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Mary Prince’s Undisciplining Lessons: Counter-Narrative and Testimonio in *The History*

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Mary Prince's Undisciplining Lessons: Counter-Narrative and Testimonio in The History

Abstract
This essay discusses teaching The History of Mary Prince at a Hispanic Serving Institution via Ethnic Studies praxis. It develops Nicole Aljoe's definition of Prince's narrative as counter-story and testimonio and explores the undisciplining effects of reading Prince's history as relevant to the lives of Borderlands students. To understand the multiple meanings of "undisciplining" this essay draws on the theory of Sylvia Wynter and shows how Prince's testimonio offers an alternative to Western epistemologies via communal resistance and resurgence. Several pedagogic tools are explored for teaching Prince in this way.

Keywords
Undiscipling, testimonio, counter-story, unsilencing, undercommons, Mary Prince, Baron de Vastey, Michel Trouillot, Sylvia Wynter, Ethnic Studies, Borderlands.

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Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank the graduate students of Fall 2022 who took this course and taught me so much. I am very grateful to the Democratizing Racial Justice collective and to my collaborators on the Ethnic Studies Educators' Academy, 2021.

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We must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the ‘racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago’ (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live into the present. —Christina Sharpe, In the Wake, 13

Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. —Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 73

I shall consult the shades of the dead, those unfortunate compatriots of mine you threw alive into a fiery furnace. —Baron de Vastey, The Colonial System Unveiled, 196

In writing for the audience of ABO Journal about teaching The History of Mary Prince (1831) I am aware of the boundaries, and of the horizons of expectations that might make boundaries around disciplines, fields, courses, periods, and geographies, as well as around different kinds of higher education institutions. As I list these words, the entanglement of education with the geographies of colonialism are clear: we have “fields”, “disciplines”, and “periods” that follow not only a sense of space as there to be conquered and marked, but simultaneously what Mark Rifkin notes as “settler time”, a history based in Eurocentrism that implicitly dismisses other histories, other times, the pasts erased by Europe. Prince’s story is taught in African American Literature, and in Africana and Black Studies, “disciplines” that often turn against the university’s aims, the undercommons of the Enlightenment as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten have famously termed the “maroon” efforts of “subversive intellectuals” working within the university (Harney and Moten 26-28). The History might be taught in English, History, American Literature, disciplines that were formed specifically to maintain colonial and imperial power via the university. As Edwin Mayorga, Lekey Leidecker, and Daniel Orr de Gutierrez summarize:

Throughout this history, and in every stage of its maturation, the university has been inextricably tied to state imperialism. Its authority has depended entirely upon state legitimacy; its intellectual practice evolved through the extraction and commodification of non-Western knowledges; its structure and methods fashioned to facilitate state agendas, such that all levels of
the institution, including its disciplines, methodologies, administration, and funding conform to the imperial project. (Mayorga, Leidecker, de Guterrez, 92).

How can these disciplines, with very different aims, be crossed and how can Prince’s narrative help us to do that?

I have taught Mary Prince’s narrative in English programs at undergraduate and postgraduate level in Britain, Ireland, and here in the United States, specifically in the Borderlands region, where centuries of violent racial and colonial history mark the lives of the students I teach at the University of Texas at San Antonio, a R1 Hispanic Serving Institution. This essay is about the undisciplining forces that teaching Mary Prince has unleashed from the Latinx, Chicanx, Black, Indigenous and queer students I have read her with. These force insist that we who teach The History of Mary Prince, engage with,

the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons that fugitive enlightenment enacts, the criminal, matricidal, queer, in the cistern, on the stroll of the stolen life, the life stolen by enlightenment and stolen back, where the commons give refuge, where the refuge gives commons (Harney and Moten, 28).

This is an essay about the precious, undisciplining pedagogy that Prince offers, that can lead us out of disciplinary periodicity, out of colonial geographies and temporalities, and into the resurgent wells of counter-story, a mode of narrative that is vital to students here at the Borderlands. Undisciplining pedagogy must be attentive to location and to specific groups of students: the lessons Prince offers us are to resist universalizing and to be responsive to how to enact counter-narrative within specific contexts.

We can understand “counter-narrative as the mode to (re)tell stories from the point of view of the oppressed to challenge dominant and racialized ideologies that arise from deficit-based narratives” (Peña, Lopez, de Faria Santos, 1), and thus engage Prince as a knowledge carrier, not only to the British culture of enslavement in the 1830s, but also to our current moment of deep crisis in the neoliberal university. As Prince tells us in her counter-story, she knows what colonial slavery is because she has lived within it and she is therefore an authority who can rebut the lies of the planter class:

I will say the truth to English people who may read this history that my good friend, Miss S——, is now writing down for me. I have
been a slave myself – I know what slaves feel – I can tell by myself what other slaves feel and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery – that they don’t want to be free – that man is either ignorant or a lying person . . . This is slavery. I tell it to let English people know the truth (Prince, 94).

Prince clearly addresses the deficit in white knowledge with her story and lived experience. In following the direction of Prince’s undercommons and counter-story towards the experiences of the enslaved, I write from the positionality of being part of the East Indian Caribbean diaspora, of having grown up, and been educated in Trinidad, and in Ireland, within British colonial systems, of being now in exile from anywhere that might be home, but always in spaces marked by the violence of colonial borders. I write from the positionality of living the marginalization of Caribbean lives and histories in the academy. I write from having taught Prince inside the Enlightenment period courses of English Literature that I myself was disciplined into, and from having been taught new ways to undo these disciplines by my students here at the Borderlands. I hope to show how the boundaries described above must not define how we read The History of Mary Prince and to convey the urgency of centering the Caribbean and the lives of the enslaved as a “counterculture” to modernity (Paul Gilroy). These lessons are most urgent for those approaching this essay from within eighteenth-century and Romantic studies, fields that still revere the Enlightenment despite all we know of its history of domination and extraction. In that sense this essay is a pedagogy lesson for many instructors in how to unlearn what they have been taught, rather than in how to teach. Unlearning involves listening to our students as themselves knowledge bringers whose experiences and needs must shape what we deliver towards a shared goal of undisciplining pedagogy and the academic structures within which we all operate.

Undisciplining and course design

I first taught Prince on Romanticism courses in the UK, where hers was often the “token” Black text on reading lists that were team designed as is the practice on modular-run British courses. I had trouble convincing white, British colleagues that Prince was worthy of a place on a Romantic period course: she was repeatedly perceived as marginal, if even relevant, to courses still focused on the Big 6. When she was included, she was often on her own, dislocated from Caribbean history and the context of the Haitian revolution, as the British focus remained on France and supposedly “radical” Romantic writers and white abolitionists whose ideologies of white supremacy were never examined. Upon
moving to the US I was then able to teach *The History* on British Literature survey courses and on Romanticism courses that I designed alone, ensuring she was in good company with other writers such as Olaudah Equiano and Ottobah Cugoano. I could place Prince on period courses as part of a “Black Atlantic” section and teach the history of the Haitian revolution and of slave rebellions throughout the Caribbean and Antigua, where Prince lived, as context. Even then, these “Black voices” were bounded by the white period course designations and by the expectations from students of encountering British canonical texts. Undisciplining from the inside is always a risky project, especially for women of colour professors. In Fall 2022 I was given a multiply cross-listed postgraduate course with eighteen MA students and five PhD students who had entered UTSA’s postgraduate English programs that are defined as “cross-cultural” in focus. The cross listing meant the course had many roles to fill: it had to be a long nineteenth-century course, and a PhD-level theory course, and with a cross-cultural focus. This challenge was an opportunity and I wrote a new online course, combining synchronous and asynchronous modes, as in the outline below which I offer, including the full reading list.

**Course Outline:**

**Unsettling Race, Coloniality and Empire in the Long 19th Century**

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

Agostino Brunias, “Pacification with the Maroon Negroes” (1801). Description: A Group of free Jamaican Maroons negotiates for power with British colonists. Guns are laid in the middle. The Maroons stand on the left while the colonists read the treaty.
This course explores recent challenges to nineteenth-century studies that dismantle many assumptions about the period’s literature and culture from multiple postcolonial and decolonial perspectives. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), Linda Tuhiwai Smith disrupts the relationship between colonial institutions and non-Indigenous scholars, and the Indigenous peoples whose knowledge and histories they subjugated, drawing on the trajectories laid by Edward Said and others in response to empire. Such multidisciplinary responses will inform this course as we question the long nineteenth-century archive and relations of power in knowledge formation to “talk back”, “write back” and “research back”. In *As We Have Always Done* (2020) Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes the freedoms of communities and individuals, alternative “gender fluidity and sexualities and relationship orientations outside of colonial conceptualizations” that are her Nishnaabeg inheritance. We will be attentive to Indigenous and Black voices that disrupt gendered and raced norms forged by empire. We will focus on the responses to race-making and empire that expose the ambivalences of colonial discourse and that also offer alternative models of liberatory humanism. In our undisciplining praxis we will stretch the period’s temporal boundaries and reconsider the imperial organization of space. In this course we will be guided by Christina Sharpe’s call in *In the Wake* (2017): to become “undisciplined” to undo the “racial calculus” (Hartman) of slavery, colonialism and empire, and to ensure that new and previously erased sites of knowledge enter our methodologies. In drawing on the thinking of these and other writers, we will explore and unmake the colonial literary and cultural assertions of the long nineteenth century and center the alternatives from Black, Caribbean, and Indigenous writers and artists.

**Course Schedule**

**Introductory readings: Weeks 1-2**
“Decolonization is not a Metaphor”, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang

**Block 1: Haiti and Black Freedom: Weeks 3-5**
The Haiti 1805 Constitution, Jean Jacques Dessalines
Chapter 4, *Baron De Vastey and the Origins of Black Atlantic Humanism*, Marlene Daut (2017)

From, *In the Wake* Christina Sharpe, (2017)

“To Toussaint L’Ouverture”, William Wordsworth, (1803)

“Toussaint L’Ouverture acknowledges Wordsworth’s Sonnet to Toussaint L’Ouverture”, John Agard, (2007)

Introduction and Chapter 1, from *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James (1938)

Introduction and Chapter 1, from *Silencing the Past*, Michel Trouillot (1995)

“Pacification with the Maroon Negroes” Agostino Brunias (1801)

**Block 2: The Colour of Romance: Weeks 6-8**

*Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen, (1816)


*Race and Racism in Austen Spaces* Kerry Sinanan, Tré Ventour, Bianca Hernandez-Knight and Amanda Rae-Prescott (2021)

**Block 3: Black Testimony and Resistance: Weeks 9-11**

*The History of Mary Prince*, Mary Prince (1831).

Extracts from *A Map to the Door of No Return. Notes to Belonging*, Dionne Brand (2002)

Selected digital archives, Bermuda’s Salt Ponds. Turks and Caicos Museum.


“The ‘Slave’ As Cultural Artifact: the Case of Mary Prince” Kerry Sinanan (2020)

**Block 4: Alternative Indigenous Humanisms: Weeks 12-14**

Sky Woman Stories: from David Cusick, Robin Wall Kimmerer and Thomas King.


While this course is clearly designed for a postgraduate cohort, and for the demographics of a HSI comprising predominantly Latinx, Indigenous, and Black students, many of the principles can be drawn upon for undergraduate level and for different student bodies in different institutions. If not all of the critical texts are suitable for undergraduate reading, many are, and others can be substituted. One substitution I would recommend is to teach Sylvia Wynter’s interview with Bedour Alagraa, “What will be the Cure”, in place of “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom” as this is accessible for undergraduates while also opening out some of Wynter’s core ideas, especially on how storytelling itself can be transformative. How one would pitch many of these texts at a PWI would need to be considered but it is also worth noting that many of the students who took this course had themselves been put through the Texas educational system and had learned accounts of history and literary culture that privilege white and Eurocentric content and perspectives in accordance with Texas Education Standards. Every student on this course expressed their own “knowledge deficit” in regards to the Middle Passage and transatlantic slavery which they had not been taught, even at undergraduate level. Moreover, many of the students on the course, six in all, were teachers operating under the repressive Texas education law passed in 2021, SB3, which has been used to silence teaching the racist history of the United States and to suppress teaching Black literature and history. In the wake of SB3 being passed Black teachers were fired in Texas simply for doing their jobs. The systems of disciplining operate widely.

This course deliberately aimed to undiscipline traditional nineteenth-century periodicity within the discipline of English by beginning with theories and writings from Black and Indigenous perspectives, Sylvia Wynter and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), that laid out clearly the undercommons direction of our reading. Wynter’s essay is one that needs to be worked through closely even with postgraduates but its fundamental argument, namely that the battle of now is between the “present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human” and “the well-being . . . of the human species itself/ourselves” (Wynter, 260), was very well understood by students, mostly from Texas, who have found their lives marked in often traumatic ways by the racism of the white ethnoclass. Indeed, in the summer of 2020, San Antonio’s City Council issued a resolution declaring racism a public health crisis. For many students, the theory of Wynter’s work is part of their material conditions. Betasamosake Simpson’s writing is readable for undergraduates and postgraduates and her articulation of always having been in radical resurgent
resistance chimed well with many of the students on the course who are Indigenous: indeed exploring often erased Indigeneity as part of Borderlands identity was part of our class discussions. More broadly her book also articulates the concerns of students from many backgrounds who have grown up under the shadow of climate change: “Our way of living was designed to generate life—not just human life but the life of all living things.” (Betasamosake Simpson, 3).

From this opening the course was well positioned to approach Mary Prince’s history as part of a resistant opposition to white heteropatriarchal empire, rather than a text one might encounter on the “inclusive” edges of a Romanticism course. When we came to read Prince, her account of being sold at the slave market, in particular, was one that students related back to Wynter and Betasamosake Simpson’s pieces precisely because it directly names the practices of chattel slavery that the coloniality of being rested upon, and it names enslaving culture’s disregard for the inter-relatedness of life through its extraction of capital:

At length the vendue master, who was to offer us for sale like sheep of cattle, arrived, and asked my mother which was the eldest. She said nothing, but pointed to me. He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and, turning me slowly round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the venue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or lamb he was about to purchase (Prince, 62).

What being chattel means, from Prince’s point of view, is to be forced to endure the domination of the “globally hegemonic ethnoclass world of ‘Man’” that Wynter delineates and historicizes in detail (262) on an intimate level. From this intimacy with white power, Prince tells her counter-story. Prince is powerless at the sale, taken from her mother, and forced to submit to the proddings and inspections of British male enslavers whose laws grant them full access to her as property. The scene therefore also clearly names a foundational moment in what Cedric Robinson, included on the course, defined as racial capitalism. The slave market epitomizes the violence, too, against what Betasamosake Simpson names as a Nishnaabeg network of being that settler colonialism, plantation culture, and slavery all destroy: “an ecology of relationships in the absence of coercion, hierarchy, or authoritarian power” (8). Instead of this freedom of reciprocal and respectful relations, enslaved people are sold on stolen Indigenous land, along with other chattel—farm animals—in a system designed to destroy “a web of connections” (Betasamosake Simpson, 8) on a transatlantic scale.
Wynter’s intensive tracing of this history of colonization and slavery to the present were very clear for my students. Texas is the most locked down state in the US, ruled by the interests of the Prison Industrial Complex that has evolved from the plantation system, and San Antonio is deeply marked by racial geographies that create poverty among Latinx and Black communities. There are four major military bases in San Antonio and many of the students of colour I teach are in the ROTC as recruits, are military veterans, and have family in the military, encompassing demographics from low income households. This passage from Wynter’s “Unsettling” essay, in which she describes the systemic making of “New Poor”, is lived experience for many Borderlands students:

with this category in the United States coming to comprise the criminalized majority Black and dark-skinned Latino inner-city males now made to man the rapidly expanding prison-industrial complex, together with their female peers—the kicked-about Welfare Moms—with both being part of the ever-expanding global, transracial category of the homeless/the jobless, the semi-jobless, the criminalized drug-offending prison (Wynter 261).

Read in this context of the long history of incarcerative settler history, Prince’s depiction of the slave market is an undercommons insistence on the need to unmake the systems of heteropatriarchal white supremacist capitalism which continue to form the living conditions of many Black, Indigenous and Latinx students. The undisciplining force of this scene from The History is therefore part of a much wider global majority resistance to the myriad forms of discipline that white supremacy has made part of our lives.

Counter-story and Testimonio

We read Baron De Vastey’s The Colonial System Unveiled as a testimonio before reading Mary Prince’s history. The account was not translated into English until 2014 when Chris Bongie and others undertook it as a collaboration, following the tradition of collectivism, rather than individualism, that De Vastey had modelled. As Marlene Daut writes,

For Vastey, death was not an obstacle to accessing the experience of slavery, hence the ashes and tombs that he claims he is awakening and interrogating . . . He uses “we” to stress the collective nature of his writing and to stress the continuity of it. His work is crucial to understanding how we should talk about lived-memory (Gaffield and Daut).
In his dedication to King Henry Christophe, Vastey states this collective goal clearly, saying that he writes out of “the desire of contributing to the happiness of my fellow-kind, of being of use to my compatriots and earning the respect of YOUR MAJESTY” (82). Vastey offers a short but powerful history of Haiti, emphasizing the rapaciousness of European colonizing powers. He then moves to write on behalf of Middle Passage victims who were forced into the holds of slave ships:

Try and imagine the deplorable situation of five to six hundred unfortunates in this state, laden with chains, kidnapped by means of violence, deceit, theft, and a thousand other equally shameful methods. Consumed with grief, their hearts filled with bitterness and despair, never more will they see the land that gave them birth, never again will the see their kinsfolk, their friends. All the bonds that could attach them to life are broken, destroyed forever. (94-95).

This act of testimonio gives voice to millions of silenced voices and Vastey writes on his ancestors’ behalf. Vastey can undertake this work because he has talked and listened to his community and is transmitting their stories:

The facts I am going to recount bear the stamp of truth. They are a matter of common knowledge. I collected them from the survivors of families whose kinsfolk experienced the acts of torture I am going to try to sketch here . . . These witnesses are unimpeachable (109).

Reading Prince’s History as counter-story and testimonio along with Vastey, meant that we had a powerful non-Western tradition that linked Caribbean, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx geographies, histories, pasts and presents in which to situate her words. Prince also carries the stories of others: “Poor Hetty, my fellow slave, was very kind to me, and I used to call her my Aunt; but she led a most miserable life” (67). Prince tells us of the violent death Hetty was subjected to by their master and so uses her voice to tell what would be otherwise untold “I cried very much for her death” (670). And, like Vastey, Prince is compelled to expose the slavoacracy for what it is: ‘Oh the horrors of slavery!—How the thought of it pains my heart! But the truth ought to be told of it, and what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is” (74). In these ways, Prince’s testimonio brings her specific knowledge into abolitionist Britain, and she speaks for dispossessed others who have suffered
what she has, in order to advance a collective goal on behalf of all enslaved people.

One of the students who took the course, Jeanette Loredo, describes herself as a Latina, a high-school teacher, a mother, grandmother, and a strawberry farmer in Texas. Loredo chose the option of testimonio for her final piece and she noted the relevance of Prince’s narrative to her own students: “In reading The History of Mary Prince, the heartbreaking scenarios that were presented resonate in the modern times we live in today”. She also wrote about the urgency of an undisciplining approach to pedagogy, emerging out of reading Prince with Black and Indigenous texts, including Sky Woman narratives:

I teach children who have their mothers, but some have been ripped from their biological mothers, some have economic and social status impacts, some are disabled, some are quiet thinkers, believers and non-believers, some are BIPOC and some are not, and some obnoxious and “macho”, and some are warm, generous, and giving. I see a significant relation in farming to teaching. . . To be a farmer of society and liberty is a challenge, with all the injustice in our country, it needs a reset, renewal, revival, rebirth, a renaissance of remedies for the cultivating, tending, and reshaping of humanism and humanity! (Laredo, final paper)

Loredo here intertwines her life as a grandmother, farmer, teacher, and student to forge a resurgent pedagogical praxis that is vital for Borderlands survival. The “reshaping of humanism” that Loredo calls for is the insistence of testimonio to unmake the “Liberal or economic (rather than civic) political humanism that is being brought in from the end of the eighteenth century onwards by the intellectuals of the bourgeoisie” (Wynter 322). This insistence is core to Prince’s narrative in many direct exhortations that point to the limits of white sensibility and humanism: “Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves” (62). Disability, separation from her family, interactions with Christianity that are complex and embedded in power structures, are all part of Prince’s narrative, too. Her plaint for her family after being sold apart is not simply a past for Loredo’s students, nor for many from the Borderlands:

My heart was quite broken with grief, and my thoughts went back continually to those from whom I had been so suddenly parted. ‘Oh my mother! My mother!’ I kept saying to myself, ‘Oh my mammy and my sisters and my brothers, shall I never see you again (64).
A 2023 report into child protection in Texas shows that “Hispanic and Black children were more likely to end up in the state’s care. Since July 2019, forty-seven children have died while in the Texas foster care system.”

For many, Prince speaks directly to the political effects of liberal-economic humanism that dispenses rights based on an in-built racial-capitalist hierarchy. For Borderlands students, a presentist reading of history is not a methodological choice, but an unavoidable set of facts that show Prince’s story of pasts in the present via the testimonio genre. As Trouillot tells us: “the past is only past because there is a present . . . The past—or, more accurately pastness—is a position. Thus in no way can we identify the past as past” (Trouillot, 15).

The choice of testimonio as an option for assessment is something I have learned to offer from listening to my HSI students, many of whom are very familiar with the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa:

While the genre of testimonio has deep roots in oral cultures and in Latin American human rights struggles, the publication and subsequent adoption of This Bridge Called My Back (Moraga & Anzaldúa) and, more recently, Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios (Latina Feminist Group) by Chicanas and Latinas, have demonstrated the power of testimonio as a genre that exposes brutality, disrupts silencing, and builds solidarity among women of color (Anzaldúa) Within the field of education, scholars are increasingly taking up testimonio as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms in academia. Unlike the more common training of researchers to produce unbiased knowledge, testimonio challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance (Bernal, Burciaga, Carmona, 363).

This is not something that can be taught to all groups of students and certainly not to students for whom testimonio is not part of their culture. In sharing this pedagogic approach I hope to give an example of how Prince’s History, along with a pedagogy that centers students as knowledge carriers, leads to undisciplining and it is important that each instructor give thought to what particular undisciplining work needs to happen where they are.
Testimonio firmly rejects the Western assumption of objectivity associated with universal, liberal humanism, to foreground learning from lived experience within oppression: these stories then become part of the historical narrative. In *Creole Testimonies*, Nicole Aljoe argues extensively for the term “testimonio” to also describe slave narratives “I believe that it is important to consider these West Indian slave narratives through the lens of the testimonio genre” (Aljoe, 17) because these accounts are describing communal oppression and offer alternative accounts of the human. Prince’s narrative, Aljoe shows, uses testimonio as a powerful legal tool that insinuates West Indian slave experience into the abolitionist discourse: “Prince affirms her reliability as a legal witness by drawing attention to the fact that she knows it is her ‘duty’ to tell the truth and supply evidence when it is deemed necessary” (Aljoe, 105).

In my teaching, testimonio is part of a Borderlands pedagogy that draws on Ethnic Studies to offer culturally sustaining modes of learning. I was able to develop Ethnic Studies pedagogic modes along with other Borderlands scholars and teachers in a Mellon-funded *Democratizing Justice* Ethnic Studies Educator’s Academy in 2021, that drew on methodologies and practices to build curricula around the San Antonio resolution, 2020. How would we teach students in primary, secondary and higher education, that racism is a public health crisis? In this group I was both a teacher and a student (Freire), learning from Ethnic Studies colleagues as I also developed my pedagogy. We worked collaboratively, over two semesters to develop a comprehensive teaching guide that covers teaching racial justice and that explains the main Ethnic Studies practices to a wider audience:

- Curriculum as counter-narrative
- Criticality
- Reclaiming cultural identities
- Intersectionality and multiplicity
- Pedagogy that is culturally responsive and culturally mediated
- Students as intellectuals (ESEA, 7).

The ESEA teaching guide has detailed lesson plans with assessment criteria, resources, and ways to engage the classroom with the community. Many of us designed testimonio-based assignments and I developed one for our group on housing and education. I adapted this assignment from the ESEA teaching guide to my postgraduate course and many students chose this as part of their portfolio. Instructors can also think about how they might adapt some of these Ethnic Studies praxes for their specific teaching contexts. Prince’s *History* and Baron de Vastey’s *The Colonial System Unveiled*, were read as being part of the testimonio
genre. This mode of teaching is not one to adopt at PWI’s but is useful to think about in terms of serving minoritized students and it is offered here as a prompt for further thought from instructors on where they teach from.

Linking Caribbean accounts of slavery to lived Latinx experience enables HSI students to see their lives as part of a geography and history that crosses the borders of the nation state:

Latinx and Black geographies are inextricably linked, because Blackness and Latinidad are not mutually exclusive and because Black thought, experiences, history and politics, along with the legacy of transatlantic slavery, profoundly shape contemporary social and spatial arrangements in las Americas (Cahaus).

Not only this, these histories are vital for all students to know given how official curricula erase them. On the course we read Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s Silencing the Past, a theory of history as narrative that is related to power and that produces silences: “power itself works together with history . . . Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles. It preceded the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation” (Trouillot, 28-9). It is for these reasons that counter-story and testimonio become vital for teaching for social and racial justice in HSIs. Alongside discussing the erasure of Caribbean history from dominant historiography, Trouillot’s opening chapter discusses a history that is geographically close to students in San Antonio, that of the Alamo. Yet the full history of this site is not accessible to those of us living in proximity to what remains a key ideological place and story for Texas: “the Alamo shrine is Texas’s main tourist attraction, drawing some three million visitors a year” (Trouillot, 11). Listing a range of important questions that remain in the white dominant Alamo narrative, Trouillot notes that the details matter as “the custodians of history shiver, afraid that the past is catching up too fast with the present” (11). Trouillot offers a vital insight for Latinx and Indigenous students for whom a full Borderlands history remains hidden, even while via the Alamo gift shop “half a dozen titles by amateur historians bring more than $400,000 a year” (20). Within this overwhelming silence, the past is not over and Trouillot tells us how even the buried remains of Indigenous people, whose presence is unacknowledged at the Alamo, works to unsilence the past: “Yet even dead Indians can return to haunt professional and amateur historians. The Inter-Tribal council of American Indians affirms the remains of more than a thousand individuals . . .buried in grounds adjacent to the Alamo . . .” (9). This haunting, what history tries to hide, disrupts the power of the story.
In a presentation considering de Vastey’s work as testimonio, one Latina student, Riley Davoren, gave a deeply researched definition of the genre that discussed Anzaldúa and the hybridity of counter-story and modes that connect to testimonio: “Today, many Chicana Feminists have expanded testimonios through Gloria Anzaldúa’s autohistoria-teoría (tee-oh-ree-ah): a feminist writing practice/methodology that bridges many literary modes, including testimonio, and theory.” Davoren concluded by suggesting that “further contextualizing testimonio as both a methodology and literary mode, that operates outside of Western epistemologies in various ways, provides the opportunity for a deeper analysis of de Vas tey’s The Colonial System Unveiled as a “proto-testimonio.”

Another student, Kennique Thomas, read Mary Prince’s History from her position and experience as a Black mother in Texas and noted the violence of a system that demanded Prince reveal her story to a white slave-owning society. She described Prince’s predicament of risking not being believed and of not being able to “provide witness testimony that would verify the material claims” she made. Thomas noted the history of Black people’s experiences and words being dismissed by white society and the courage Prince had to speak her truth into a hostile space.

The urgency of Prince’s counter-story is clear and her testimonio garners the power needed to undiscipline the enslaving culture of Britain. This power is vital for our marginalized students today who live in the systems that are created by slavery’s pasts, even as we teach in universities designed to uphold colonial knowledge systems. To feel its full force we must undiscipline how we teach The History of Mary Prince and cross the colonial borders of our subjects, periods and epistemologies to enter the emancipatory, undercommons spaces that she continues to direct us to.

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1 For some of this history, see the website Refusing to Forget, “Some of the worst racial violence in United States History took place along the Mexico-Texas border from 1910 to 1920. The dead included women and men, the aged and the young, long-time residents and recent arrivals. They were killed by strangers, by neighbors, by vigilantes and at the hands of local law enforcement officers and the Texas Rangers. Some were summarily executed after being taken captive, or shot under the flimsy pretext of trying to escape. Some were left in the open to rot, others desecrated by
being burnt, decapitated, or tortured by means such as having beer bottles rammed into their mouths. Extralegal executions became so common that a San Antonio reporter observed that ‘finding of dead bodies of Mexicans, suspected for various reasons of being connected with the troubles, has reached a point where it creates little or no interest. It is only when a raid is reported or an American is killed that the ire of the people is aroused.’”

2 https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/872/billtext/pdf/SB00003F.pdf#navpanes=0


5 “Inequities by race are vast and deep in cities throughout the nation, including in San Antonio. As demonstrated in this Racial Equity Indicator Report, people of color in San Antonio experience worse outcomes in health, education, employment, housing, and across many other metrics.” City of San Antonio, 2019 Racial Equity Indicator Report, 4. https://www.sanantonio.gov/Portals/0/Files/Equity/IndicatorReport.pdf

6 “Already, Hispanic and Indigenous youth make up some of the largest percentages of high school dropouts. Further, 17 percent of youth ages 16-24 identifying as Hispanic or Indigenous drop out of secondary school education. Their reasons include systemic issues, like the school-to-prison pipeline and economic hardship. These kids will now be subject to recruiting as a "way out" of their situations.” https://www.publicnewsservice.org/2022-10-12/social-justice/tx-writer-low-income-youths-targeted-for-military-service/a80991


8 “The Hallmarks of Ethnic Studies Pedagogy. Ethnic Studies is rooted in the social movements, histories, lived experiences, and aspirations of Black, Indigenous, Chicanx, and other People of Color in the United States. As a liberatory praxis, Ethnic Studies is committed to pedagogical practices that humanize, dignify, and heal our communities after centuries of racial, linguistic, sexual, cultural, psychological, spiritual, and economic violence. As Ethnic Studies educators, we draw from the Ethnic Studies hallmarks outlined by Christine Sleeter and Miguel Zavala. These hallmarks serve as a philosophical guide to our pedagogical and political commitments as we re-center students’ histories, realities, and the cultural wealth they bring with them when they enter their classrooms.” https://racialjustice.utsa.edu/community-projects/educators-academy.html

9 Assignment 2: “Testimonio: Where do you know from?”

This assessment is a testimonio option that validates the body and lived experience as sites of knowledge. The prompt is: Where do you know from in relation to this course and particularly in relation to the San Antonio Resolution Declaring Racism a Public Health Crisis? How have your life and embodied experiences been impacted by either housing inequity or educational inequity?

Testimonio Criteria
1. A testimonio is a first-person narrative that you write in your own voice (you may write in your chosen language if this can be accommodated by the instructor).
2. A testimonio offers learned experience through the medium of narrative and
respects personal and community experience and embodied living as archives of knowledge from which we can learn.

3. The testimonio approach aims to present momentum for radical change by valuing and validating experience. Although it emerges from our own experience, it is a communal mode that engages with community and seeks to build community through shared understanding of systemic oppression.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. Students learn the methodology of oral history and its necessary ethics.
2. Students connect their learning of reading the San Antonio Resolution with their and their interviewees’ experiences and their understanding of the issues discussed in the resolution.
3. Students reflect on how they would use their findings for social and racial justice actions ((ESEA 21-22).

Works Cited


