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~Verónica<sup>1</sup>

## Weaving Our Histories: Latin@ Ethnography in the Heritage Language Classroom

by Elena Foulis and Jennifer Barajas

Latin@ heritage language learners (HLL) carry with them a wealth of experiences related to race, immigration, and language. The use of ethnography and oral history with heritage learners of Spanish allows educators to create opportunities for engaged teaching and learning practices when students invite their families into classrooms as knowledge producers, fostering creativity and self-confidence. This article builds on the foundation of the importance of using students' voices and experiences in heritage language instruction (Carreira and Beeman 2014; Roca 2000), but we also look at how HLL are rarely asked to consider their lived experiences as rich cultural and historical knowledge outside the HLL classroom. Furthermore, in our work as educators and teachers of HLL, we have the opportunity to model inclusion and engagement of students' literacy pluralities centered on their families' heritage and also their own experiences as Latin@s. In doing so, we show the importance of recognizing and honoring their unique backgrounds, and we, as educators, also participate in the transformation of thought by becoming a community of learners along with our students. In the same vein, Deafenbaugh (2015) writes about including aspects of folklife and folk arts instruction that encourage educators to include students' personal experiences and knowledge of their community in the classroom as a way to recognize the importance of

understanding different perspectives. She comments, “Allowing community knowledge and ways of knowing into the classroom requires teachers to be learners and reflective about their own practice” (Deafenbaugh 2015, 77). Moll et al. (1992), use the term Funds of Knowledge to talk about the resources in our students’ and their families’ communities and homes. Indeed, intentionally incorporating students’ lived experiences challenges deficit models of language learning and use, both found in their own communities, that remind them that their Spanish is not good enough, and the majority English-only population who point to English as the revered (valid) American identity. By centering students’ socio-cultural and socio-linguistic knowledge, we challenge existing views that promote English as the language of success or that stigmatize U.S. Spanish.

Judith Flores Carmona and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2012) identify using oral histories in the classroom as a pedagogical practice that encourages solidarity and integrates culturally relevant educational practices. Their study focuses on an elementary school project in which Latin@ students work with their families to collect oral histories and family stories. They note that engaging students in this work encourages qualitative research methods and the creation of “intergenerational knowledge that centers the epistemologies of their families” while working collaboratively with others (Flores Carmona and Delgado Bernal 2012, 3). We agree, and students confirm our assumptions, that this is also happening in our classes. For instance, Verónica reflected at the end of the semester, “I really liked taking this class because I was able to learn more about my culture and other cultures from Latin America. I like hearing the different accents from the various countries and seeing how they are similar to or different than those of my country. It was great to hear that so many students had come here with the same cultural experiences.”<sup>2</sup> Verónica’s reflection reveals the solidarity that is created within the classroom and the joy that students find in examining their own culture while also learning about others that are similar. Sebastián had a similar experience as he announced, “Learning about other cultures in the Latin@ community made me appreciate my own culture so much more.” Collecting oral histories allowed these students the space to delve into their cultural knowledge and create a sense of community with students from similar backgrounds. Since our students attend universities in the Midwest, the campus community makeup often differs from where they grew up, so they welcome a chance to encounter others with comparable stories and begin to form a new community.

We center our analysis and description of using family histories in the writing classroom using Critical Race Theory and Latino Critical Race Theory (Delgado Bernal 2002; Solórzano 1998; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Yosso 2005a, 2005b), approaches that have thus far not been considered in the analysis of heritage language courses, because both “acknowledge that educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize and their potential to *emancipate and empower*” (Delgado Bernal 2002, 109, italics ours). HLL, an often-racialized minority, carry with them a generational wealth of experiences related to race, immigration, and language. Yet rarely do they have the opportunity to see these experiences as cultural capital—borrowing Yosso’s term—in the classroom. Educational systems in our K-16 schools often fail to center experiences of minoritized students as knowledge producers, and culturally relevant curricula and classes for HLL are limited and frequently dependent on whether there are enough students enrolled. When classes for HLL are cut, it continues to reproduce White privilege and erasure of the Latin@ student experience, since they are often put into second-language learners’ classrooms where their unique needs are not

addressed. Certainly, inviting students to integrate the epistemology of lived experiences in connection with those of their families makes them creators of new knowledge and in doing so we are attempting to dismantle unequal structures of power and privilege, often enjoyed by the White majority. In his 1998 article, Solórzano identified at least five themes in research and teaching approaches to Critical Race Theory in education. Those are: 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; 2) the challenge to dominant ideology; 3) the commitment to social justice; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and 5) the interdisciplinary perspective. We believe that each of these themes is present in the work our students do in documenting family history. We use Solórzano's themes with a focus on Latin@ identities, to analyze and demonstrate how using ethnography through pedagogy produces individual stories that then become part of a collective consciousness. These family stories lead to greater understanding of a larger historical and social context for developing research and creative writing assignments while also focusing on transferable skills that will help students to be successful throughout their time in university and beyond.

There is a growing trend for preserving and documenting Latin@ life across the U.S. Archives such as *Voces Oral History Project* (Rivas 1999), *Borderlands Archive Cartography* (Álvarez and Fernández 2017), *Oral Narratives of Latin@s in Ohio* (Foulis 2014), and others demonstrate the need to collect the unique history and contribution of our communities. In the classroom, we can assign interviews and documents from these archives so that our students learn and understand more about their heritage, their own communities, and the diverse experiences of Latin@s across the country. We also have the opportunity to teach and empower them to begin collecting their own family histories.

We begin our courses by helping students recognize that they bring a wealth of linguistic knowledge of Spanish and that our goal is to help them use Spanish in different contexts and writing genres. For example, for most of our students, this is the first heritage language course they have ever taken, which already signals to them a different experience. They are in a class with other HLL with similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds and they are asked to explore further these identities as points of departure and engage in collaborative learning with their peers. One activity they are asked to complete is to talk about their names, their family names, and the pronunciation of them. They are asked to reflect on whether the names were anglicized, and whether this had any influence on their identities and Spanish language use. This initial discussion and activity help students see their histories as places of knowledge. In our work as educators—and bringing our own lived experiences of native and non-native speakers of Spanish, first-generation college graduates, immigrants, women, and mothers of heritage language speakers—of HLL of Spanish in intermediate to advanced writing courses we aim to support students' learning journeys that intersect with issues of race, gender, immigration, and, central to these classes, language. Furthermore, as Delgado Bernal (2002) concludes, "To recognize all students as holders and creators of knowledge, it is imperative that the histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of students of color are recognized and valued" (121). Through their work on their ethnographic projects, students begin to recognize the importance of their experiences and cultures and know that their stories are worth sharing.

Planning and preparing for an ethnographic interview entails planning, writing questions, recording the interview, transcribing, reporting, and composing drafts, all done in Spanish. Lynch

(2003) suggests that by using Spanish in diverse situations outside the classroom, students are more likely to acquire and continue using the language. This ties in nicely with our goals: 1) to develop critical writing skills and expression; 2) to develop a historical consciousness about the Latin@ presence in the U.S.; and 3) to document the experiences of Latin@s in the U.S., all of which begin with the interview assignment. Each step requires that students make critical choices about language (i.e., is it formal or informal language, address forms: *tú* vs. *usted*), coding for transcription, summaries, identification of keywords, themes, and organization. The diverse use of Spanish allows students to realize the benefit of knowing and communicating in another language, thus contributing to their sense of confidence. While students are not told to interview a specific family member, most choose to interview a parent, grandparent, or mentor who, for the purpose of this class and goals, must be a Spanish speaker. While most of the interview is in Spanish, we understand that part of the family's experience of living in the U.S. involves language contact, so we advise students to allow their narrator to speak in both English and Spanish, if that happens organically. This too is part of documenting family history, and it is part of creating trust and rapport with the narrator. Additionally, this allows the students to reflect on bilingualism and code-switching (changing between one language and another [Poplack 1980]), themes that are often discussed in our classes, not in the abstract, but rather in real-life situations. Indeed, allowing code-switching in the classroom and studying code-switching as an organic form of communication in their families pushes students to consider their bilingual or multilingual abilities, given that code-switching happens among those who are not monolingual. This is not to say that it is not a stigmatized practice—a view fueled on racism and exclusion—but by allowing it to happen spontaneously, we enact the counter-storytelling tenant of Culturally Responsive Teaching. We present the project as one that focuses on the centrality of experiential knowledge (Solórzano's fourth theme) because we want to affirm and be inclusive of family epistemologies that can inform us about relationships, (im)migration, language experiences, gender practices, and cultural traditions, among other themes or topics. Often students do not start the project with a theme in mind, but we provide students with some examples and encourage them to think about

### **The Art of the Interview: Oral History and Ethnography**

While we use the terms ethnography and oral history interchangeably in this article, we are aware of the differences. We do not use the term ethnographic methods because we believe many of the family members who our students interview are in close proximity or live with them, therefore, their research aligns more with that of an ethnographer who spends a significant amount of time with their interviewees. At the same time, as Hamer (2000) describes, “The folklorist’s perspective, as an outsider, is explained as helping people to see the value of that which is normally overlooked” (57). Although the student researchers are not outsiders when interviewing family members, they are charged with demonstrating the value of the traditions and experiences that have been undervalued by their own families or by society. However, the student is only capturing a period of time of the family member’s life (oral history), or, sometimes, a specific practice such as a celebration, a cooking tradition or cultural practice (i.e., *curanderismo*) that might be identified as folklore. Therefore, we see so many similarities between ethnography and oral history in the work our students do because each interview allows meaningful encounters to exist organically. That is, as cultural insiders, students are not only observing someone else’s culture or behaviors, they are getting at a deeper understanding of who they are in relation to their families’ histories.

what it is that they want to know more about from their family. We emphasize that they are documenting history and family folklore, and they might discover something they did not know.

Through oral history, students are collecting their families' histories, dialoguing with the past and actively engaging in public memory (Frisch 1990; Hamilton and Shopes 2008). Alessandro Portelli (1990) explains that in oral history, the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is one where two subjects recognize each other as such, which "stimulate others, as well as ourselves, to a higher degree of self-scrutiny and self-awareness; to help them grow more aware of the relevance and meaning of their culture and knowledge..." (43). Yet, when HLL conduct oral history interviews they are also acting as an ethnographer who already has many insights into the family culture and their histories—and perhaps secrets—which is why we choose to talk about this assignment as one that engages in both practices. In ethnography, as an ethnographer collects and later composes a narrative based on their observations, they become a social analyst (Rosaldo 1993) because they are a "positioned subject" who is "at once cognitive, emotional and ethical. She constructs knowledge through contexts of shifting power relations that involve varying degrees of distance and intimacy" (180). Reflection and interpretation are a key component of ethnography (Marcus 1998; Geertz 1973) and this is what happens in the writing process of this assignment.<sup>3</sup>

As we talk about this work with students, we point out that collecting family ethnography or oral history involves interviewing the family member to get an inside perspective into what it was like to live in a particular time and region(s); hence, they are preserving a piece of family history. Ethnography allows close encounters with family history because students in their roles as researchers get close to the everyday experiences of other people and use of Spanish in non-academic settings; this requires a deeper immersion into the narrators' (interviewees') world, even when they might be family members, to understand what others consider meaningful and important experiences for them. Although Núñez (2012) uses ethnography and writing in the service-learning context, her findings align with the work we do with HLL, for example, when she notes, "The act of reflecting upon personal observations also creates opportunities to reveal the meta-cognitive aspects associated with thinking about the ways in which we relate to the world we live in and the people we interact with" (86). For instance, several of our students reflect on the hardships their parents have gone through so that they could one day enroll in a university. This reflection makes the students recognize and become more appreciative of all their parents' efforts. Additionally, we find that ethnography of family plays a key role in the development of HLL awareness of their own culture and identity formation. Furthermore, students are documenting experiences from different racial and socio-cultural perspectives (Solórzano's fifth theme), for example, those of working-class backgrounds, varying generations, race (black, indigenous, mestizo, white), or gender. Through the use and practice of oral histories, HLL gain knowledge, document family life, use their Spanish language skills outside the classroom, and learn to preserve and celebrate their heritage.

Since we are working with HLL college students, and the focus is writing, after the collection of their ethnographies we discuss how best to capture speakers' emotions, points of view, and use citations. Furthermore, we agree with bell hooks (1994), that we must not ask students to take risks we are not willing to take. "Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive"



A student with her mother who was interviewed as a part of a class project.

(hooks 1994, 21). When we assign this project, we have already established a rapport with students, we have shared our own narratives of language learning, family language, experiences with immigration, and gender roles. For example, students read the article “Belonging and Accents: Salvadoran Diaspora in Mexico and the U.S.” (Foulis 2017) in which I talk about my experience of having family members who identify and speak differently than me. We explore the concept of identity as related to birth, and as one that complicates our histories when we carry multiple heritages. hooks continues, “When professors bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-

knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” (1994, 21). She identifies this as engaged pedagogy, one that not only empowers the students to own their story and experiences, but we, too, as professors, are being transformed by each student we work with and, certainly, by each story we read. Moreover, we provide the space for students to understand the self through shared knowledge (Freire 1970) when the classroom becomes a place of dialogue centered on the experiences of all: students, family (community), and teacher. One way we have done this is by sharing a family interview we conducted, a published personal essay or poem we authored, a family video, or stories of our individual and family experiences.

One foundation of teaching HLL is that we honor students’ experience and knowledge of the language (Spanish) and add to their repertoire by pushing them to use Spanish in different contexts and in all the skill areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) (Colombi and Roca 2003; Lynch 2003; Potowski and Carreira 2004; Schwartz 2003, among others). Hence, drafting questions, recording, and transcribing give students additional practice with language mechanics and an opportunity to interpret and be creative in the way they compose their essay. Crucially, the assignment is broken into smaller, more manageable tasks and students receive feedback at each step. For example, after deciding who they want to interview and why, students are asked to draft questions for the interview so that they are prepared, while at the same time keeping in mind that the natural flow of conversation may lead the interviewees to elaborate more or less on certain topics. Part of composing questions is deciding whether these questions are appropriate and sensitive for the person they plan to interview, that is, we highlight that being insiders of the culture and family does not mean we can ask anything. Strategically, this preparation work is accomplished and revised early enough in the semester so that students are ready to complete the interview during a mid-semester break, when many students will already be visiting family. We do not assign this project as the first writing piece of the semester. Although we teach different

levels, and some of our assignments vary, we have students first write an autobiography. We ask that students focus on their linguistic background or an aspect of their Latin@ heritage. When they get to this assignment, we want them already to be thinking of their identity and experiences as a source of knowledge and as something worth writing about. Building their confidence, both linguistically, in their language skills, and of their identity and feelings of belonging, is an important aspect in both our classes.

Although Solórzano's themes four through five happen at different points throughout the process of planning, practicing, and developing questions, we find that the opportunity to explore 1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; 2) the challenge to dominant ideology; and 3) the commitment to social justice happen in the writing process. For example, as students transcribe, identify themes and keywords, and reflect on the narrator's perspective, they might begin to see and recognize their family members' language use (i.e., education level, dialectal variation, attitudes, discrimination), their experiences with immigration as tied to race and class, the privileges that come with citizenship, and gender roles and dynamics. As they then decide what the focus of their essay will be and what citations they want to use and highlight, they see their writing as an emancipatory vehicle that honors their family history. Tere, in the advanced writing course, decided to interview her mother about running one of the family's restaurants. She initially thought she was going to learn about the restaurant business, but she realized that being a Latina business owner, with primarily male employees, has many challenges. During our meeting about this essay, we discussed the content and developed an outline. In our conversation, I pointed out that her mother had achieved and overcome so much, while also supporting and encouraging her female employees. Tere wrote, "A woman that is willing to get an education and see what's ahead of her, without regretting the sacrifices and challenges that exist, has the resources she needs to achieve her dreams. Marisela [student's mother] advises women that want to own their own businesses to reach the highest level of education possible, because 'education is key.' She highlights that before starting this enterprise, one must have a strategic plan in order to be successful." The ability to read and listen to the interview again—often multiple times—gives students valuable moments of reflection and an opportunity to go over their notes and to pay attention to the speakers' inflection as they are also trying to include the speaker's tone into their essays. Students are asked to write a three- to four-page essay in two columns, draw out two to three key quotes from the narrator and place them in between the columns, and include a literal (narrator) or metaphorical picture. Family ethnography writing allows us to curate the life of our narrators, one that is at once accurate and aesthetically pleasing.

Furthermore, we find that students' engagement and incorporation of lived experiences is similar to what Leeman, Rabin, and Román-Mendoza (2011) find in the role of HLL in critical service-learning pedagogy. When they go outside the classroom, we encourage students to exercise "their agency by becoming language activists engaged in shaping the language policies and practices in the society in which they live" (Leeman, Rabin, and Román-Mendoza 2011, 483). Because students spend a longer time on this assignment and it involves several different steps, there is time to reflect on the collected content and to see that their work creates primary sources. Foulis (2018) identifies the work of oral history in the service-learning classroom as one that "allows the student to reflect on their own lived experiences in relation to others, providing them with enough context to have interpretive authority over their own learning" (121). For example, Dani decided to interview both her grandparents at the same time. This, as we later discussed during our writing

workshop, adds a level of complexity because we must be clear about who said what during the interview. The student commented on how difficult it was to keep them focused on the questions and minimize their side conversations, but she also incorporated the peculiarities of interviewing couples who often finish each other's sentences or intervene to "set the record straight." The student wanted them to tell the story of when they met, and she wrote their responses in this way, "There was a town celebration and that's when he saw her for the first time. He recalls asking my grandmother if she wanted to be his girlfriend. My grandmother immediately corrected his statement, saying that he did not ask until the next day. That day, there was a parade with a band, and my grandmother's family hosted a party at dawn. She invited José and right there, in the middle of the street, he asked if she wanted to be his girlfriend." The way she composed her narrative is both personal and distant. It is clear that she is composing their story, but she also wants the reader to know that this is part of her story. As shown in this example and throughout her larger essay, Dani distances herself from the story by using pronouns like "they" or saying "my grandparents/grandma/grandfather" to write their history, but she also uses "my grandparents/grandma/grandfather" to write herself into this history. She is, indeed, weaving her history with theirs. Writing family ethnography is creative writing and is deeply personal. Indeed, this project demonstrates a greater connection and commitment to ethnographic essay writing.

As we have mentioned previously, an additional benefit to using ethnographic interviews in the classroom is the engagement in the language and culture on the part of the student. Although Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) worked with students learning a second language (L2) rather than HLL, their findings are relevant to our students. The authors point out that ethnographic work is beneficial because it is versatile and "more than just a cognitive process, the use of ethnographic interviewing techniques to interview live target language speakers engages the learner affectively as well as cognitively" (Robinson-Stuart and Nocon 1996, 437). Thus, these types of projects can be assigned and adjusted to different levels of HLL classes, from beginners to more advanced students, and tend to affect the students' behavior and attitudes. For example, in a beginner course, the focus of the interview might be solely on family language use and the connection of the student's own use of Spanish. For a more advanced course, it would involve broad topics such as their family's immigration story or a significant experience—positive or negative—with using Spanish or English as non-native speakers in public, again, always offering students the opportunity to reflect upon their own identity. Moreover, both their L2 and our HLL experienced a stronger desire to continue using and learning the language and researching more about the culture. For instance, Verónica commented, "I love to learn about my culture, and I want to learn the language better so that I can improve my communication with my family." Although Verónica was already speaking and writing at a more advanced level, she realized the importance of improving so that she could continue with these types of insightful conversations with her family members.

Finally, we believe that engaging in ethnography and writing about it prepares students for writing other types of research assignments. Through the process of recording, researching, preparing, interviewing, and organizing the materials collected, students have gained numerous skills including working with multiple sources and analyzing and synthesizing data that they themselves have gathered. This is especially important for HLL who tend to have stronger oral capabilities than writing skills (in Spanish). As Schwartz (2003, 251, her emphasis) proposes, "It is important that we include instruction *and* practice on writing strategies" in classes that focus on writing.

Because of the step-by-step nature of the ethnography project, students are able to contemplate their writing goals and receive feedback at several stages throughout the course of the semester.

Thus, through the use of ethnography and oral history our HLL refine and improve their writing skills, which will help contribute to their continued success, both in future classes and in their careers. Meanwhile, as students collect and curate each family story, they create new primary sources that put family experience at the center, allowing them to recognize and acknowledge the value of telling our own histories. Through this work, we provide students a safe place to embody a new personal script and we are inviting them to feel comfortable and to be active agents in the creation of new knowledge. Furthermore, through the many in-class activities, students create community with each other, and this solidarity is especially important in the Midwest, where they many not encounter as many Latina/o/x peers.

*Elena Foulis is a student-centered educator with BA and MA degrees in Spanish and Latin American Literature and a PhD in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. She is interested in reaching non-academic and academic audiences through her writing, presentations, and public humanities projects. She is author of the eBooks [Latin@ Stories Across Ohio](#) and [Mi idioma, mi comunidad: español para bilingüe](#) and is host and producer for the [Ohio Habla](#) podcast.*

*Jennifer Barajas holds MAs in Spanish and Hispanic Linguistics and a PhD in Hispanic Linguistics. She is an Assistant Professor at Bradley University. She created the Spanish for Heritage Speakers course at Bradley and engages students in and out of the classroom. Her research interests include sociolinguistics, phonetics, and U.S. and heritage Spanish.*

*All photos courtesy of the authors.*

#### **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> All students' names have been changed.
- <sup>2</sup> All students' quotes have been translated and edited for clarity.
- <sup>3</sup> We find that our students merge in and out of ethnography and oral history which is why it is difficult to talk about them separately.

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