenges the reader to explore the feeling of frequencies emitted through images and the ways in which self-fashioning are “quotidian practices of refusal” that respond to an oppressive gaze through “complex articulations of self that resist easy categorization and refuse binary notions of agency versus subjection” [35] (p. 59). Barrales seeks to understand what images can communicate about resisting dominant narratives and what young people want to preserve and showcase through their own “quotidian practices of refusal” within visual testimonio. Following Victoria Restler’s views on collage and refusal, we analyze these multiple communicative resources because “It is in this multiplicity, in the refusal of seamlessness, in the uncertain spaces where lines and voices and thoughts meet (or don’t), mingle or cross, that “critical engagement” is possible” [36]. The range of communicative resources and the content of the narratives themselves reject a monolithic view of the “immigrant experience.” In the case of Barrales’s work, the visual and auditory aspects of the multimedia collage reveal a dual-layered testimonio that is intergenerational: it includes recordings of the mothers’ and daughters’ voices as well as the daughters’ imagery to accompany the audio excerpt. Throughout the analysis of images, we center a critical perspective, situating them within a history of racialized childhoods in which Black children have been denied the possibility of experiencing an idealized innocent childhood. This use of visibility takes into account, in Wendy Luttrell’s (2020) words, “how the legacy of slavery, institutional racism, and colorism shape who is afforded the protected status of “child” to begin with” [37] (p. 25).

In the following section, we present instances of testimonio from immigrant-origin children and youth hailing from Latin America, the English-speaking Caribbean, and West Africa. We initially considered the following criteria for inclusion in our analysis: speakers with a shared country of origin and a narrative focus on border crossing stories. However, we found that this yielded data on testimonios representing a Latinx immigrant experience with origins in Mexico, Central, and South America issuing from a shared experience of crossing a contested geographic border and surveillance upon arrival. In our desire to shift the gaze from stories of hardship to everyday life depictions with the goal of amplifying our knowledge of immigrant subjectivities, we modified our criteria for inclusion. First, we chose testimonios that included a racially minoritized immigrant experience. The majoritarian U.S. discourse on immigration overfocuses on debates over the securitization (read: militarization) of the current border between the U.S. and Mexico and rarely include the views of Black immigrants. Here, we want to highlight those experiences from an emic point of view. Second, we coded our data thematically for those stories that did not uphold mainstream narratives of immigration that center the myth of the American Dream steeped in meritocratic views of self-worth. When we listened carefully to those narratives that did not explicitly follow the typical arc of adversity–perseverance–triumph, we found that



immigrant-origin students told stories that transcended assimilationist views of individual success dependent upon a deficit view of the non-white racialized self.

#### 4. Testimonio Findings

Our findings are organized into three subsections that include an ethnographic and multimedia testimonio from each of our studies. The subsections focus on (1) the significance of childhood, (2) the importance of preserving certain traditions while questioning others, and (3) the value of care in a limited economy of resources (material and relational). Through their narratives, these children and youth offer counterstories that unsettle dichotomous characterizations of childhood versus adulthood and that refuse majoritarian deficit views communicated by schooling institutions and mass media. Through their storytelling, these narrators signal what is important to them as they imagine future possibilities for themselves and their loved ones. Moreover, they provide insights into what counts as belonging and self-worth across the lifespan, across institutions, and across generations. We label each section a counterstory in order to underscore the pedagogical dimension of these testimonios and to leave open the possibility that the reader would be compelled to action based upon what they have learned.

##### 4.1. Counterstory #1: *The Significance of Childhood*

The first set of testimonios underscore a prevalent theme in our data: that children in racially minoritized immigrant families shoulder significant responsibility beginning at a young age. These realities should prompt us to question longstanding western views portraying infancy and early childhood as periods of innocence, immaturity, and dependency that eventually give way to awareness, maturity, and autonomy in the later years of life [38,39]. Experiences of childhood are embedded in a broader sociopolitical context of racialization and oppression that is implicitly and explicitly broached in the narratives presented here. The institutional violence experienced by racially minoritized students across U.S. institutions—including schools and the carceral system—is enacted in part by treating children and youth as adults, thereby truncating any experience of a normative childhood as defined and experienced by their white counterparts [40–42]. Our analysis is informed by the critical work of scholars chronicling the schooling experiences of Black students and the disproportionate and punitive disciplinary practices leveled against Black girls in particular [43–47]. We also read our data against the backdrop of educational research showing how schools position children and families from non-dominant, non-white Latinx communities as linguistic and racial others whose cultural practices constitute a liability rather than an asset to learning [48–51]. The testimonios presented here are counterstories because they offer accounts of childhood in immigrant children and youth's own words and because they reclaim narratives of educational progress that shift blame away from themselves and instead focus on the institutions that have failed to serve them.

##### 4.1.1. Example One: "Advice for a Child"

In this first multimedia collage project, 14-year-old Nancy presented the words of her 49-year-old mother Limarys. During the interview excerpt that Nancy chose to include in her project, Limarys issued a refrain communicating the message that childhood is a singular, fleeting moment in life. The collage opens with an image of Limarys in the foreground, pictured against a cement home with an iron gate in Panama where both she and Nancy have lived in the past. The audio track that accompanies the collage images includes the voices of both mother and daughter. (While an analysis of the language varieties that index the Caribbean and West African origins of the mothers, whose words are transcribed in Examples One, Four, and Six, lies beyond the scope of this article, we want to acknowledge the presence of multiple forms of English and Spanish in the text.)

1. Limarys: Don't rush life. Enjoy yourself. **Everything** that's here, will be **always here**. You a child **one time**.
2. Nancy: **One time**.

3. Limarys: **One time.**
4. Nancy: **One time.**
5. Limarys: You gon be a child just **one time. One time** you gon be a child. And it, being a child don't last long.

The words transcribed here exemplify two of the three characteristics of a testimonio narrative: metonymy and I-shifters. Nancy's decision to title her project "advice for a child" set the stage for her mother's words to be heard as generalizable—by having chosen the generic pronoun "a" she indicates that the message applies not only to her but to other children like her. Limarys' words also suggest that Nancy is metonymic of—can stand in for—an audience of other children that she imagined reaching through this interview. Within turn 1, Limarys began by directly addressing Nancy as "you"—her daughter conducting the face-to-face interview. By the end of that same first turn, Limarys shifted from the specific "you" to the indefinite pronoun referring to an abstract child ("a child") that Nancy represents. The latter, generic, child prevails in this counterstory and is the construction that Limarys used for the remainder of her narration.

Anyone listening to Limarys' message—first Nancy, and then us—would have to anchor her words in place and time in order to understand their meaning. The words themselves are indexical—they require additional contextual cues in order to know who and what Limarys is referring to. In Limarys' message, this arises in the tension she expressed between what endures and what disappears in life: "everything that's here will always be here" and "you gon be a child just one time". There are a number of words integral to the excerpt which are never specified: the indefinite pronoun "everything", along with the spatial and temporal adverbs "here" and "always", are empty of referential meaning until Nancy helps us to interpret them by providing imagery and sound. The repetition of "one time" serves as a counterpoint to the word "always" which modifies living in a state of childhood, suggesting that concerns over time and the boundaries between childhood and a subsequent developmental stage are at the heart of this intergenerational counterstory.

Nancy leveraged the multiple communicative resources available in multimedia collage to underscore the central refrain in this testimonio: "you a child one time". The phrase is repeated seven times in the 37 s project. To accompany her mother's spoken testimonio, Nancy added a hand-illustrated flower, punctuating Limarys' speech (see Figure 1). A flower appears each time Limarys utters the phrase "one time". By adding a repeated visual element that matches the slow tempo of her mother's speech (which in and of itself underscores her message to take one's time), Nancy employed the oratory style of repetition and parallelism to underscore those words that were most powerful to her. The placement, movement, and color of the illustrated flower varies with Limarys' talk (see Figure 2). As Limarys uttered the words "it don't last long", the flowers change color and additional multicolored flowers appear synced to the tempo of the Marc Anthony song "Vivir Mi Vida" which begins to play in the background. The words of the song add another layer of emphasis, reminding Nancy to live life as a "child" ("vivir mi vida", punctuated by the frivolous "lalalala" of the song's chorus). In her 2020, book, *Children Framing Childhoods*, Luttrell underscores the power of images and explains that "Photographs communicate what may be seeable, but not easily sayable about our social worlds and the fashioning of identities" [37] (p. 8). This ceremonious visual moment can be seen as a metaphor for a rite of passage—coming of age as a time of blooming—an experience that is complex enough to warrant the use of sensory resources beyond the spoken word.

Nancy made a number of other aesthetic decisions that help to clarify and underscore the significance of her mother's words. First, she repeated the phrase "one time" in turns 2 and 4. These turns display the tender relationship between mother and daughter—Limarys asking Nancy not to rush life, to stay a child as long as she can, and Nancy repeating it twice to affirm that she heard this powerful message. In turn 5, Nancy manipulated the recording of her mother's words by adding an echo sound effect to emphasize this key phrase through even further repetition. Second, Nancy's choice to include a photo of her mother in the collage constitutes a visual reminder that this testimonio is Limarys' direct

participant account. The message is clearly attributed to Limarys and her image reinforces that she is the primary narrator. Nancy's decision to include a photo of her mother also suggests that we (the audience) cannot understand the significance of what Limarys says without knowing what she looks like. By choosing a photo of her mom in her "younger years", Nancy further connected her mother's experience to her own—one of movement between Panama and New York, between Black girlhood and womanhood.



**Figure 1.** Una Flor//One Flower.



**Figure 2.** Florecer//Blooming.

Finally, by presenting a distorted—stretched-out—image of a home in Panama where both Limarys and Nancy have lived, Nancy offered us a reference point for the “everything” and “here” that her mother uttered. We can imagine that, having lived in Panama when she was younger, Nancy assents to the view that childhood is located “there”, far from their current residence in Brooklyn where they face a different set of realities. Yet, addressing her 14-year-old daughter as “you a child” (turn 1), Limarys resisted a majoritarian narrative that imposes an adult gaze on her daughter in the U.S. context. While Limarys acknowledged that childhood is fleeting, she also reminded Nancy to remain one as long as she could—an act of resistance in and of itself for Black girls growing up in the U.S.

#### 4.1.2. Example Two: “Tenemos Diez, Once Años”

“We are ten, eleven years-old”

In 2014, the year that Mangual Figueroa was conducting her ethnography of immigrant childhoods in Brooklyn, the six focal girls in her study were preparing to graduate from elementary school and enter public middle schools around the borough. The graduation song that they were learning to perform that June was the same song that Nancy included in her project: “Vivir mi Vida”. The song’s chorus mentions joy (to laugh/“reir”) and pain (to cry/“llorar”), representing the tension that Limarys and Nancy broached above and

that the immigrant-origin girls in Mangual Figueroa's study expressed below—enjoying childhood innocence while also preparing for life's challenges. On the second day of their member check meeting, Mangual Figueroa posed a question to the six immigrant-origin girls in her study: "what do you think you all have in common?"

Lupe began by tentatively listing everyone's age: "Creo que todas somos . . . Tenemos diez; digo, once años" ("I think we have . . . We are all ten; I mean, eleven years old"). Mangual Figueroa affirmed this response and added a note about their shared grade in school: "Diez, once; están en quinto. ¿Qué más?" ("Ten, eleven; you're in fifth grade. What else?"). At this point two other girls chimed in to say that they were, in fact, eleven and twelve years old, and on the verge of turning twelve. After hearing the number twelve Lupe posed another question—"¿Reprobaste un año?" ("Did you repeat a grade?")—implying that their ages were out of sync with a normative elementary school trajectory and thus needed to be accounted for. The seemingly simple declaration of their ages and Lupe's probing question led these fifth-grade girls to recount moments when they confronted a schooling system that viewed them through a deficit and racialized lens. We present the transcripts in the original translanguaging style in which they were spoken and provide a full translation into English. (The transcription of ethnographic linguistic data are presented with the Spanish language on the left and their English translation on the right. Counter to common publishing practices in the U.S., we have chosen not to italicize the Spanish so as not to normalize one code over another. We have purposely placed the Spanish-language transcription on the left so that the reader first encounters the original language of the exchange before turning to its translation in English). We refer to the first author as Ms. Ariana in the transcript because this is how the students addressed her during their interactions.

1 Lupe:	¿Reprobaste un año? ((un gesto señalando que no))	Did you repeat a grade? ((a gesture signaling no))
2 Canela:	Yo también voy a tener doce.	I'm also going to be twelve.
3 Lupe:	Yo . . . Yo no pude entrar a la escuela como tuve la exacta edad <b>porque mi cumpleaños era en abril</b> so tienes que repetir un año. ((hablando como si estuviera llorando))	I . . . I couldn't start school since I had the exact age because my birthday was in April so you have to repeat a year. ((voice mimicking a cry))
4 Ms. Ariana:	Un año.	One year.
5 Lupe:	<b>Y yo jamás repetí un año; jamás, como fui p'atrás, sino culpa de mi cumpleaños.</b>	<b>I never repeated a year, never, since I went back instead it was my birthday's fault.</b>
6 Ms. Ariana:	Sí.	Yes.
7 Lupe:	<b>No, no es culpa I love my birthday . . .</b> ((bajando la voz))	<b>No, no it's not fault I love my birthday.</b> ((lowering her voice))
8 Various voices:	Por la culpa . . .	It's the fault of . . .
9 Ruth:	Oh, sí. Dos cosas. La primera es que . . . Creo nosotras tres . . . no, seis somos iguales porque . . . sino que nosotras no, pero tenemos familiares y tal vez nosotras . . . como fuimos inmigrantes, somos inmigrantes. So creo que esa es la cosa como lo que tenemos nosotras. Y la segunda cosa que quería decir es que yo no [ruido de fondo] sino que <b>a mí no me mandaron para atrás, que no pasé el examen</b> , sino que cuando vení . . . cuando yo vine, digo. Cuando yo vine iba para . . . en El Salvador estaba . . . en primer grado. Cuando vine, ya debía de estar en segundo grado. <b>No me agarraron en segundo, sino que hice otra vez el primer grado acá, y eso me ayudó también para aprender el inglés</b>	Oh, yes. Two things. The first is that . . . I think that we three, no, six are the same because it's not that we . . . but we all have family and perhaps we . . . since we were immigrants, are immigrants. So I think that that is the thing like what we have. And the second thing that I wanted to say is that I didn't [background noise], it's not that <b>they sent me back, that I didn't pass the exam</b> , but instead when I come . . . when I came, I mean. When I came I was going to . . . in El Salvador I was . . . in first grade. When I came, I should have been in second grade. <b>They didn't take me in second grade, instead I did first grade again here, and that also helped me to learn English.</b>

Directly following her own question about being retained, Lupe attempted to answer it, as if to quickly set the record straight regarding her own experience. In turn 3 she accounted for why she is older than some of her fifth-grade peers: “I couldn’t start school as if I had the exact age because my birthday was in April.” Following this I-statement, Lupe pivoted to describe educational policies applied to all students: “so you have to repeat a year”. However, Lupe’s interpretation of this policy is not detached or neutral—she changed her voice into a performed cry—lamenting the fact that she had to “repeat a year” and communicating the stigma associated with doing so. Lupe underscored that she was not to blame for repeating a year: “I never repeated a year, I never since I went back” pivoting with the word “instead” to offer us another explanation (“it was my birthday’s fault”). Still, she was not satisfied with this account because—after all—her birthday was inextricable from her sense of self. To blame her birthday was to blame herself. These revisions underscore Lupe’s desire to tell a redemptive counterstory that did not hold her responsible for perceived educational failure nor for an arbitrary set of life circumstances that she did not have the power to change (such as the day she was born or the day she was brought to this country).

Throughout turn 9, Ruth continued in a testimonio frame by noting the qualities that she believed united the six girls—“we all have family”, and “we were, are immigrants”. Additionally, this “we” suggests that her experience is metonymic of the experiences of the other six students in the study and beyond. Ruth began with an observation about what all of the girls possess—family and an immigrant identity—before turning to a story about what they lacked (normative academic progress). Following Lupe’s story and thinking out loud about blame, Ruth explained that she was not sent back—she did not fail a test—instead, her school placed her in first grade twice. Ruth used the same construction as Lupe had previously: first, debunking a deficit view and absolving herself of blame (“I didn’t, it’s not that they sent me back, that I didn’t pass the exam”) then stating “instead” to pivot the narrative away from self-blame to institutional practice (“I should have been in second grade. They didn’t take me in second grade”). Where Lupe blamed the arbitrariness of her birthdate, Ruth blamed an unspecified “they” who we can imagine is plural for teachers, school administrators, or authorial figures making consequential decisions about her life. Ruth’s word choices have particular meaning in light of her immigration experience, which she recounted openly to this small group and which she often retold in writing assignments for her teachers as well. As a formerly undocumented child who crossed the current U.S.–Mexico border, the phrase “mandar para atrás” (a calque, or word-for-word translation of the English “to be sent back”) and the word “agarrar” (“to grab”) have a double meaning that can signify being detained at the border and being sent back to one’s country of origin. In this narrative it also means being held back a grade. Similar to Lupe, who attempted to end her testimonio with a redemptive statement—“I love my birthday”—Ruth also tried to restore her sense of self-worth by framing the story in a positive light (“that also helped me learn English”).

As we can see from this brief exchange, the seemingly simple fact of the students’ ages was actually a complex subject of debate and contextualization. The narrative of entering school was an important one for the girls to retell—a significant moment that involved an encounter with public institutions, with evaluation and placement, and with an assessment of knowledge and ability. Elsewhere, Mangual Figueroa (2017) analyzes the significance of this moment for Lupe, who often recounted the experience of having teachers doubt her academic ability as early as first grade and her and her mother’s story of advocating to prove them wrong [24]. While in these other retellings Lupe recounted a triumphant American Dream-like narrative of deficit views followed by hard work and triumph over adversity, here she shifted the blame away from herself and instead towards institutional policies regarding age cut-offs for entering school. This formative moment shaped the girls’ sense of self-worth, evident in this exchange many years later at the tail end of their elementary school experiences.



#### 4.2. Counterstory #2: Questioning and Preserving Traditions

The second set of counterstories center the focal children and youth's questions regarding cultural preservation and assimilation, enduring questions in mainstream and scholarly discussions of immigration. As we saw in the previous example, racially minoritized immigrant students like the focal children and youth in our studies are routinely treated as objects of policy. This strips them of agency and obscures the complex ways in which they make decisions over their everyday lives. Similar to the children in Luttrell's (2020) longitudinal study of working-class childhoods, our participants demonstrate that they are "aware that their own and their family's activities and values might be suspect" and that, as a result, they "seemed compelled to show their recognition of mutual care in their lives and learning" [37] (p. 22). While Counterstory #1 focused on the value of childhood over time and in relation to dominant schooling institutions, the following examples offer a lens into participants' sense of self-worth in relation to their own and mass-produced cultural frames of reference.

##### 4.2.1. Example Three: "Solo Quiero Pasar Tiempo con mi Familia"

"I only want to spend time with my family"

Continuing the conversation about the significance of their birthdays, Ruth shared a dilemma that she imagined facing when she turned fifteen in a few years' time.

1 Ruth:	En mi opinión, mi mamá dice, para mis como quince, ella solo puede ... Yo digo, bueno ... Bueno, ella no dice ... No quiero poner palabras en su boca, pero lo que yo, en mi opinión, lo que yo pienso es <b>yo no quiero como una fiesta como uno ve en la televisión o en películas o en vida real</b> , que se van a un ... como rentan un lugar y lo decoran y todo bien grande, disco y un montón de luces. Eso yo para mí no lo quiero, <b>sino que yo solo quiero pasar como tiempo con mi familia</b> , que yo veo que ellos ... que ellos ven que yo como ...	In my opinion, my mother says that, for my fifteenth, she can only ... I say, well ... Well, she doesn't say ... I don't want to put words in her mouth, but in my opinion, what I think is that <b>I don't want like the kind of party that one sees on the television or in movies or in real life</b> , that they go like rent a place and they decorate it with everything big, disco and a ton of lights. I don't want that for myself, <b>instead I just want to spend time with my family</b> , so that I can see, that they can see how I ...
2 Lupe:	Como tú disfrutas estar con tu familia.	How you enjoy being with your family.
3 Ruth:	<b>Ver que ellos están disfrutando</b> con mi vida todavía?	<b>To see that they are enjoying</b> my life still?

Ruth's story centers on la quinceañera—a milestone birthday at age fifteen celebrated throughout Latin America that often involves a traditional and gendered presentation of the young person to their kinship and ethnic community. As she began, Ruth thought aloud about observing cultural rituals while also claiming autonomy from her own familial traditions. In this testimonio frame she demonstrated her own metalinguistic awareness of talk and authorship—who can speak for whom and about what ("I don't want to put words in her mouth"). Ruth worked to find her own authorial voice: shifting from a rehearsal of the tone she would use with her mother ("in my opinion"), then asserting her own belief ("what I think is that") and finally launching into her own assertion of desire and purpose ("I don't want that for myself", "I just want to") as it related to her fifteenth birthday celebration. At the same time, Ruth evoked pervasive cultural representations of a birthday ritual that she did not aspire to—"the kind of party that one sees on the television or in movies or in real life". Ruth described images of quinceañera parties that were not unique to her and her family and that she knew were consumed—and perhaps even desired by—the other participants in Mangual Figueroa's study. She rejected these images of her culture, disseminated in mainstream media channels that present an essentialized view of what Latin American coming of age celebrations entail. As Ruth articulated a shift from the spectacular to the particular, she asserted that the value of a birthday ritual is to spend time with her family and, even more so, to know that they "are enjoying my life still". This transition echoes the questions of childhood thresholds raised in the first set of

counterstories, as well as the Menchú epigraph presented at the outset of this article where birthdays entail becoming increasingly responsible to and for one's community.

#### 4.2.2. Example Four: "Growing Up with 5 Siblings Was Fun"

Just as Ruth's description of her future quinceañera centered on a desire for her family to enjoy each other's company, Riley's testimonio evokes questions about kinship and joy. Riley begins with a photograph of herself as a toddler embraced by her mother, both of them looking directly at the camera commanding the audience's attention. Their gaze is also soft and inviting, as if we, the audience, were situated within this living room, ready to listen to their story. Riley began the interview by asking her mother about her upbringing in Jamaica with five siblings (a phrase that she repeated twice in her query).

1. Riley: What is it like growing up with **five siblings**? Can you tell me a story about you and your **five siblings**?
2. Angela: Growing up with **five siblings was fun** since I was the last child. We would go to the river to wash our clothes and take them home to hang and dry. And you know at times most of the times especially during the summertime, we would all cook on woodfire that **was so fun**.
3. Riley: (laughs) Really?
4. Angela: Yeah, that **was fun**.

The story that Angela shared with Riley began with a declaration that life was fun for her as the youngest of five siblings, and then turned to a description of washing clothes and cooking food in her sibling's company (turn 2). Angela emphasized "fun" and located it in the past tense, repeating this three times throughout the excerpt (turns 2 and 4), as if to recall pleasant memories of a time long gone. For Riley, the idea of chores, particularly washing clothes at the river, was hard to conceive as a fond memory. Riley's giggling and disbelief ("really?" in turn 3) communicate the tenderness in this testimonio—Angela's warm insistence on her joyful childhood and Riley's playfully disbelief of that mother's assertions counted as "fun." Angela's experiences of growing up with five siblings (with the shared familial knowledge that Angela grew up in Jamaica) was inconceivable for Riley who was born and raised and living in Brooklyn.

Without ever mentioning that her mother was born in Jamaica, Riley used a range of visual resources to demonstrate the differences in her life before and after immigrating to Brooklyn. As Angela describes her childhood as fun, images of toys and childhood games—such as a jump rope and a soccer ball—appear superimposed onto the photographic image of mother and daughter. Up to this point, it is unclear where this recounting is situated geographically and culturally. When Angela began to describe the particular activities of her childhood—washing clothes and cooking on woodfire—Riley introduced images of otherness vis-à-vis a tropical setting (see Figure 3). In this way, Riley implied that she and her mother did not share the same frames of reference for what childhood could be. The images used to depict washing clothes include a mass-produced plastic hamper juxtaposed with a tin basin and washboard as if the two communicate two ways of "doing laundry": indoors by machine and outdoors by hand. This frame demonstrates visual collage techniques of integrating smaller parts to create "a larger collective" [52] in this case, a whole self that included Riley's understanding of domestic life in the U.S. and her understanding of childhood in Jamaica. As Riley moved on to tending to the clothes, the audience begins to see an image of a country home in Jamaica, where each item of clothing is hung up one by one superimposed over images of thatched roof homes set against a green backdrop.

As Angela's narrative shifted from her particular family to evoke a generalized and shared truth with the discourse marker "you know" and a description of cooking over a wood fire (turn 2), Riley returned to the original image of her as a toddler sitting on her mother's lap, now displaying a wood stove, colorful pot, and a spread of Caribbean food: rice and peas, oxtail, and plantains (see Figure 4).



**Figure 3.** “We would go to the river”.



**Figure 4.** “Cooking on Woodfire”.

The video ends with another photo of Riley—at approximately age 7—and Angela in which both of them are looking directly at the camera. Riley’s decision to include a second mother–daughter picture reinforces her desire for the audience to see who uttered the voices and, in so doing, to communicate that the speakers are living and loving people in Brooklyn. Their gaze has a testimonial quality emphasizing their authorship of the direct participant account and welcoming the audience into the narrative. As the speakers address us, we are invited into their home and into their line of sight so that we may learn from them. While leaning into questions of perspective that evoke two different childhoods, Riley refuses to reproduce images of scarcity. Instead, Riley’s multimedia testimonio communicates abundance: a family full of children, a childhood full of fun, and a home full of food and toys.

#### 4.3. Counterstory #3: *The Value of Care*

This last pair of testimonios raise nuanced questions about the kinds of care and attention that the narrators value. There is a long history of schooling institutions intervening in racially minoritized and economically disenfranchised families’ lives in order to change their caregiving practices through assimilation to majoritarian white middle class and English-speaking norms [53]. In these testimonios, Lupe and Hadijah offer us insights into family life and care structures in their own right.

## 4.3.1. Example Five: “Es muy Difícil Compartir el Cumpleaños”

“It’s very hard to share the birthday”

In the final part of the member check conversation about birthdays, Lupe offered a third view into their significance from the perspective of sharing care and attention with other family members. She begins, like Ruth, by rejecting a view of birthdays that emphasizes material wealth and instead emphasizes the importance of kinship and connection.

1 Lupe:	Y no quiero ... Por ejemplo, solo una ... un cake en el parque, un barbecue. Bueno, una cosa ...	I don’t want, for example, only a cake in the park, a barbecue. Well, one thing ...
2 Ms. Ariana:	Para estar unidos.	To be together.
3 Lupe:	Ajá, yo tampoco no ... me ... ¿Cómo se dice? ... Me celebran mi cumpleaños, pero es que a veces ... <b>a veces no hay dinero o no hay cosas que podría celebrar mi cumpleaños y ...</b> Y so, a veces mi tía, solamente mi tía ... <b>No somos muy ricos ni nada. Yo sé que nadie aquí es como rico ni nada, que van a escuela privada y todas esas cosas ...</b> Yo, y mi tía solamente de comprarme como un cake pequeño, solamente para que todos se recordaran de mi cumpleaños. Pero la cosa, a mí ... lo que a mí me chocó de mi cumpleaños cuando cumplí ocho, nueve y diez, es que mi primo chiquito también es um ... nació en el mismo día que yo, <b>y es muy difícil compartir el cumpleaños y siendo la misma familia, porque como ella era la niña chiquita, le hacen todas las fiestas ...</b>	Yeah, I also don’t ... How do you put it? They celebrate my birthday, but sometimes ... <b>sometimes there isn’t money or there aren’t things with which they could celebrate my birthday ...</b> And so, sometimes my aunt, only my aunt ... <b>We’re not rich or anything. I know that no one here is like rich or anything, like goes to a private school and all of that ...</b> Me and my aunt only buy a small cake, just so that everyone remembers my birthday. But the thing is, for me ... what was hard for me when I turned eight, nine and ten is that my younger cousin is also um ... was born the same day as me, <b>and it’s very hard to share the same birthday and be in the same family, because since she was the younger kid, they would throw her all of the parties ...</b>
4 Ms. Ariana:	Ajá	Uh, huh.
5 Lupe:	<b>Pero como notaron que yo me estaba sintiendo mal por eso,</b> me hicieron una fiesta ... una fiesta en la escuela ... una fiesta ...	<b>But since they realized I was feeling bad because of that,</b> they threw me a party ... a party in school ... a party ...
6 Anais:	¿Este año?	This year?
7 Unidentified Student:	Ajá; una fiesta ...	Uh huh; a party ...
8 Ms. Ariana:	Aquí la hicieron.	They did it here.
9 Lupe:	En la ... en mi casa. Compartir un cake pequeño de cappuccino. También aquí traje un cake de cappuccino, <b>y me hicieron un barbecue en mi cuestión también ...</b> Porque ellos notaron que es muy difícil compartir cumpleaños con una niña chiquitita porque le ponen más atención a ella que a mí. Y eso es muy difícil. Y a mí si me celebran mis cumpleaños, siempre estoy muy alegre y muy juntada con mi familia, y si no me lo celebran, siempre ... todos siempre me felicitan o me regalan algo.	In the ... at my house. Shared a small cappuccino cake. I <b>brought a cappuccino cake here too, and they did a barbecue at my thing too ...</b> Because they realized that it is really hard to share a birthday with a little girl because they give her more attention than me. And that is very hard. And if they celebrate my birthdays, I’m always very happy and tightly closed with my family, and if they don’t always celebrate it, always ... they all always say happy birthday or give me a present.

Lupe first resituated herself within a testimonio frame by vacillating between the I-statement characteristic of a direct participant account and a generalized subject position (one or we) that suggests her narrative is representative of Latin American immigrant girls similar to her. Beginning with mention of “my birthday” in turn 1, she then shifted from a description of her family (“we’re not rich or anything”) to a set of claims about the group of six plus Mangual Figueroa (“I know no one here is rich or anything like goes to a private school and all of that”). In so doing, Lupe constructed a shared type of immigrant girl—for which her particular story can stand in—and created a framework that allowed the subsequent sentences to speak for all of us and her audience. Her evocation of

a “somos” (“us”) lent her narrative credence by suggesting that her story was generalizable. Additionally, similar to Ruth, she toggled between temporalities by speaking in the present while imagining a future birthday celebration. Lupe evoked past birthdays (eight, nine, ten) to garner further authority for her claims (this has happened before). After turning towards the past, Lupe named the particular challenge on her mind: sharing a birthday with a younger cousin who received more attention than she did. Once again, childhood was presented as full of responsibility at a young age—as early as 8 years-old Lupe knew she needed to cede attention to (and often care for) those even younger than her.

Then, as ever, Lupe reframed challenges to find a positive spin. In turn 5, she stated that her family did notice that sharing a birthday was hard for her and they found other modest ways to celebrate her as well. From here on, her testimonio vacillated between reporting on actual events and projecting a desired future birthday celebration. Lupe imagined a party thrown for her at school (turn 5). However, when Anais asked a verifying question (“this year?” in turn 6), followed by my ratifying statement (“they did it here,” turn 8), Lupe revised this claim—which we may read as hopeful but not actual—and instead settled on describing a party at home with a barbeque and “small cappuccino cake” in turn 9. Lupe ended by reiterating that her family did realize what was hard for her, repeating the verb “notar”, meaning to take notice of (in turns 6 and 10), thereby acknowledging the subtle forms of care that made a big impact on her sense of belonging within her family. Lupe ended on a positive note as she did in Example 1—“if they celebrate my birthday I’m always very happy and with my family, and if they don’t always celebrate it . . . they all always say happy birthday or give me a present”.

#### 4.3.2. Example Six: “Did You Ever Feel Like You Weren’t Having Enough Attention”

Our last example represents a conversation between a mother and daughter regarding family and siblinghood in Nigeria. This testimonio highlights one mother’s resistance of a view of care that emphasizes individual attention over familial togetherness.

1. Hadijah: Did you ever feel like you weren’t having **enough attention** because of your siblings?
2. Sade: No, we never think, I never think about that for one second because we grow together, we eat together, which **kind of attention** are you talking about? We eat together, we do everything together, we walk together. You know? We grew up . . .

As a 15-year-old girl growing up in the U.S., Hadijah wondered how any one child could receive sufficient attention in a large family. Her framing—hinging on the word “enough” to modify “attention”—centered the question on the quantity of care received by adults. Sade’s response began with a “we” formulation, sidestepping the I-formation to convey that she represented the views of her siblings. In her response she repeated the word “together” as if to override Hadijah’s view of attention centered on one person competing with others for care.

Halfway through her response, Sade paused to ask Hadijah a question: “what kind of attention are you talking about?” Here, she conveyed an alternative frame of reference; one not focused on the quantity of care but instead on the quality or kind of care received. Sade’s tone and repetition —“no we never think like that” (turn 2)—was assertive and an attempt at clarifying that the experiences with her siblings and family were tender, beautiful, and fondly remembered. Sade’s testimonio can be heard as a counterstory communicating that her cultural norms, including her kinship structure, constituted a source of pride rather than a burden.

The video opens with a photo of Sade on the right side of the screen wearing a traditional African dress and headwrap surrounded by a raining backdrop. This is followed by Sade standing beside a sunny playground in Brooklyn (see Figure 5). Hadijah then introduced the following images: a vase full of red roses, an African bust of a woman’s face, and a fan with traditional African print, juxtaposed with the images of a New York City playground (see Figure 6). The use of images throughout this video leverages another way of communicating through testimonio by displaying shared cultural images that cannot



quite be described or named through a spoken statement but that stand in for a larger community through their iconography. This is parallel to Menchú's decisions to wear a huipil for many of her public appearances, even as she juxtaposes traditional modes of Quiché dress with other western ones (see Hedrick's 1996 discussion of the impact of Menchú's clothing on her white American students' reading of her testimonio) [23]. Although Sade never used the phrasing, we/us Nigerians, the images that Hadijah chose to include in the project are a representation of a collective "us" depicting her connection to West African culture. The repetition of the artifacts evokes the collective "we" that is never communicated in the spoken testimonio but is portrayed visually. Looking across Figures 5 and 6, we can see that Sade's photo is deleted as the icons are added to fill the screen in a literal switch from the individual person to a collective frame of reference.

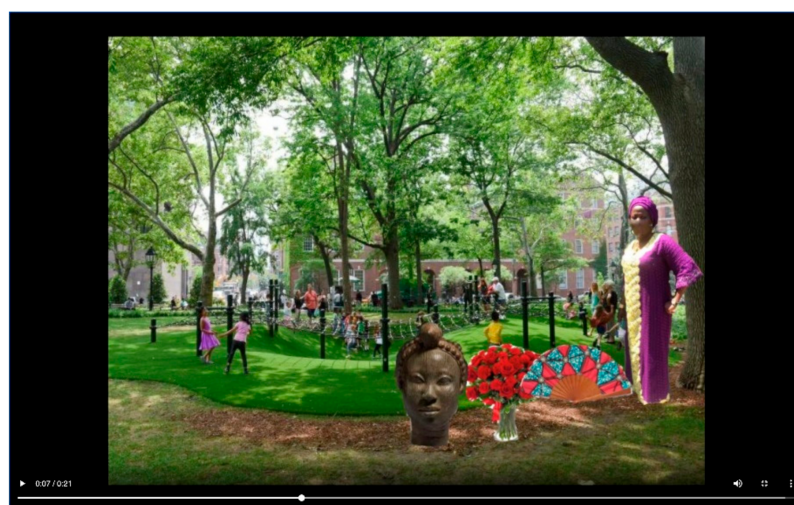


Figure 5. Sade in Brooklyn.



Figure 6. Icons over Brooklyn.

Throughout the audio we hear a small child in the background who is either playing with a toy or watching a TV show, providing the audience with further context in which to understand the narrators' perspective on togetherness. Hadijah was interviewing her mother while other family members of various generations were present. From the baby, to Hadijah, to her mother (Sade), there was family present as Hadijah asked: is growing up in a big family a good thing? It is almost as if the slice of audio represents the dilemma that Hadijah posed—how to feel heard and seen when other family members are present. Additionally, the presence of the younger child's voice—which does not, but could have,

jeopardized the quality of the interview recording—is notable. Nowhere in this excerpt was the younger child asked to be quiet or leave the room for the purposes of the recording; Hadijah was living the kind of extended intergenerational co-existence that she asked her mother to account for. This blurring of the past/present, here/there demonstrates that the experiences Sade verbally described and Hadijah visually attributed to her African heritage, were also present here in Brooklyn (on the playground and in the audio).

## 5. Discussion

This article has examined testimonio-like narratives of elementary- and high-school-aged immigrant-origin children and youth that function as counterstories: first-person narratives told in order to counter deficit-based views of racially minoritized immigrants similar to themselves. We argue for the significance of these narratives in spite of, and because of, the fact that they represent the mundane and ordinary experiences of young immigrant-origin women of color residing in Brooklyn, New York City. In so doing, we resist narratives of exceptionality or deviance that circulate in the news media and popular culture regarding immigrant-origin youth. These mainstream perceptions tend to portray racially minoritized immigrant-origin youth in one of two ways: first, they herald immigrant-origin youth for their individual successes based upon White middle-class norms of academic and social achievement (often involving assimilation in the form of language loss and cultural alienation); second, they blame children, youth, and families for their linguistic and cultural origins while imposing institutional disciplinary mechanisms in the form of parent reeducation, subtractive language programs, and disproportionate disciplinary practices that can lead to carceral experiences. Relatedly, existing portrayals of immigrant-origin children and youth—and the communities they belong to—tend to impose exclusive categorical identities that do not allow for the multiple ways of belonging that we have demonstrated here. In U.S. schools and society, racial, ethnic, and linguistic belonging tend to be viewed as mutually exclusive: for example, the youth authors of the multimedia testimonios that participated in Barrales' study were labeled as Black students but not as immigrant-origin youth. At the same time, the Latin American children in Mangual Figueroa's study were labeled as English learners, but not as immigrant-origin youth. In both cases, immigrantness is obscured in schools, yet this article shows that children and youth consider their immigrant subjectivities to be integral to understanding their life experiences through storytelling.

The testimonios presented in this article demonstrate the many communicative resources employed by immigrant-origin children and youth who shared their testimonios with us. We draw on multiple sources of evidence in our analysis—transcription of audiovisual recordings, juxtaposing images, and the spoken and aural quality of the recordings—and we examine the ways in which these resources are leveraged to produce a narrative that reflects the first-person and metonymic accounts considered typical of the form. These narratives offer us compelling counterstories focused on three key themes. The first focuses on ideas of childhood at the nexus of innocence and responsibility. In both Lupe's recounting of her birthday and in the visual testimonio of Limarys and Nancy, there is a tension present in the speakers' talk about childhood. In these examples, there is both a sense of loss and of possibility and, therefore, a rejection of a dichotomous understanding of joy and pain, innocence and responsibility. The second set of testimonios present a counterstory to the notion that immigrant-origin children and youth are social actors without agency, upon whom social and educational policies need to be imposed. In fact, these testimonios portray children and youth's agency and sophistication as they raise probing questions about intergenerational cultural transmission, local and societal expectations, and the value of family togetherness. In so doing, these testimonios demonstrate the embeddedness of immigrant-origin children and youth in social and cultural networks that are intergenerational and transnational. The third and final set of testimonios raise another set of enduring questions about familial togetherness in immigrant contexts, offering a

view of care and connection within immigrant families living in the U.S. and a glimpse into what these immigrant-origin children and youth value.

We have developed our critical conceptual perspective on testimonio from our close reading of the published work by Rigoberta Menchú and Elizabeth Burgos, along with the scholarly debates that have issued from this work in recent decades. This article extends discussions regarding the “testimonial contract” that develops between the speaker who delivers her testimonio and the listener who publishes and disseminates the narrative [17]. A central ethical question that arises in this relationship is a representational one: of all of the narrative details that the speaker communicates, what and how does the listener choose to share them with a broader public? We find a metaphor useful here: that publishing testimonio is like ringing a tuning fork. When a tuning fork is struck, two tones are emitted: one is called a fundamental tone and one is known as a harmonic tone. These tones are only perceptible as separate for a moment; they quickly merge into a fundamental tone used when tuning certain instruments to a desired pitch. In our work, there are several relationships that we can attune to: first, the listener/publisher or researched/researcher; second, the peer/peer collaboration that leads to co-constructing narrative during interaction; and third, the mother/daughter dialogue in which the daughter is both listener and producer of her mother’s own story.

We argue that publishing testimonio is like striking a tuning fork: the author (like the musician) can attune to a particular note and is responsible for sanctioning certain desired sounds over others through the production process. The notes most often heard in the literature on testimonio represent hardship, violence, and struggle; the notes that resound in the literature on immigrant-youth education play tunes of educational failure and language loss. In this article we hope to train the listeners’ ear to another note: not tragedy, nor triumph, but children and youth’s everyday ruminations that resist sensationalization. We have done so by centering the first-person narratives of Black immigrant mothers from the English-speaking Caribbean and West Africa, as retold through the eyes of their U.S.-born daughters, and we have done so through the first-person accounts of undocumented and formerly undocumented Latina children who evoke an array of other people including educators, mothers, and family members. The layers of meaning and authorship in the testimonios we have presented indicate the presence of majoritarian and non-dominant people and institutions, and we find central themes that cut across this diverse array of authors.

Our approach to the study of testimonio has permitted us to think across and within group-level experiences—not to essentialize, but to broaden our perspective, and to center multiple subjectivities. An intersectional view, which includes gender, race, ethnicity, language, and immigrant status, needs to be further explored here and in related research. We hope to have demonstrated a way to further nuance our understanding of immigrantness in the U.S. by bringing together qualitative perspectives across studies centering multiple diasporas to help raise questions about the salience or dispensability of racial and ethnic labels. An important outcome of this holistic view of qualitative research is that our participants have resisted the very idea that they were being researched *on*; instead they took up the role of telling us what they want us to know about them. The children in Mangual Figueroa’s study did so at age ten by requesting that she host member check sessions so that they could hear the recordings she was making of their everyday talk. The youth in Barrales’s study turn their gazes towards us in the multimedia collages, looking back at us as if to question our purpose and to challenge our listening stance.

In so doing, these participants took ownership of our research and invited us to see how we are implicated in their own lives. Elizabeth Burgos describes this moment in her introduction to Menchú’s published testimonio and we have considered it in our own research as well [33]. We believe in the power of building trust across differences, and we also recognize that this process does not erase power differentials between individuals. Anzaldúa treats the very word *nosotras* as emblematic of these power differences produced out of a colonial legacy and maintained in the present. She says (2007): “I have a term

that is called *nos-otras*, and I put a dash between the *nos* and the *otras*. The *nos* is the subject “we”, that is the people who were in power and colonized others. The *otras* is the “other”, the colonized group. Then, there is also the dash, the divide between us” [54] (pp. 281–282). Anzaldúa goes on to explain that the dash is not stable, and that over centuries of colonialism we have learned that there is no “pure other”—we are all influenced by these histories in the present and we are implicated in their ongoingness. As Torre and Ayala (2009) explain in their call for feminist research in the adjacent field of social psychology, this formulation has a liberatory potential that starts with an acknowledgement of interdependence that can lead to transformation [55].

We believe that the data presented in this article teach us at least two key lessons: first, that we must reframe our views of immigrant-origin youth—moving away from assigning them categorical racial and ethnic labels towards learning in a grounded way about how they themselves understand their own identities. Second, that we must resist methodological categories that silo us (ethnographic versus digital, research on children versus youth, and others) because these disciplinary boundaries limit our ability to make connections and gain new insights. The data presented in this article push us to think about connections across language, immigrant status, and racial/ethnic identity. This work rejects views that dichotomize demographic characteristics, such as Black/Hispanic and English-speaking/English learner, that are often considered explanatory variables in research on schooling. Similarly, through the use of visual based research, this article highlights the ways in which arts-based methods have the power to show us a more nuanced, asset-based understanding of the immigrant experience that cannot always be communicated by words but rather, must be felt through visual & aural affect. As Restler (n.d.) states in her collage study of teaching practices in an age of accountability, we believe that “images, and the process of creating them provide a counterpoint to the proliferation of de-contextualized digital depictions” of, in our case, immigrant-origin children, youth, and their families [36]. Additionally, similar to Yosso (2006), who used an approach that she calls “composite counternarratives” to gather multiple sources of data on one student to present a picture that counters majoritarian narratives of the group that student represents, we have also taken a composite approach to analyzing multiple testimonio narratives from various immigrant-origin children and youth to amplify our counter dominant views of racially minoritized immigrants in the U.S.

## 6. Conclusions

While it is tempting to conclude this article with a call for further research, a directive for what is best for immigrant-origin children and youth, and a series of steps for naming them that would mitigate their erasure, we instead want to conclude with a call for sitting with “unknowability” (Patel, 2016). We, like the students we have represented in this article, have encountered the use of racial and ethnic identity markers as explanatory variables countless times in our lives as students, educators, and scholars. Consider, for example, the times our guidance counselors discouraged us from applying to selective undergraduate programs and then blamed our ethnicity for our acceptance in those colleges. Consider the ways in which, as teachers, we tried to reframe conversations about the so-called achievement gap away from indictments of students based on their perceived racial backgrounds and direct attention to the structural inequities in schooling. Consider the many times senior colleagues have invited us to join a new initiative aimed at teaching racialized immigrant parents the literacy practices they needed to acquire in order to raise successful children. Each time, race and ethnicity are treated as explanatory variables for educational (and by extension, life) outcomes.

These experiences underscore our resolve that, as Ladson-Billings (2012) argues, “education and race . . . have been inextricably linked for centuries and until we begin to unpack those linkages we will continue to struggle to make sense of how race operates in our research and scholarship” [2] (p. 116). The taken-for-granted logic regarding race and learning is pervasive, and we have examined everyday narratives of immigrant-



origin children and youth to show the equally mundane ways in which they unpack these linkages—those imposed upon us by those who subscribe to majoritarian stories and who enact policies that issue from them. Our participants’ willingness to share their own stories, to think across time and place, and their refusal to participate in simplistic accounts of their and their mother’s childhoods, are a lesson to us as educational researchers. If we remain silent, children and youth may show us the way forward. Additionally, they may help us to unpack the linkages between their own lived experiences of race and their own sense of imagination and possibility—not one dictated by demographic characteristics correlated to projected outcomes. As Patel (2016) writes: “education, for centuries, within the grip of coloniality, has sought to make this fundamental aspect of humanness, learning and changing, definitely known. In its fundamental unknowability, learning can remind us of the limits of coloniality” [3] (p. 6). The children and youth we work alongside have taught us to sit in our unknowability and to marvel at the creative narratives and authentic forms of care that emerge when we do.

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