

APPALACHIAN NEPANTLERA NARATIVAS:  
BORDERLANDS MESTIZAJE FEMINIST QUEER RESEARX

A Dissertation  
by  
MARIA CONCHITA GENEVIEVE HERNANDEZ

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## **Abstract**

### **APPALACHIAN NEPANTLERA NARATIVAS: BORDERLANDS MESTIZAJE FEMINIST QUEER RESEARX**

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Following the guidance of borderlands epistemology, this dissertation aims to decolonize research through contranarrative. The writer's work, exploring the Queer Latina experience at a predominantly white institution, engages undergraduate participants in guided and ethical development through expression and identity-affirming practice. The author refers to her dissertation project as researx—a variation of spelling that symbolizes indigenizing acts of resistance against normalization in educational research through the use of the phonetics of her indigenous ancestors. The writer believes the practice of translingualism is a tool for bilingual and translingual writers and educators to decolonize their spaces, opening up more possibilities for the futurity of indigeneity and intersectionality in the literature and beyond. The writer also deviates from traditional APA formatting, which continues to promote linguistic Othering; words in Spanish and Nahuatl in this piece will make an intentional refusal against the italicization of Spanish or Nahuatl words in this predominantly English-language work. These words will be defined and translated as needed for the audience to have sufficient context to understand theory and other elements of the dissertation project. Relevant theory—more specifically, methodologies—discussed in this

work include: borderlands, mestizaje feminism, trenzas y mestizaje, Nepantla, cariño, corridos, and testimonios.

*Keywords:* Borderlands mestizaje feminism, trenzas y mestizaje, cariño methodology, healing justice narrative, contranarrative Queer, Nepantlera, PWI, higher education, researx, rebeldía

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### **Dra. Linville Hernández, Mamá,**

I knew from the age of four that I wanted to be a doctor and an educator because of you and the family you secured for me. My dreams to earn a doctorate were, in large part, to continue your legacy: the legacy of powerful Hernández Latinas. .6% of Latinas in the U.S. have a doctorate (AAUW, 2019); in our immediate family, 2 out of 3 do. That’s a legacy to be proud of, not because of the status a degree affords but because of the work and dedication it represents. You earned not one, not two, not three, but four degrees after migrating to the

U.S.—despite all the statistics that, at the time, denigrated you and your many abilities and qualifications. Though words are insufficient ways to thank you, I hope my actions—the way I show up unashamedly as myself and take the fullest advantage of the freedoms afforded me by your sacrifices—give you a sense of peace in knowing that I am safe; I am happy, and I am free to be.

**To my hermana, Natalja,**

You are the only other person on the planet who understands the most about my life experiences as a Queer, biracial, white-passing, Latina. There have been periods of time when I felt the pain of loss because of our geographic distance, but you have been a consistent guide for me, challenging me spiritually. Together, we work to heal some of our intergenerational and family traumas. You inspire me, and you have taught me so much in all our interactions these past 34 years. Your work in healing yourself and our family greatly inspires my work in developing a practice of healing through education.

**Beyond My Familia**

I have an amazing group of advisors, mentors, and friends I would like to credit as helping me through my journey.

I have a core group of friends who have known me my whole adult life (and some more than that). They have stuck with me through many of my journeys, before and during my doctoral enrollment; though there are many who could be listed, a select few deserve honorable mention: Anna Westman Kamnde, Jessica Martin, and Clarke Berrit Bisby. Thank you for putting up with the messy, anxiety-ridden texts, for dealing with my closeted self-sabotaging behaviors before I came out, and for always accepting me for who I am. Your

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## Colleagues

There are a few former colleagues whose role in my life in preparing for this dissertation have taken on more prominent support roles. Though there were many doctoral and masters' students and recent graduates with whom I enjoyed taking courses with, there was one cohort member—in particular—who deserves acknowledgment for our shared exchanges in critical race and antiracism theories. Future Dr. Philip Gadzekpo is a scholar I am honored to know and proud to be acquainted with.

Dr. JuanEs Ramirez was the first Latino colleague I have ever had in higher education. When I started at Appalachian State University, he and I were both program managers for Distance Education programs. He also happened to be enrolled in the doctoral program I was hoping to enroll in the following year. He is another person who challenged me to question the internalized voices that communicated deficit-based perspectives of my heritage and culture. He became my mentor and friend. His advice prepared me for the overwhelming amount of knowledge my brain would absorb the next few years and supported me through a number of difficult but necessary professional decisions I made during the coursework phase of my program. I am so grateful to him, his sage advice as well as the way he embodies joy and prosperity.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all my mentees and members of my family who navigate space as *Nepantleras*:

- My mother, Dra. Blanca Elisa Linville Hernández
- My sister, Natalja Marie Hounon Hernández
- My tía, Lucy Hofman
- My tíos, Jorge, Joaquin, and Jose Hernández
- My cousins living stateside—Luz de María “Lula” Hernández Fortis, Elisa Hernández Fortis, Chelsy Hofman, Kyle Hofman, and Logan Hofman Elkins
- My niece, Joaquina Ixchel Hounon
- My nephew, Finn Rudnik

*In memory of my first- and second-generation immigrant grandparents—Dr. Joaquin Hernández Callejas, María Concepción “Conchita” Alas, Alma Rehard, and Judith Rehard Hofman.*

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction:**

#### **Appalachian Nepantlera Narrativas in Context**

“May we do work that matters. Vale la pena” (Anzaldúa, 2015, p. 102).

Borderlands-mestizaje feministas, Saavedra & Nymark (2008), argue that "the body and sexuality are potential decolonizing tools that rupture and fragment the Western inorganic approach to theory. Listening and voicing el cuerpo," or the body "and sexuality...to build new puentes that connects [sic] as opposed to divides [sic] us" (p.267). The term "researx" will be used regularly in place of "research" in this work. Depending on where you are in your own decolonizing process, you may need more details to understand what researx is, as this is a term I have never seen before in educational literature. The term is inspired by Nahuatl, the Native inspiration prominent within Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism and the indigenous tongue of some of my maternal ancestors, who descended from both Spaniards as well as displaced Native groups who spoke Nahuatl and Lenca (Cordova, 1999; Santos, 2014; Bautista, 2019; Quijano, 2007).

Applying the Nahuatl spelling of the English "sh/ch" sound (University of Texas) to replace the final sound in "research" symbolizes the decolonizing borderlands theory that will frame my study. Using "C. Alejandra Elenes' (2005) definition of the borderlands," scholars interpret the "border in its literal meaning...the historical and contemporary context under which" non-European ethnic "communities have been formed in the U.S." Borderlands-mestizaje feministas also recognize "symbolic barriers that divide" the very communities dominating cultures aggregate into one monolithic category "by race, class, gender, sexual orientation," and other identities (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 256). Among the symbolic

racial borders in consideration within the theory, linguistic borders within the Latinx community challenge the dominating perspective of the Latin American people as a unified ethnic group with shared heritage and language.

Research explored in this paper centers and was designed by and for those with Queer and Latinx identities who embrace feminine energies as a fundamental aspect of who they are. This study is not for the benefit of the university; the research will—indeed—extend the reach of a theory anchored in Xicanx feminist perspectives and centered in the (meta)physical borders crossed by sexual and ethnic minorities. Borderlands-mestizaje feminism (BMF) research, which is “a hybrid and multidimensional mode of thinking,” derived from Xicanx feminism and borderlands theory that bears anticolonial strength in one of settler-colonialism's most ardent colonial technologies: higher education (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 255). I entered this dissertation with full awareness that individuals who diverge from dominating identities or the normative definitions of identity are often only seen and heard by the white institution “when it benefits the needs of the white institution” (Harris, 2016); as such, my primary research goal was and is not to continue benefiting the colonial institution but to explore experience through BMF narrative in a way that benefits those with marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys to our collective future.

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.

We are the feminist among the people of our culture.

We are often the lesbians among the straight.

We do this by bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 21)

The poem above was written by Gloria Anzaldúa, a poet and a scholar most known for her literary contributions to the queer, feminist, and Xicanx feminist—or feminista—movements (Anzaldúa, 1942-2004). Through her liminality—liminal being a term signifying transition or "in-between" (Anzaldúa, 1987)—she developed Borderlands theory, which speaks to the liminality of the Latina Queer identity and how she occupies and navigates spaces. The spaces the Latina liminality occupies are both literal and spiritual in her *vivencia* and *sobrevivencia*, her lived experience and survival. Borderlands theory explores these liminal spaces, *Nepantla* (Garcia, 2019), from Mestizo-indigenizing paradigms. Using these indigenizing concepts, Borderlands challenges colonial normative narratives of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—making the theory an ideal home for centering the Queer Latina intersectionality. Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism (BMF) takes the Borderlands theory further in its indigenizing capacity, mobilizing feminista efforts to hybridize anticolonial, feminista, and Borderlands methodologies within indigenizing paradigms. BMF literature has a dominant narrative that does not exclude queer voices but emphasizes Latina identity. The *Nepantlera narrativa* project adds to this body of literature by contributing more Queer voices into the literature with the incorporation of *Queer Latina voz, mentes y cuerpos*—theoretical concepts of authentic voice as well as emotional and physical impact or representation. Queer Latina *vivencias* and *sobrevivencias* are similar to broader Latinx and female intersectionalities but shift in *mentes y cuerpos* within liminalities that are subordinated in the dominant discourse because of a combination of race, ethnicity, and gender/sexuality.



## **La Fuerzas de Montañeras Queer**

My own identity will be contextualized throughout this work. As I write, I define myself as a pansexual, ambiamorous, nonbinary femme. I am also continually learning and exploring, namely to better understand the distinctions between different LGBTQIA+ identity terms—including but not limited to two-spirit, ethical non-monogamy, polyamory and demisexual. I don't believe sexual or gender identities to be sedentary, and mine may shift and evolve as I grow and develop.

My existence as an openly Queer Latina educator is inherently dissonant to the heteropatriarchal, white settler colonial structures that govern research and postsecondary experience. Research has the potential to be used as a tool to build colonial constructs or to deconstruct them (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Smith, 2012). Another Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) poem follows and supports the BMF methodology of *trenzas y mestizaje*, which methodologically braids and blends theoretical elements together in one strategic design to symbolize cultural strength and unity, a new mode from distinct parts. Epistemologically *trenzas y mestizaje* depicts the personal and the cultural as inseparable from identity and, therefore, a means of contributing to knowledge:

"Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders"

Because I, a mestiza,

continually walk out of one culture

and into another. because I am in all cultures at the same time,

alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,

me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.

Estoy norteadada por todos las voces que me hablan

Simultáneamente. (Anzaldúa, 1987)

Anzaldúa helped me—as a Queer Latina educator and learner—understand, interpret, and navigate the worlds I engaged with before coming to Boone and during my enrollment at Appalachian State University. Her words have helped inspire or fuel me in college experience, and I was honored to share these principles as examples of narrative healing and justice to the three undergraduate student participants in this study. The *Nepantlera narrativa* project is a participatory group of three Queer, Latina undergraduate students who met during Fall 2021 to engage in the Borderlands methodologies of *encuentros y pláticas*—or personalized and group conversations (González, 2010). During *encuentros*, I shared some Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF) narrative methodologies and epistemologies with the participants as a foundational curriculum. Beyond the grounding concepts—which included *Coatlicue* (an indigenous methodology that explores conflict and processes identity crisis through the fine arts), *corridos*, *testimonios*, *pláticas*, and *encuentros*—the group contributed to the curriculum through their interests.

One theory not originally proposed for the *trenzas y mestizaje* project was Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) (APA, 2017). NET was added to the project curriculum after *Nepantlera* interest in mental health emerged through their storytelling. NET, in the context of this project, aligned well with the personalized elements of *trenzas y mestizaje* methodology employed in the research project. NET is a psychological theory used to support those managing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder that myself and one other *Nepantlera* navigates with and through. Because the theory had a personal connection to neurodivergence represented in the group, this theoretical adjustment with a process-centered

trenzas y mestizaje research application allowed us to engage deeper in our narratives toward individual and community healing through narrative.

Nepantlera storytelling in the project curriculum was intentionally structured to leave room for free and creative thought, directed by the organic thoughts, emotions, experiences and processing of those experiences. Encuentros consisted of storytelling hours, where a pedagogy provided both structure and freedom for the participants, Nepantleras, to share openly with the group. The Nepantlera stories as well as the methodological framework and research questions outlined below guided me throughout the research process. The Nepantlera narratives included in this dissertation signify both the summaries of the oral storytelling that occurred during encuentros as well as the written narratives selected by participants to be included in this discussion. These narratives represent healing justice in progress by students with liminality—specifically, those identifying as Queer, Latinx/e and who also believe they possess feminine energy as a core component of their identity.

Their participation co-constructed a local grass-roots, contra-curricular narrative group that exchanged resources, materials and topics. These topics often moved beyond the grounding BMF concepts initially prepared for the project but within the group's intended pedagogical scope and methodological framework of the research design. Using BMF, two questions have guided the Nepantlera narrativa research:

- How do institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at Appalachian State University?

AND

- How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?

## **A Queer and Decolonial Alliance in Academic and Linguistic Activism**

In this work, I have used the "a" suffix to conclude nouns in Spanish that reference myself and female-identifying Latinx as a community of poder feminina, feminine power. When referring more generally to culture and identity rooted in Latin American—countries whose unification was brought about by the displacement and genocide of indigenous lives and cultures by colonizers from Spain or Portugal—the suffix "x" is used. While the letter "x" is commonly used in the U.S. to queer language, challenging heteropatriarchal linguistic norms (Romero, 2018, p. 57), Latinx unveils alternative roots for the etymology of the letter “x;” “x” was added to the Spanish language as a result of colonization to incorporate sounds present in the native languages that were not adequately expressible in Spanish (Garcias, 2017, p. 210); therefore, Latinx both queers the gendered binary construct of the colonial Spanish and English languages as well as visibilizes the colonial impact on indigeneity existing in the Latinx history and present.

The Nepantlera Narrativa project was participant-driven contra-curricular project. The binary of curriculum and counter-curriculum are well known, but both Queer and Decolonizing theories that inform BMF epistemologies mobilize educators to meaningful educational transformation that challenges all normative binaries. In discovery of a more precise term to reflect the boldness of the project, I used my writing background and the Borderlands’ methodology, *trenzas y mestizaje*, to blend language theory into my analysis. Often, the prefix “contra” is used erroneously in the social sciences as a synonym for “counter.” While the translation of the Spanish term “contra” in English is “counter,” English Lexicology distinguishes the prefixes “counter” and “contra.” These distinctions, as well as the application of the translingualism *trenza*—which embraces the influence and integration of

multiple languages in one discursive space—informed my decision to utilize contranarrative, applied in this research analysis. The “counter” prefix signifies an opposition to an implied norm or “correct” way or state; contra, on the other hand, signifies a distinction, a difference, an alternative state but does not semantically assume superiority or inferiority; contra implies a contrast, yes, but that contrast is not inherently in reaction to the topics it relates to in alternative discourses.

Contra-curriculum emerges from an authentic leadership and *cariño*. In the case of this contra-curricular project, the research developed into educational activism that I will refer to throughout the dissertation as *rebeldía*. *Rebeldía* is a cultural *fuerza*, strength, from the Queer Latina liminality. This *fuerza*, though not exclusive to the liminality centered in this research, mobilizes marginalized identities to queer and decolonize in rebellion against injustice and colonialism. One form of rebellion and decolonization that emerged in the project was defiance through our self-identifying process. Two borderlands methodologies used in this research that guide identity development and discovery are *Nepantla* and *conocimientos*, which are often used in tangent with one another.

*Nepantla* is a figurative space, a decolonial imaginary (Pérez, 1998; de los Ríos, 2013), that symbolizes the "in-between" category of liminality. The word *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl term and concept from Mayan expressive tradition. *Nepantla* derived from the indigenous and mestiza experience that followed colonization; it is a creative plane that is authored by the *nepantlera*. In this figurative plane, all aspects of liminal identity may exist in harmony, impacted by but not dominated by colonization. In this research, *Nepantla* was the first step in the *Nepantleras'* *conocimientos*, which processes and transforms the

circumstances and identities that exist in Nepantla into a story with identifiable pattern(s) (Calderon, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2002).

### ***Mestiza Relationality and Cariño***

Relationality as a methodological *trenza* in this project pairs profoundly with *conocimientos* methodology, described in the paragraph above. Anticolonial theorist, Leigh Patel (2016) guides decolonizing resear(x/ch)ers to engage in regular self-reflection through the employment of relationality, encouraging researxers through ethical self-examination; relationality positions the researxer and educator as a lifelong learner, asking them to process their relationships with and to all contextual entities—living and non-living—throughout their practice in consideration of the impact and influence their positionality holds (p. 57). The relationality *trenza* in this project was an important structure to support its partner *trenza*, *cariño*. *Cariño* is a BMF methodology that supports contra-narrative projects. I will describe the methodology in more detail in Chapter Five; however, understanding *cariño* is important to situating the project ethically, as the methodology values relationship-building between the researxer and participants (Duncan-Andrade, 2006; de los Ríos, 2013). Through *cariño*, the researxer prioritizes the needs of a particular group.

With *cariño*, I centered and designed a project for those with a liminality that I share: Queer Latinx who embrace feminine energy as a fundamental aspect of who they are. Following *cariño*, I worked to establish a relationship of mutual care and trust with the participants as the participants determine “who they are and who they would like to become” (de los Ríos, 2013, p. 63). This study is specific to the locality of the named university where the researx was conducted. Other examples in the literature have used monikers to replace the institution’s name as an additional safeguard for the participant’s anonymity. *Cariño*

embeds ethics methodology into the research design. All participants agreed to and felt it important for accountability and transparency purposes to use the university's names and the names of its offices as elements of the context presented for their narratives. Informed by *cariño* and other BMF epistemology, that I outline in this and other chapters, I employed *cariño* to ensure that participants maintained safety while securing power and autonomy over their stories—including in how their stories are presented.

The *Nepantleras* also maintained the right to exit the group at any time and to not have their work included in the dissertation even if they chose to remain in the group. My relationship-building through *cariño* revealed the naming of the institution—explicitly—as an intentional, collective choice that adds meaning to the narratives. The decision was not made lightly. In *cariño*-guided discussion, participants were informed of any potential risks to their involvement and the way that their work would be presented in the dissertation. In building trust with the participants, I educated them on the potential risks of being involved in a dissertation project that centers racialized marginality at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). As the project continued, I followed up with each participant individually and as a group to confirm their understanding and vision for how their narratives would be presented in the dissertation.

Before the dissertation was submitted to the committee for review, I shared the draft with the students so that they could offer their feedback or decline the inclusion of their narratives if, for any reason, they had concerns with being included in the dissertation. After the committee reviewed my dissertation, the participants were invited to the defense if they felt safe doing so and they were shared the most updated copy of the dissertation in case they wished to review it. Despite the natural risks involved to sharing stories that contradict the

dominant perspective, the students believed naming the institution reflected their authentic voice and experience while upholding the group's shared values in transparency. They noted in our written correspondence that they felt "safe," with their self-selected pseudonyms, explicitly naming Appalachian State University in the dissertation.

### ***Contranarrativa Claims: the Language of Rebellion***

Disavowing ourselves from the labels society assigned us, we embarked on a journey to reclaim our identities, knowing that we were the experts of our own lived experience. Even with this healing act of rebeldía, the concepts of racial identity were muddled for the participants. Most in the group proudly identified as a person of color (POC), but they struggled to enter deeper, decolonizing dialogues surrounding their indigenous and/or African ancestry. I observe this silence in solemnity. The mestiza identity, which is a hybridity of multiple races mixed with indigenous and colonial ancestry, is a complex and debated term within the Latinx community. Within its lexicology and etymology, the painful history and present realities of material barriers for Latinx hybridity are apparent.

In the next and final section of this chapter, I situate the project within its historical context in honor of the group decision made to share contranarratives that—disembodied from locality—may alter the voice and intended narratives. The historical context of the UNC system, which mirrors similar systems that house PWIs nationwide, suggests that silencing surrounding race may be structural. Throughout the university, programming emphasizes on unity, global citizenry, interculturalism, and other blending and bridge-building initiatives across campus (Appalachian State University, 2022) merge racial and ethnic minoritized groups into social aggregates. In these university-housed discourses, little space is structured to ensure students maintain agency over how their identities will be presented or



what opportunities for personal development they will have access to during their college experience. This hierarchal approach to leading diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity on campus is colonial—giving more power to administrators and less power to faculty, student-facing staff, and the students who they, as educators, have dedicated their careers to support. Though a counternarrative would offer a reaction to and against this injustice, in ensuring the Nepantleras had full agency over their narrativas, they were encouraged to use their authentic voice to explore the researx questions. The results produced contranarratives that shared the Nepantlera experience from their own perspective and mestiza relationality, which rebelled against dominant narratives that will echo in the section below; more than countering dominant narratives, Nepantleras shared alternative stories that acknowledged Queer Latinx/a mentes y cuerpos are worth more than their opposition to the normalized discourse at their university.

### **A History of Latinx Student Support at Appalachian State & in the UNC System**

Appalachian State University is a predominantly white institution with a long history of racism that is constantly being erased through silence or other forms of white violence. The rural institution is housed in the mountains of Western North Carolina in a small town no less than one hour's drive from the nearest city. Publicly available historical data related to the university is limited, and data collected in relation to the history of racial and ethnic marginalization on campus is managed by the university's communications staff. The institution is part of a broader state system: the University of North Carolina system.

The history of the university's support of Latinx students is very recent with limited documentation specific to individual institutions. This section includes context related to the ways the UNC system has adjusted their policies, procedures, and practices in reaction to

legal and social changes that impact higher education. Slow change continues in the southeastern United States public postsecondary institutions; this dissertation, however, does not suggest or imply that these changes have benefited the communities they are targeting. On the contrary, Nepantlera narrativas problematize existing higher education structures and suggest alternative approaches for marginalized student support. Understanding the context of racism that exists within education structures, supporting and creating barriers to education based on race, within the UNC system offers insight to how this might impact universities constituents engaged with a rural institution within the system.

Currently, of the 17 total institutions, the UNC system has five Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): (1) Elizabeth City State University, (2) Fayetteville State University, (3) North Carolina A&T State University, (4) North Carolina Central University, and (5) Winston-Salem State University (UNC Student Affairs, 2021). The UNC system admitted its first black student in the 1950s; shortly after, in the same decade, the first African American student admits graduated with their bachelors'. By the next decade, the system saw its first doctoral graduates.

### ***Before Our Births***

The participants of this researx group are millennials and Gen Z. Those engaged in the research include: myself (a doctoral candidate) as well as a sophomore, a junior, and a senior at the undergraduate level. The decades just before our births laid the foundation for their experiences in education. In the 1950s-1980s, monumental sociopolitical shifts impacted education—not only at the policy level, but also in the minds and perspectives of those engaging in higher educational discourse. The UNC system was officially formed in the 1970s. Until the 1950s, any of the institutions currently within the system that were not

categorized as an HBCU exclusively admitted white students—including Appalachian State University, which was founded in 1899 as a training school for white educators (Waterworth, 2022).

It wasn't until the 60s that the UNC system began allowing black students on the sports teams and student government bodies—which gave marginalized students more representation, access to support, and funding through athletic scholarships and services (UNC Chapel Hill, 2006). Also in this time period, the system hired its first black faculty and began establishing programs for international students. This paved the way for Latinx student support in the next few decades, as enrollment trends in the Latinx community increased alongside increases in migration. Other new initiatives in this decade to decrease educational barriers to nontraditional students included opening up extension programs for remote learning. Logistical complications manifested from these quick social shifts. These evolutions in educational trends commanded adjustments to existing higher education admissions protocols, straining staff and posing standing systemic barriers for many Latinx youths.

In the 1970s, the UNC system was officially formed and saw its first racially/ethnically marginalized academic administrator and Greek organizations, and study abroad service-learning experiences. More diverse hiring in student affairs at this time increased access to financial support for historically marginalized students and encouraged the development of cultural programs. Unprecedented growth in enrollment and degrees earned highlighted this decade's accomplishments for the system—thanks, in large part, to marginalized students. Another impact in the system is the formal enactment of Equal Opportunity Employment in the system, which changed human resource policies surrounding

hiring personnel with the stated goal of creating more equal work environments for marginalized professionals.

***In the 2000s, Appalachian State Sets a Plan to "Diversify"***

Around the time I started my undergraduate degree, in the early 2000s, the UNC system formed its first "minority-" serving administrative positions. With more institutional support, student organizations amplified efforts that advocated for increased minority recruitment. For this section, I will review only the incidents that came up organically in conversations exchanged through either my professional or student interactions within the institution. Sources shared in this sub-section offer grounding support to the narratives lived and experienced in the everyday lives of those I interacted with regularly on campus. The experiences listed in this section are not exhaustive of every racist, misogynistic, and/or homophobic incident that has occurred.

When I was president of the Latinx Hispanic Faculty & Staff affinity group, I looked into the history of the organization and the university's support or initiatives pertaining to Latinx students. I used this information to create an infographic in partial fulfillment of the LatinxEd Fellowship (2021) requirement and for use in the grass-roots organizations I lead. Much of the data included on Latinx student support at Appalachian State University, outside of the infographic I curated as a result of my research, is not easily accessible to the public. Appalachian State University had no publicly available record of Latinx or Hispanic student, staff, or faculty support or outreach until 2012. It was around this time that the UNC system began forming institution-based affinity groups for students, staff, and faculty as well as statewide networks for higher education professionals (Hernández, 2021).

Two categories of professional affinity organizations exist at Appalachian State University: informal and formal. Informal affinity groups are not officially affiliated with the university, do not receive funding, and are not required to follow University Communication guidelines—except when the service is part of a member’s professional job description. Formal affinity groups receive official university recognition, funding, and named inclusion in the university's official diversity portfolio. In 2012, a number of Hispanic-identifying Appalachian State Professionals from the informal affinity group, Appalachian@s, participated in a statewide Latino Forum. After this forum, it would still be years before any formal student organization for Latinx student affairs and support would be organized within the university (Hernández, 2021).

The university continued to struggle with its racist, heteropatriarchal, white settler colonialism over the years that followed the performative shifts toward diversity and inclusion that came after 2012.

Dr. Sheri Everts "joined Appalachian State University as its seventh leader in July 2014" (Howard, 2022) and has since seen a wave of sociopolitical shifts that have and will surely continue shifting the way higher education is seen, valued, and organized in the community. In 2015, the chancellor and the university had plans to make "a concerted effort to diversify;" among these initiatives included a plan to "bring in a consultant to educate supervisors on inclusion, implement a bias incident response process and work to more efficiently educate search committees on compliance in the hiring process with an online component" (Wilkerson, 2015). It took years after this news release to even begin rolling out the institutionally-supported, campus-wide training to supervisors; its initial rollout was optional. When I first began employment with the institution, I filled out a bias incident

report in a bias incident report form that was available on the Diversity & Inclusion website. Shortly after my first year working for Appalachian State University, that form was removed from the website. No other bias incident response process has been instated that has been shared publicly in either campus announcement or press release.

**Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) and Queer Student Leadership in the Wake of White Supremacy.** The slow-moving administrative processes toward securing safety and dignity to the Latinx community impacts the mobility of Latinx-centered student groups. Little progress has been made since 2012 in supporting Latinx App State students, a group that significantly and continually supplies students for the boasted 18.2% of racially and ethnically marginalized diversity that is featured so prominently on the university website (Appalachian State University, 2022). Even still, Latinx student leadership was on the rise; as the university administration searched for answers to diversify the institution, the informal Latinx Hispanic Faculty & Staff affinity group that continued to operate without direct support from the institution hosted a statewide Latino forum at the university in 2015. In that same year, the first Latin-centered student-led organization—an independent Latin sorority, Chi Upsilon Sigma (CUS)—came to Appalachian State University (Hernández, 2021).

Around the same time period as more Latinx student enrollment increased exponentially at App State, student leaders took strides in making space within the institution for students of color. These student-led movements forward happened contemporaneously with spikes in the nation and university’s xenophobic and white supremacist movements. The culture of white supremacy was designed by European settlers who “created the category of ‘white’ and the concept of whiteness and...the idea of white supremacy as a way to

organize” groups within “singular and unifying racial” categories; “By requiring [white settlers] to disconnect from their ethnic and national identities,” whites were able to “access to the material, emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual benefits of a whiteness designed specifically and intentionally to pit them against and place them above Indigenous and enslaved peoples” (Okun, 2021). This pattern of dominance and superiority continues today in the systems and structures of public, postsecondary education. Implied by predominantly white enrollment and employment numbers at the university, located in the Southeastern region of the U.S., Appalachian State University is a product and perpetuator of white supremacy.

White supremacy culture exposed itself more prominently in daily, neoliberal Mountaineer life (Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Peace Studies, 2020). A campus sit-in—featured in both regional and national Associated Press articles from Winston Salem Journal, ABC News, and AP News in 2016—responded to HB2 laws that protesters were concerned limited campus safety for the LGBTQIA+ community. The university’s response to HB2 became a priority issue and concern for all marginalized students; dozens of students, a number of them students of color, protested in a sit-in at the chancellor’s office. Confidential conversations I’ve had with university staff at that time, shared stories of the chancellor—immediately following these protests—having the communal furniture in the administration building removed. These actions continue to send a clear, and passive aggressive signal to all who enter. The building remains what many would consider a misuse of space with large corridors of vacant floorspace and no areas for community or student interaction in the common areas.

**My Entry Into (and Exit from) Appalachian as Full-Time Staff.** In 2017, I began my full-time employment as program manager with the university's Office of Distance Education. My supervisor was a Latina from Colombia, and my colleague was also from Columbia. Even though I had held positions in higher education since 2007, I had never before had colleagues with whom I work directly from the Latin American community, let alone superiors. I was very excited and hopeful to be among three working in one office to minimize the sense of tokenization I usually feel in professional spaces. What's more, the same year I began employment was also the year the university granted official recognition to the Latinx Hispanic Faculty & Staff affinity group, Appalachian@s (Coutant, 2018).

I was quickly disillusioned when, later that same year, white supremacists attempted to recruit members for a hate group by hanging a sign on a highly visible pedestrian bridge that many campus and Boone community members would pass throughout the day; Partially covering the university's message of, "Making a difference in the world... one student at a time," the Identity Evryopa sign hung, reading: "A NEW DAWN IS/ BREAKING/RISE AND GET ACTIVE" (Bawab, 2017). Even with the resurgence of white supremacist groups, university recruitment efforts pressed forward to bring in more students of ethnic and racial diversity to the predominant white student enrollment numbers. Part of these efforts included the initiative "Dia Latino" in 2017, which was led by the office of admissions to target Latinx/Hispanic families with prospective students (Cabarrus County, 2017). Depending on who you ask, some Latinx educators might interpret the event as exploiting the Latinx fuerza of familia, which prioritizes and values family input for major life decisions, while others view it as culturally affirming (Ramírez-Escobar, 2019; Jimenez, 2019, Yosso, 2005). Dia Latino continued to bring the University to increasing its ethnic/racial diversity rate and



meeting its 20,000 by 2020 enrollment goal (Oakes, 2019). Partnering with Appalachian@s—a group that has since rebranded to use the name, App Unidos—admissions hosted the Día Latino recruitment event in Spanish. Partnership with App Unidos was essential because, at the time and to this day, Appalachian State University admissions only has one Spanish-speaking staff member (Admissions, 2022). Being raised by a Latina doctor of psychology who owned her own translation business, I remember vocalizing discomfort with how they expected the Spanish-speaking faculty and staff to serve as translators for free.

Since the formation of Appalachian@s, among other multicultural initiatives—specifically through the division of student affairs on campus—student-led initiatives are more frequent and visible at the university. In 2019, Latina student leaders from the student organization—Hispanic Student Association, now the Latin Hispanic Alliance—created the Multicultural Greek Council, a collaborative of leaders from Greek organizations that center marginalized identities to organize movements for positive cultural change (Broyles, 2019).

In 2020, Appalachian State University chancellor, Dr. Sheri Everts, awarded participating App Unidos members—Dr. Felicia Arriaga, Sarah Donovan, Marco Fonseca Rodríguez, and María Conchita Hernández—a grant scholarship to initiate an Immigrant Ally educational program under the group name: the Immigrant Mountaineers Movement. Though the funding was not regranting in the following grant application cycle, this program continues to serve over 300 campus members who have engaged in education and planning around immigrant-origin student support. (Todd, 2020)

Shortly after the Chancellor's Innovation Scholarship award winners for 2020 were announced on February 29, 2020, news of an English instructor using the "N" word regularly

in her classroom was released to the community (Brenan & Lundy, 2020); the university offered students alternative options in place of continuing the course, but no immediate action was taken in response to student concerns regarding the instructor. She is still employed full-time by Appalachian and is still involved in social justice groups. She has not made any public statements or apologies for her use of racist language in the classroom. The English department chair apologized for the pain caused to the student who issued the public complaint, and the university directed future complaints through the official "grievance processes" (Brenan & Lundy, 2020).

In 2021, approximately 20 external and internal resources offered support to Latinx students, including six affinity groups—funded by the university; the Latinx Hispanic Faculty & Staff Association leads educational programming, offers student advising, mentorship, and translation services for the campus (App Unidos, 2022). The counseling center hosted ethnic dialogues between professionals and students with Latinx identity to exchange experiences and insights on their educational experience with code switching (Counselling, 2022). The university hosted charrette for strategic diversity plan in the spring semester of 2021 (Burnette, 2022)—the outcomes to connect how these charrettes informed the plan were never transparently shared with the campus community. Shortly after this event, I modeled professional boundary-setting by resigning from my full-time position in order to set a boundary between myself and the institution whose current structures are designed to silence my voice and suppress my identity as well as the anticolonial and/or antiracist activism that emerges from it.

## Chapter 2

### **Rebeldía: Decolonizing Activism and Latina Positionality in Education**

*“Aquí en la soledad prospera su rebeldía./En la soledad Ella prospera”* (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 23).

The verses above are from Borderlands theory seminal text, *Borderlands/La Frontera* by Gloria Anzaldúa. The common translation of the excerpt is: “Here, in solitude, their rebellion prospers./In solitude, She prospers. However, the word “soledad” in Spanish can mean loneliness, isolation, or solitude. I open this chapter with this excerpt because the ethnicized, racialized, gendered, and sexualized experience that the *Nepantlera* narratives illustrate in Chapters Three and Four reveal a reciprocation of *soledad*—solitude and isolation—blended with the *fuerza* of *rebeldía*; this *fuerza* aligns with my positionality in the research project and with the work of feminists in educational theory that inform it.

My activism evolved over time and has been heavily influenced by the work of Gloria Anzaldúa since childhood. My early exposure to Queer, feminist literature as well as having the experience of being raised by Latinx leaders shaped my understanding of how to organize change in the community. My contributions to the community originated in volunteer work. I started volunteering for schools, nonprofits, churches and other faith-based organizations in elementary school. What I did not realize then was that many of these organizations replicate the anti-indigenous and anti-black structures that I name in this and the previous chapter. Though I did not have the language to express my experience or my concerns at the start of my community engagement, higher education became a space for me to explore social change from different perspectives. The more exposure I had to alternative discourses in addition to the dominant narratives, the more injustice I saw.

Injustice motivated me to figure out ways to help bring meaningful change in my community; my aspirational fuerza, or hope for the future, worked against the normalizing forces that sought to suppress the ways I wanted to show up as a Nepantlera—someone with liminality who is unapologetically refusing the reproduced colonial trait in erasure and silencing. I didn't always have the language, the tools to understand how to build a bridge between where colonization had displaced me and my self-directed futurity in belonging, nor did I have safety to be my fullest self in my literal spaces; I navigated my world in a series of trauma responses until I knew alternative ways of being. Nepantla is a figurative space that empowers Nepantleras to safely embrace their whole selves without risk or harm when there are dangers in their literal spaces. In Nepantla—a mestiza expressive artform for processing identity and experience after colonization—the Nepantlera maintains full autonomy over their identity, and the complexity of their hybridity exists in harmony.

Though Nepantla is a figurative plane, Borderlands' Nepantleras carry their Nepantla with them and may show up in their literal spaces as their fullest self in all their complexity (Anzaldúa, 1987); in my case, my fullest self is Queer, indigenous, Latinx, decolonizing, femme, fluid, nonbinary, nonconforming, complex. Though I have not always felt safe to be fully myself in my physical spaces, I always aspired to share my fullest self beyond just the Nepantla I had created in my poetry and journals. It took me 33 years to feel safe enough to be my fullest self, and I am still (un)learning and growing.

Though my identity development is an important aspect of my positionality in the research, so is my activism and the ways I have grown in my understanding of how I should show up in racial equity and justice movements. In high school, I decided to enhance my community involvement. I used my skills and experience to build a nonprofit with my

mother, supporting immigrant-origin people in the U.S. as well as those experiencing challenges in the nations of the Northern Triangle: El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. This work was led by Mestizas with U.S.-citizenship that extended aid to those with subordinated social categories within the broader Central American migrant label. This aid was organized with minimal thought or intention to structuring that support to centralize the vision and leadership of those groups in the work.

I continue to work for this nonprofit as a way of honoring this piece of my history and modeling healing justice as ongoing work toward community repair; however, I struggle with the ways white saviorism (Cole, 2012) was propagated in the origins of the work and have since used this lesson to guide more meaningful choices in my activism. In the doctoral program, I discovered that the poet I admired for much of my life was also a prominent scholar and theorist in positing change for education. With this newfound avenue of literature to explore in the theories I introduced in the first two chapters of this dissertation and show within the context of the research in Chapters Five and Six, I learned that mainstream literary canon left out decades of contributions from authors of color. BIPOC scholars have actively worked and led the charge against white, heteropatriarchal, colonial oppression in education and other social contexts since the 1970s. Borderlands theorists and other scholars of color referenced in this work have helped me redefine and reimagine social activism in higher education.

### **Nepantlera Rebeldía in Education**

My whole life, I have been encouraged to assimilate in public and to only exist how I see myself in my personal life, in intimate spaces. Even in those spaces, full expression is discouraged. Writing was the safest way for me to show up and act in resistance against the

white supremacy that told me to acknowledge one of my racial ancestries and to ignore the “Other,” the heteropatriarchy that said I could and should choose to ignore my feelings for womxn and my cultural intuition regarding gender/expression, the colonization that told me Indigeneity was in the past. In Chapter Five, I’ll offer more narrative around my perspective on the weight and complexity of the Mestiza identity to supplement the introduction I provide in this chapter. Writing was my first act of rebeldía, rebellion as grassroots activism.

I am more confident now to embody the concepts of Nepantlera ontology—which commands intentional, transparent approaches to professional practice and socializing. My activism emerges in ways that are influenced by relationality: the juncture of and relationship between time, place, resources, and identity. While writing and rebeldía are still my preferred forms of activism, my research follows a decade of educational activism. Specifically, I started a *cariño* practice in student-development, advising, and mentorship early in my higher education career with the Florida College System and have built on these practices during my employment at Appalachian State University. My activism within higher education has been largely met without or with minimal financial compensation. I volunteer my time to give support to marginalized students that the university has not created meaningful structures for, including: immigrant-origin students, non-traditional students who are older or have full-time jobs, transfer students, neurodivergent students, LGBTQIA+ students, students with non-Christian faiths, and BIPOC students. I believe in the power of stories to heal the self and in the power of the healed or healing individual self to impact systemic change through the individual relation to the community.

### *(Anti)Racism and My Experience in the Latinx-odus*

Systemic change requires, at the very least, an examination of existing structures, their areas of injustice, and their opportunities to enhance experiences for marginalized groups. This section will share a narrative that describes a personal experience I had with the interim Chief Diversity Officer (CDO) at Appalachian State University. The Chief Diversity Officer is a structured position at the university in the office of Diversity & Inclusion, which consists of only one full-time staff member (the CDO) who serves at the will of the chancellor. The CDO has the implied role of advocating for Diversity and Inclusion at the university. It is important to note that this dissertation does not aim to problematize the interim CDO as an individual who is a woman of color who comes from the college of business and is a juris doctor (JD). She is not an enemy to the messages of this work or to the students who participated in it. Instead, this dissertation shares this narrative to parallel the narrative style present in the storytelling methodologies of the research that offer a microcosmic narrative to creatively illustrate and relate systemic injustices to audiences. While taking in this story, readers should understand the interim CDO as a character in this nonfiction anecdote of colonial structure in the university as told from my perspective and my personal experience.

In a meeting between myself, another Immigrant Mountaineer Movement member, and the interim Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), I asked what the office of Diversity & Inclusion's stance was on antiracism. Specifically, would the university be willing to make an antiracist statement on diversity? The interim CDO's response was disheartening to the IMM facilitators on the call. She confirmed that the university would not now or anytime in the foreseeable future (paraphrase) use an "antiracist framework." In the Zoom meeting, she

placed air quotes around the word “antiracist.” Her office did offer the Immigrant Mountaineers Movement funded space to be added to her portfolio; however, since the interim CDO was unwilling to identify her office as antiracist, we declined the offer, preferring to remain an antiracist, grassroots organization.

Shortly after the meeting with the interim Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), Appalachian State University continued its legacy in white supremacy, making Alabama news headlines after a football player from Appalachian State University spit on an Alabama team member while using racially charged language (Stephenson, 2021). While manifesting in student spaces, the university's racist toxicity also overwhelmingly prevails for Latinx professionals and other professionals of color. The interim CDO, shortly after assuming her Diversity & Inclusion leadership role, conducted a survey on campus conditions for marginalized personnel to understand the climate for marginalized professionals at the university. The official results were never released in a public statement, to the campus, or with the participants of the study; however, a student wrote a news article for the student-run newspaper on the survey results (Stewart & Moore, 2021). The news article revealed what was already evident to most at the university; marginalized personnel leave Appalachian State University as quickly as they possibly can to escape the toxic work environment, leaving the students they advise and friends they've made to process the loss. Among the professionals of color who made their exit before this survey was circulated are all the Latinx founding members of the Immigrant Mountaineers Movement, who left App State in 2021. Each of us either permanently or temporarily terminated our contracts with the university, even though two of us chose to remain engaged with campus organizations fighting white supremacy.



Among the social movements countering white supremacy, #RepresentationMatters has popularized a theoretical concept in BIPOC-authored educational leadership theories in higher education. Not only would students benefit from representations of their identity in student-facing faculty and staff positions, but they are now more likely to be searching for those representations as signs of belonging in their current or future higher education environments. Institutions need to be more intentional with the structures of their support to marginalized students and personnel. Though this section offers information on the institution's alleged support/initiatives related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the institution is not at the center of discussion for this paper. Rather, this section within the context of the BMF research foundation and findings suggests the colonial institution has already benefited from the enrollment and employment of those with liminality—among them the racialized, ethnicized, gendered, and sexualized; it also suggests the harm permitted within existing and historic systems that educators must commit themselves to change. Understanding the historical context described above maps the environment in which the Neplanteras navigate during their college experience. Reflecting on this analysis, educators and administrators may design and restructure meaningful spaces for healing justice—like the Neplantera narrativa group—that might benefit marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys to our collective futures.

### **Colonized Minds**

Healing justice narrative, specifically counter- and contra-storytelling research has revealed ways "White supremacy manifests as overtly racist acts, but also through everyday practices and beliefs that uphold Whiteness as the standard and perpetuate racism regardless of one's intentions" (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 318). The institution of higher education was

created and continues to be a normalizing force, upholding coloniality. Coloniality is a force that replicates imperial constructs, such as sexism and elitism; in the process of amassing wealth and power through criminal acts, colonialism has created its own capitalist, white supremacist, and racist social technologies to reinforce its values (Wolfe, 1999; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Bautista, 2019). Colonialism has expanded further into education and society—creating what some theorists identify as neoliberal climates in educational sites, strategically driven by "corporate interests to maintain dominance over disadvantaged groups" (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 319). Among these theorists, Kholi, Pizzaro, and Navarez (2017) identify the "new racism" and white supremacy in education as "evasive, subtle, and challenging to identify because it is normalized and hidden under the guise of multiculturalism, colorblindness, and everyday individualized interpretations of policy and practices" (p. 195).

**Kayu ne: Shapata, Kotik, Tishik, Tish-ki, Tet (Lencan—Let's Talk About It: Discover, Learn, Know, Teach, Work)**

As an authentic element of this research project, I have been on my own healing journey by building translingual fuerzas. I am the sole person in my maternal lineage who has mastery in only one language. I can socially navigate in both Spanish and English, but my overwhelming levels of comfort in English compared to Spanish contribute to my feelings of separation from my community. My limited proficiency in other languages limits my ability to connect with my family and with other indigenous people of color, so I prioritized enhancing my Spanish and learning more Lencan as well as Nahuatl throughout my doctoral enrollment for my own healing and for my contribution to this project. Though Spanish is a colonizer tongue, it is a marginalized tongue in the context of the U.S. and one

that affects my relation to others with my liminality; Bautista (2019) exposes this experience as part of settler colonial conquest to separate indigeneity from its culture through epistemicide, including linguistic genocide; what myself and many other Latinx born and/or raised in the U.S. learned early in life was that “Attaining proficiency in the colonial language,” Spanish/English, is “critical to social mobility” (p. 59). Following the methodologic *trenza* of translingualism, this dissertation—except in direct quotes—will indigenize research language. I will use the Lencan term, "Intibucá" to replace the English word, "Western" when referencing or explaining paradigms and ideologies that originate in the U.S. or Europe.

The Intibucá research value and process of legitimizing knowledge is viewed by anticolonial researchers as another method of violence enacted on indigenous peoples in the name of imperialism (Freire, 1970; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Bautista, 2019), which has refined its practices of "legitimizing knowledge" for centuries and reifies what Saavedra & Nymark (2008) coin the "nos/otros," or us/other, dichotomy (p. 263). Whether "intentionally or not...dominant ideology and discourse" has many blind spots, permitting gaps in identity research—often justified for the sake of progress and other colonial values that command consistent and persistent building of legitimized knowledge (Anzaldúa, 1990; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Calderon, 2014).

### **Metamarginalization & the Whitestream**

Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism (BMF) challenges colonial blindness in research that willingly overlooks gaps in the social sciences by commanding researchers to move away from oversimplifying knowledge. Oversimplification is a settler colonial design that began with the settler colonial invention of whiteness that I mentioned in chapter one. This

chapter explores the othered spaces within dominant discourses, spaces that exist in the margins of the whitestream. Canadian sociologists describe whitestream as “discourse that is...principally structured on the basis of white, middle-class experience” (Denis, 1997; Grande, 2003; de los Ríos, 2013). BMF scholars rebel against whitestream, Intibucá research norms by "resisting the disembodied nature of research" to create space for critical pedagogy to be "expanded, stretched, and problematized..." (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, pp. 256-264). Colonial values in research have propagated categories of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation/sexuality, and socioeconomic status. Latinx is an identity with the potential to possess all forms of marginality in divergence from normalized society, which theories that inform and are inspired by Borderlands theory often refer to as "whitestream." Whitestream discourse marginalizes Latinx; even still, as Latinx liminalities traverse marginal discourses outside the whitestream, their role and position as the target of subordination may shift within the context of those marginalized groups.

Metamarginalization happens as a result of marginal discourses that uphold colonial values or patterns for categorization, offering divergence to the norm only in the category that the group may represent collectively. Within the context of that group, there are likely identities that are subordinated within that marginality in addition to being subordinated in the larger discourses of whitestream society.

Borderlands-mestizaje feminists argue that "critical pedagogies have unintentionally marginalized" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 256) within marginalized groups as a natural consequence of "dualistic, essentialist, and oversimplified thinking (Elenes, 2001, p. 691). BMF isn't the only theory problematizing metamarginalization. Among identity-affirming critical theories that work alongside BMF is DisCrit, an area of disability studies that often

centers metamarginalization in analysis. While disability is not an identity category that is centered in this project, understanding metamarginalization across critical disciplines is helpful for Borderlands scholars to raise their own awareness of the experiences and perspectives of identities that might be marginalized within the BMF framework. Queer theorist, Jasbir Puar (2017), illustrates metamarginalization within the disability community:

Scholars such as Nirmala Erevelles and Christopher Bell have insistently pointed out the need in disability studies for intersectional analyses in order to disrupt the normative (white, male, middle-class, physically impaired) subjects that have historically dominated the field. The epistemic whiteness of the field is no dirty secret. Part of how white centrality is maintained is through the policing of disability itself: what it is, who or what is responsible for it, how one lives it, whether it melds into an overarching condition of precarity of a population or is significant as an exceptional attribute of an otherwise fortunate life. These normative subjects cohere not only in terms of racial, class, and gendered privilege; they also tend toward impairments that are thought to be discernible, rather than cognitive and intellectual disabilities, chronic pain conditions like fibromyalgia or migraines, and depression. (p. xix).

This metamarginalization example shows the internalized oppression—or the "devaluation or inferiorization of one's self and one's group" (David & Derthick, 2014) that replicates capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchy from dominant, colonial discourses within the margins of disability. When the marginality centers race or ethnicity, metamarginalization often emerges from internalized racism—the assumed superiority or inferiority from internalized oppression and privilege (IDE, 2018). The value of this research

project is in its problematization of the transmission and reification of coloniality in higher education, even in its institutionally-supported marginal spaces.

### ***Heteropatriarchal Colonialism, Machista, and Borderlands Rebellion***

The next few sections will outline the figurative border crossing that Latina academics navigate within theories and movements that center marginalized identity and the experience of marginalization. This subsection begins a series of subsections that offer context to highlight the epistemic marginalization surrounding the political movements and theories that impact Queer Latina liminality; this environmental context frames and informs the methodology selected for this research to minimize the reproduction of coloniality and marginalization. Metamarginalization—a form of marginalization within marginalized groups—is emerging as a topic of interest in theoretical and political movements, specifically those that expand on feminism and Latinx critical philosophies. The 2020 Black Lives Matter movement visibilizes in mainstream outlets the perspectives of BIPOC female activists who have been carrying the nation in social revolution for half a century. The Combahee River Collective (2015), Black feminism, Borderlands, intersectionality, and Xicana feminism have all worked contemporaneously to problematize "Euro-American erasure of the different locations of women of color" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 261).

The blind spots are not exclusive within gendered groups; machismo is a cultural norm (Ramirez, 2019) that subordinates women into stereotypical Marianista roles—submissive, "pure," domestic, manipulative, emotionally dismissive, and inherently heterosexual (Pappa, 2019; Bautista, 2019). Machista thought is misogynistic and imposes gendered expectations, based on a binary that suppresses all genders. Machista culture has impacted the Chicano political movements of the 1960s and 1970s; feministas have drawn

attention to the erasure of feminine voices in these movements (Alarcon, 1999; Delgado Bernal, 1998). Xicana feminist representation consistently intervened and interrupted the "(sub)conscious awakening" of the patriarchal, political activist structures in the Chicano political movements (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 259). Based on the limited mention and the marginalized examination of machismo in the literature reviewed in preparation for this research, machismo and the erasure of feminine voices in academia continues to be an area of blindness for theories that center Latinx identity.

### ***Colonial Blindness***

The silencing or muting of topics that colonial norms and negatively impact the Queer Latina liminality, like machismo, is part of a colonial tradition in education to control who has the right to know, to be known, and to contribute to knowledge (Patel, 2016). Metamarginalization of Xicanas and machista dominance within Chicano political movements is only a fractioned example of how mainstream education, theory, and activism in the U.S. is following an intentional, settler-colonial design whose very nature (re)produces colonial blindness; heteropatriarchal structures existing in Queer and BIPOC communities position the interstitial identity of the Queer Latina in conflict with educational research that informs policy; our biological and cultural identities can represent complicity in the current and historical colonization of land or work to decolonize/indigenize institutional norms; our sexual and gender identities combined with our achievements unsettle heteropatriarchal norms ingrained in these cultural complicities; in between our experiences with race, gender, sexuality, sexual expression, and settler-colonialism, Queer Latinas can lead in the rebellion against heteropatriarchal, (neo)colonial forces (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Calderon, 2014).

Colonial blindness thrives in sites of colonized knowledge. Decolonizing scholars Tuck & Yang (2014) speak extensively on the topic of settler colonial knowledge to examine settler colonial codes that govern academic knowledge, influence popular knowledge, and so ubiquitously impact Intibucá society:

Rarely examined is the code beneath the code. Who gets to know? Who gets known? Where is knowledge kept, and kept legitimated? What knowledge is desirable? Who profits? Who loses/pays/gives something away? Who is coerced, empowered, appointed to give away knowledge? These are the analytic questions that drive beyond coding. In a sense, these are not open-ended questions, but ones that have already been answered for us. The academic codes that govern research, human subject protocols, and publishing already territorialize knowledge as property and researchers as claimstakers. Academic codes decide what stories are civilized (intellectual property) and what stories are natural, wild, and thus claimable under the doctrine of discovery. Human subject protocols establish that individuals must be protected, but not communities. (p. 812)

The majority of academics have unionized themselves to settler colonial paradigms without questioning the very source and structure of those codes. In doing so, higher education remains blind to the many ways colonization of indigenous thought, culture, bodies, minds, and sexuality continue today.

Queer Latinas have experience that disrupts settler colonial codes. Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism (BMF) recognizes their experience—told in their voice—is knowledge with the potential to deconstruct colonizing power. Among the ways coloniality continues in knowledge construction is in the ways space is governed to pit marginalized groups in



competition against one another for resources and voice within political movements. The settler colonial (white supremacist) pattern of abandoning culture, ethnicity, and community that was established for whites to unify under a monolithic social eidetic is replicating in marginalized groups. Below, I will outline examples of political and social movements, centering marginality that may include the Queer Latina liminality but may actively suppress or fail to center either Queerness, femininity, Latinidad, Blackness, or Indigeneity respectively. Elenes (1997) specifically names erasure and silencing of difference within othered communities as being a central locality for problematizing within borderlands theoretical constructions (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 256). How can theory overcome colonial blindness in exploring the complexity of the Latina experiencia to benefit small groups and communities without harming the individual, all while going up against the goliath force of colonial institutions in educational research? BMF is a theory—developed from other theories that explore identity—that responds to this inquiry to unearth healing tools that nullify colonial impact and combat the future of coloniality through the liminality of race, region, tribe, sexuality, spirituality and/or gender.

### **Hermanas in Theory**

Borderlands theory opposes the normative pathologizing of Latinx, Queer, and other marginalized identities to enact research and practice—while developing a new Queer, female, and Latinx imaginary—“designed expressly to encourage and nurture difference” (de Castell and Bryson, 1998, p. 160). Borderlands and BMF share many theorists with Xicanx and Latinx feminism, whose practitioners are often referred to as feministas. Feministas are theoretical hermanas of Borderlands, decolonizing theory from indigenizing paradigms to present a holistic theoretical alternative to educational research norms.

As theoretical hermanas to Borderlands, Xicanx, Chicax, and Latinx feminisms share many borderlands epistemology and axiology—viewing topics, individuals, and communities explored in research holistically. One shared axiology in borderlands and the three decolonizing feminisms mentioned is the belief in the empowered Xicanx/Chicax/Latinx, a poder—power—derived from their culture and liminality (hooks, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Respective decolonizing feminisms and borderlands theories further distinguish themselves from the often generalizing and essentializing practices implicit with the aggregate terms and coding of Intibucá educational research (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 22); decolonizing feministas rebel against Intibucá norms by making explicit distinctions that honor racial diversity of Latin Americans and their descendants, which consists of every race—white, brown, black—giving each of us room to speak and to (co)exist authentically and peacefully. The feminista theories that house some of these decolonizing feminista rebels are commonly labeled under Chicana/x, Xicana/x, and Latinx/a feminisms; Chicax feminism more broadly centers any Mexican national identity; Xicanx feminism more intentionally centers Mesoamerican indigeneity in all its works, and Latinx feminism loosens that boundary further to incorporate any Latin American identity at the center. The distinct theories also accurately reflect and respect cultural differences—with some Latin Americans possessing current indigenous identities and others holding more distant ties through heritage to either Caribbean, Mesoamerican, or African indigeneity.

Borderlands is a migration story (de los Ríos, 2013); Borderlands allows us to share who we are, where we come from, and where we're going. Borderlands moves with us, not ahead of us; in Borderlands, how we define ourselves, the meaning we make from nuestra vivencia, and how our interactions—in all our liminality—with different institutional forces

and other borders shape that experience is at the center. In this center and in its margins, every piece of who we are—our whole self—is seen, belongs, and holds power.

In order to protect Latinx cultural identities while empowering us to have control over our own futures in education, decolonizing and anticolonial methodologies in Borderlands and Latinx/Chicanx/Xicanx work must continue; theorists must continue to supplement, refine, and reproduce methodologies centered in the empowered and in empowering Latina/Xicana voice as a source of knowledge (Garcia, 2019; de los Ríos, 2013).

### **(Re)negotiating Gender and Sexuality**

Queer theorists Sumara and Davis (1999) accuse curriculum and the theory that informs it of doing far more than sexualizing in the institution: they heterosexualize. Queer theory calls educators "to interrupt heteronormative thinking—not only to promote social justice, but to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting, and representing experience" (p. 191). The liminalities we inhabit gift Queer Latinas the exceptional opportunity to begin to "negotiate an empowering, racial, gendered...political terrain we also call mestizaje" (Saldivar-Hull, 2000, p. 44-45). What is defined in this research as feminine energy may be renegotiated—along with continually developing literature—to better align with different indigenous paradigms that embrace concepts of alternative, inclusive gender and sexuality—where more than one gender may simultaneously exist in one being.

Let's not forget that the gender binary and the heteropatriarchal expectations that gender and police bodies and behavior is a propagation of colonization, weaponized for the purpose of disempowering indigenous and black communities; queering gender normativity in BMF research can be applied in response to the epistemic imperative of committing to anticolonial efforts, which calls BMF projects to refuse colonial (re)conditioning (Afsaneh

Najmabadi, 2006, p. 18). I acknowledge that gender and sexuality is fluid; none of the participants felt they had discovered a language that accurately and wholly verbalizes or defines their sexuality/gender within the context of their intersectionality; all Nepantleras are moving to reduce or reject the use of feminine pronouns. Because anonymity is protected in this dissertation through the use of self-selected identifiers, and because all of the participants shared that they feel most seen when I use the pronouns "they/them/their" in reference to each of them, I will be using the singular they/them/their when referring to each individual as well as the collective Nepantlera participants. The indigenous perspective views the binary language of education and the hegemony of coloniality it is governed by as limiting (Smith, 2012). Conceptual gaps in defining the energy that composes gender reinforce coloniality, and so normative framings of gender persist within both dominating and supposed liberating discourses.

### ***A Queer and Decolonial Alliance in Linguistic Activism***

In this work, I have used the "a" suffix to conclude nouns in Spanish that reference myself and female-identifying Latinx as a community of poder feminina, feminine power. When referring more generally to culture and identity rooted in Latin American—countries whose unification was brought about by the displacement and genocide of indigenous lives and cultures by colonizers from Spain or Portugal—the suffix "x" is used. While the letter "x" is commonly used in the U.S. to queer language, challenging heteropatriarchal linguistic norms (Romero, 2018, p. 57), Latinx unveils alternative roots for the etymology of the letter “x;” "x" was added to the Spanish language as a result of colonization to incorporate sounds present in the native languages that were not adequately expressible in Spanish (Garcias, 2017, p. 210); therefore, Latinx both queers the gendered binary construct of the colonial

Spanish and English languages as well as visibilizes the colonial impact on indigeneity existing in the Latinx history and present.

### **Decolonizing with Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism**

I struggle in my own analysis in this work because of the ways in which the feminine Latina identity seems to dominate the discourse. This reflects my own lived experience and that expressed by some of the *Nepantleras* who felt they were allowed more space at home, at school, and in their places of worship to explore ethnicity as it intersects with their gender assigned at birth; however, when it came to their race, sexuality, (nonconforming) gender and sexual orientation, there was little room if any to make self-identifying decisions. In many ways, we all affirmed a choice that all Latinx/a/es have in either affirming our ethnicity over all other identity categories or white-washing ourselves by aligning with the cultural identity norms in our transplanted communities. Our *narrativas* show how strong, regardless of when our families migrated to the U.S., our emotional and spiritual connection to our countries of origin are. Though we were still (un)learning dominant narratives about Latinx/a, we had already begun to reclaim that identity on our own terms; when it came to other aspects of who we are, our stories revealed less experience with the identity reclamation.

While *nepantleras* had advanced intellectual knowledge of concepts surrounding identity, they expressed never having time or a safe space to understand how these concepts applied to them; they felt identified as female, but they didn't confidently and/or consistently self-identify as women; one of them expressed feeling confident in their attraction to the "same sex," but they couldn't safely be out in all spaces without abandoning pieces of who they are spiritually or without abdicating their family roles. Neither of them confidently identified a race. The terms they used to name their oppressors were: racism, homophobia,

machismo, and sexism. While these forces are certainly powerful mechanisms that shape experience for Queer Latinas, the deafening silence surrounding colonization's influence and control over these forces in our lives was apparent to me as a BMF educator.

As students—and as racialized, ethnicized, (hetero)sexualized beings—we are all subject to hegemonic power as we continue our education (Bautista, 2019, pp. 59-67). As a Queer Mestiza, I learned I have much undoing and (un)learning that stems from my colonial ancestry as a womxn who descends from both the colonizers and the colonized (Villenas, 1996; Tuana, 2004; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Calderon, 2014). Though many BMF scholars oppose mentes—mindsets—that affirm the settler identity over the indigenous identity in the mestiza hybridity, some anticolonial and decolonizing theorists assign the Mestiza a settler-colonial identity (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Calderon, 2014); we carry our histories in our bodies, in our psyches as we navigate these new lands, as each of us experiences different stages of our higher education and spiritual journeys in the U.S.

For decades, BMF has served to "challenge and decolonize Western mode of research" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 255). Using this theory allowed me as a researcher to highlight fuerzas—Latina cultural strengths, resources, and practices—that the participants reclaimed on their own journeys to healing, justice, and success. Maybe someday soon, they will write their own dissertation, too.

I spent a considerable amount of time weighing the value of translanguaging in academic work. Part of the complexity of Latinidad is that Latinx do not share one unified language; because our ethnicity is shaped by predominantly Spanish colonization, Spanish is the dominating linguistic practice in Latinx history and culture; however, there are still indigenous, Portuguese, British, and French colonized histories as well as North American

settler-colonial epistemicide that bring many of us to theoretical discourse in different tongues (Macdonald & Carrillo, 2008; Smith, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Santos, 2014; Calderon, 2014; Bautista, 2019). I was raised in both English and Spanish languages; over time, my family became more integrated into English-speaking communities, and my schooling continued in English; my range of expression in the Spanish language is limited, and my family was violently disconnected from their indigenous language by Salvadoran law that made it illegal to practice indigenous customs (Cultural Survival, 2019). Finding ways to retain or reclaim the Spanish, Lencan, and Nahuatl language I do know is not only significant in a BMF approach, but also to my own personal healing; the intersection and translingual exchange of all of these language traditions hold significance to my *voz y cuerpo*, my body and voice.

### **Language Activism: Challenging Rhetorical Norms to Combat Colonialism in Education**

Though Latinx do not share one communal language, as hegemonic narratives would suggest, translingualism—language fluency that crosses between more than one language—remains a common element in the Latinx college experience; BMF theoretically parallels the semantic precision and evolution of Latinx languages. The Spanish language, for instance, semantically acknowledges epistemological fluidity—boasting multiple words to differentiate levels of knowing as linguistic qualifiers; *yo sepa*—I *know*, from lived experience, from deep spiritual understanding—that Latin Americans are not trapped and often have more power than the people who are charged to lead us may recognize. In alignment with the ways Latinx languages mirror the translingual experience and history of *nuestra comunidad*, Rosa Linda Fergoso (1993) diagrams BMF as "a paradigm of

transculturalism" (p. 65). BMF "is interdisciplinary, subjective, and connected with vidas and cuerpos—lives and bodies—to" share and elevate the Latina story as a vehicle for social transformation in educational research (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 257).

Contemporary history supports the Latin American bind through the Spanish language, connecting "the panethnic Latino community with each other" and supporting colonial efforts to further separate respective indigenous tribes—along with their language and the culture and spirituality it is rooted in for the conquest of control and expansion of imperial, capitalist wealth (Freire, 1970; Bautista, 2019). Dominating culture, which sustains "an atmosphere in which English language proficiency is one of the major tenets of 'being American'" (Macdonald and Carrillo, 2008, p. 19), exacerbates Latinx cultural divides. While many Latinx students may have a connection through language, some Latinx students may have little to no proficiency in the Spanish language—whether as a result of assimilation to United States culture or because of indigenous origins in which native tongues were spoken in place of the dominant language in use within their country of origin (Calderon, 2014).

### **Contranarrativas**

For those who don't speak Spanish, I have translated the second portion of the poem from Chapter One into English—the unifying language all participants involved in this research speak with sufficient command to meet their academic demands and accomplishments:

soul between two worlds, three, four,  
my head buzzes with the contradictory.  
I am driven by all the voices that speak to me  
Simultaneously.



As many Latinx are indigenous, have indigenous ancestry, and/or have African American ancestry, we hold more than the history of the conquerors; we have stored ancestral and cultural tools in our bodies that will help in the healing. One of the many ancestral tools in our cultural toolbox that is honored and employed within BMF is the ability to know "when and how to shift and maneuver through currents of power" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 257). To expand the borders of social access and opportunity, our individual as well as community healing becomes integral to Latinx futures; consequently, healing narratives become imperative to educational and research processes. Using BMF, two questions have guided the queering and decolonizing Nepantlera narrativa research project:

- How do institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at Appalachian State University?

AND

- How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?

It is important to note before starting this paragraph that not all Latinas have deficit self-perceptions, nor should they be compelled to. In my personal experience, when you are marginalized, you go through periods when you have internalized deficits that you must continuously overcome until you recognize your power once again. All the students in this participatory narrative group identified feelings of isolation during their enrollment that they believed was associated with or related to their liminality; some have expressed emotions like fear in social spaces with white faces, which alludes a sense of powerlessness or being "less-than" in normative spaces; the written and oral narratives exchanged during the group work in Fall 2021 revealed ancestral traumas that begin in the students' respective heritage

that includes cultures colonized by Spain and then neocolonized by the United States. These inherited traumas influence their response to and perspectives of current environments (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 323).

***Past the Pain: Focusing on Fuerzas***

Latinas have also inherited strengths, *fuerzas*, from surviving those traumas that empower us to heal from them by embracing liminal, lived, cultural experience (Sandoval, 1991). Stories of survival can become "painfully forged possibilities for Chicana and Latina feminists from various disciplines to begin to include their own *experiencias*, spaces, and bodies in their work in order to reclaim self/space and body/mind in an anticolonial strategy" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 266). When the stories that center Latina liminalities contradict the dominant deficit-framing of Intibucá research, they are commonly known as counterstories. Counterstory as a Borderlands methodology resist the "bifurcation of the mind and body" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 262). As I mentioned in the introduction, the prefix "counter" implies an originating narrative, a normative story that the "counterstory" is refuting or opposing in reaction or in reversal to the normalized narrative. Some popular dictionaries define it as "contrary to the *right* course" or "in the reverse," implying either a deficit-framed judgement on the term, counterstory, or an essentialized villain to refute.

In queering the language further, this analysis challenges BMF educators to mindfully select the language that describes their practice. For this research, because the liminality centered may speak to multiple discourses in which the *Nepantleras* are marginalized and because their stories did not react in direct response to the epistemologically assumed oppression, I choose the category of contranarrative to label the style of writing presented in this dissertation. Though the contranarrative content was impacted and influenced by the

dominating forces that counterstories seek to refute, the storylines were more of an alternative narrative style—rather than a counterstory—to the dominant and normalized narratives. The contranarratives that are braided in this work came from the Nepantleras’ authentic processing of self, community, and future. What came out of that process were narratives that contrasted the dominating narratives surrounding the Queer Latina liminality.

The Nepantlera narrativas were contranarratives in that they were not speaking to or arguing with the dominant ones; instead, they were claiming the literary space that is already owed them and offered to them within BMF. Using *nuestra facultad*—our “capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities to see the deep structure below the surface...an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p. 60), Latinx BMF educators, researchers, and students may employ contranarrative storytelling methodology. One methodology that fosters contranarrativas is *conocimientos*—a transformation of circumstance into a story with identifiable pattern(s) (Calderon, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2002).

Throughout *Borderlands* and other theories—including but not limited to feminism, critical race, and queer—*conocimientos* are categorized as counternarratives. In this project, I employed what I define as contranarrative methodologies within a contra-curriculum. My use of the prefix “contra” over “counter” supports the translingual *trenzas* in the research as well as offers a more precise language to mobilize allies away from positioning their narrative in relation or reaction to the dominant narrative. One of the methodological *trenzas* used in the project to evoke contranarrative is *pláticas*. In the theme of queering research by amplifying Queer, Latinx voices, I will offer a literary perspective of *pláticas*, spoken in the voice of my friend, colleague, and mentor, Dr. Juan Esteban (JuanEs) Ramirez Escobar (2019):

Fierros and Dolores-Bernal (2016), describe pláticas as a “relational practice that develops from a goal to honor research participants’ epistemological position” (p. 116). In other words, the lines of researcher/researched are blurred to intentionally move away from research that sees the participant as a subject. As a result, this project benefits from the wealth that the participants bring to this arrangement. (p. 23)

Contra-curricular and contranarrative processes disrupt the colonial production line to engage in analysis throughout knowledge development; challenging these colonial mechanisms unbalances normative thinking and territorializes theoretical space to contextualize and map historical and/or geographic beginnings in exposing the patterns of adaptation, refusal, and rebellion against the violence and oppression still in place (Anzaldúa, 1987; Calderon, 2014).

Contranarratives do not inherently assume a counter in opposition to an established idea; rather, through the *trenzas y mestizaje* application of *conocimientos, mentes y cuerpos*, and *Nepantla*, *Nepantleras* control and manage the narratives with their voice and perspective at the center and their aspirations and potential in the projected imaginaries. This process honors and acknowledges *mentes y cuerpos* and the material impact of dominant discourse as it transcends the deficit center of that discourse and (neo)liberatory theories that uphold it. So contranarratives extend storytelling beyond the borders ancestral trauma and pain to aver cultural advantages (Tuck & Yang, 2014). *Fuerzas*, like ambition, linguistic fluidity, perseverance, spirituality, and experience navigating in multiple cultures (Martinez, 2020) have helped me make powerful realizations about my own history of whitewashing, racism, colorism, and self-loathing that I was conditioned in. Realizing incommensurable realities of

how I am complicit in colonialism and its progenetic constructions, how as light-skinned Mestiza, I may have "harmed others just by being" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9) was necessary in identifying not only my needs in the healing process but my place and how that place shapes my relationship with my heritage, my community, and my career. Through *conocimientos*, "contribution to the field of educational research and practice," BMF can offer Queer Latinas in the historically white and colonial institution a future of "decolonial possibility...through the very act of illuminating and centering the body, sexuality, and subjectivities" and "seeking the tension between colonizer/colonized spaces and bodies" to form a new space (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, pp. 255-264), a decolonial imaginary.

## Chapter 3

### Borderlands Healing Justice:

#### Narrativas in Nepantla

Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger... To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit... Finally, I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing. (Anzaldúa, 2013)

The institution is an alienating, colonial force for marginalized groups; as you have read and have likely experienced, belonging and security in one's cultural identity cannot automatically be assumed, but it can be developed. Normalizing narratives exchange constant dialogue—some might argue battle—with our cultural intuition; our sexualities, more often than not, make us outsiders in our gender and cultural groups. This chapter shares the process behind the written narratives selected by the participants as representations of their authentic voice in their healing journeys; the participants, the Nepantleras—who are introduced in more detail in later sections within this chapter—wish to share these messages publicly with the university and have documented within the literature. When starting the Narrativa collective, I gave Nepantleras full authority over confidentiality governance. This was clarified to them in writing, affirmed verbally during *encuentros/pláticas*, and then confirmed

after the dissertation was drafted to ensure the participants were comfortable with the pseudonyms they selected and with explicitly naming the university in the dissertation.

During our *encuentros*, the *Nepantleras* and I talked about potential risks to the research: namely, we discussed concerns about confidentiality and the risk of discovery—of being "found out" or of being misunderstood by those who read the dissertation and any work that is created after it. Though I don't remember the *Nepantleras* using the term explicitly, I introduced white supremacy as part of the lessons on BMF epistemology, which commands that BMF scholars and Latinas make persistent and conscious efforts to resist and refuse coloniality and white supremacy (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Calderon, 2014; Ayala & Contreras, 2018; Whetung & Wakefield, 2019). The action of resistance and refusal manifested in grassroots, campus activism: *rebeldía*. Though *Nepantleras* were new to the language of anticolonial theories, they were well-versed in lived experience with norms that policed their *mentes y cuerpos* and were eager to find acts of rebellion that would help free them from both named and unspoken oppressions. Along with the general concepts of White Supremacy, we shared stories that illustrated how it can manifest as white fragility when marginalized students organize to challenge institutional and colonial norms. I explicitly anticipated that there may be some who read this and dismiss it; in the spirit of our narrative group; I shared stories of some of the initiatives I mentioned in Chapter Two, initiatives that often resulted in a complicated mix of campus change that both inspired transformation and evoked the fragile reactions that the *Nepantleras* have grown used to receiving in their liminality.

Despite the risks, the students felt proud, honored, and hopeful about having authorship in contribution to the research. They noted in our GroupMe chats that they felt

"safe" explicitly naming Appalachian State University in the dissertation. Nepantleras submitted the copies of the written narratives in the analysis and representations below for group review over Thanksgiving break. Written narratives were the products of the oral storytelling processing that we worked on together over the series of the Fall 2021 semester. For the written submissions, I asked participants to share their experiences from their authentic voice; they had no thematic expectations or requirements to meet for their written narratives.

Before they submitted their written narratives in November, I reshared the project's research questions with them:

- How do institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at Appalachian State University?

AND

- How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?

Nepantleras were asked to explore these questions and decide what story they wanted to be heard or read. Our stories don't fit neatly into reference sections of traditional literature; they continue anticolonial testimony of inherited traits in resistance (Anzaldúa, 1987; Quiñonez, 2003; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). One anticolonial testimony shared from mestiza perspectives that problematize personal experiences to thread contranarrativas, contranarratives, into Latinx historia. Using a mestiza perspective, BMF readers re-examine the deficit-centric narratives presented in the multiple and transitional discourse of the Queer Latina. A BMF mestiza perspective examines the myth of la Malinche that has been used primarily by male-identifying Chicano writers for the ways it is used to oppress indigenous



women in Latinx groups. The legend of la Malinche is framed as a cautionary tale to raise awareness of internalized white supremacy in the Latinx community and to "denote the tragic self-perception" of this archetype; in the machista-centered legend of la Malinche, la Malinche is the betrayer, responsible "for selling out their people" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 259); however, a critical reading of the work understands the stories blaming of the Indian woman as inherently misogynistic and anti-indigenous.

Machista texts are extensions of coloniality that are prominent in Latinx culture because of colonization's gendered stratification that subordinates both the indigenous and the feminine. Dominating discourse surrounding Latinx experiencias emphasizes struggle—and the self-sacrifice that aids community in that struggle—as well as essentialization and erasure—and the unity within the community gained by individual suppression. Nepantlera voices support the Mestiza community and their descendants so that more identity-affirming fuerzas are introduced to the theory and internalized in our mentes y cuerpos. This dissertation, through the Nepantlera voices, shows that our fuerzas within higher education exist and thrive beyond self-sacrifice, essentialization, or erasure. The way we embody our heritage and the racialized identities that come with it empowers us with our greatest fuerzas. These narrativas are healing justice, a fuerza and act in rebeldía, transcending survival to leverage our cultural inheritance in shaping our present and transforming our futures.

### **Political Genres in Creative Writing: An Introduction to Testimonio and Corridos**

The Nepantlera narrativas selected by the participants for this dissertation were political poems and a testimonio—inspired by the Latinx literary traditions of testimonios and corridos, methodologies I explain in more detail in Chapter Five. There are a several

elements to the forms that are important to note as you read this collection of undergraduate work:

1. Both corridos and testimonios share commonality in their place as creative, political writing;
2. testimonios is a prose form, while corridos has more creative range in its lyrical space;
3. though corridistas must possess connection to Latinx indigeneity, testimonios arguably have more flexible guidelines regarding the identity of the writer;
4. testimonios must be written in first person by a writer who has lived the experiences in the story or who has been in a position to observe them closely with empathy for the narrator, and corridos are written mostly in the third person with a brief personal introduction to situate the narrator within the narrative (Gurza, 2017).
5. In both forms the writer and story must be centered in the Latinx experience, and the forms welcome liminality and intersectionality exploration in the focus and interest of amplifying experience toward justice.

Writing testimonios and corridos takes the strength to remember, to call "to mind a particular event, feeling, or action from one's past experiences" to engage in a "process of actually putting those memories back together in the present" (Dillard, 2008, p. 91).

### **Conocimientos: Relationality and Story**

Dominant narratives assume histories, ontologies, and futures for the Nepantleras involved in this research as well as the broader group of Nepantleras identifying as for those who possess liminality and refuse to be anything less than themselves. The conocimientos

process is expected to be painful, yet it is empowering; it gives us the gift of exploring, expressing, and reclaiming "cultural memories" (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 323). We see *conocimientos* occurring throughout the written narratives selected by this research project's *Nepantleras*. *Conocimientos* is evident as they unpack painful realities and make meaning from their lived experience from their perspective and in their authentic written voice. Through *testimonio* and *corridos*, the *Nepantleras* speak truths to various nodes of power operating the circumstances of their educational experiences and reclaiming sovereignty over their futures. *Conocimientos* methodology brought me to revisiting experiences, some painful ones, that have shaped my own development in the university as well as "to reclaim" these experiences with the *Nepantleras*. Together, our collective voice invites other Latinx to locate power, where normalizing narratives may claim we have none (Pour-Khorshid, 2016).

I enter this research as a differently-abled, Queer, Latina doctoral student. I am a survivor of sexual assault, thyroid disease, and cancer. BMF and X/Chicana scholars radicalize theory using *mestizaje* formations of *voz y cuerpo*; centering the body its lived experience through the empowered Latina voice retells the *Mestiza* story to "rename herself in her own image...reconnect her to her past, and to celebrate and learn to love herself" to show her alternate ways of being that distance her "from the oppression of the colonist construct whose only purpose is to debase her in order to control her" (Córdova, 1999, p.12). This graphic Latina *eidetic* captures a figurative and literal social reality of rape, silencing, and violence that many Latinas face on their higher educational journeys (Bautista, 2019, p. 51).

BMF theory and "methodology are moving beyond the goals and scope of qualitative research by inviting emotion," directed by the everyday experiences of the *Mestiza*, allowing

for the creative search and application of "nuestros cuerpos and experiences" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, pp. 257-264) in the negotiation of and the production of knowledge pertaining to identity eidetics in education (Cruz, 2001; Saldivar-Hull, 2000). Beyond identity labels and circumstance, mapping relationality is critical to decolonial imaginaries and anticolonial research. Later in this chapter, I will explore the concept of relationality further to discuss how it aided in the research in progress to support the co-constructed contra-curricular design.

The home and family are a cartographed locality in borderlands and feminista literature (Ramirez, 2019; McMahon, 2013; Villenas & Moreno, 2001; Delgado Bernal, et al. 2012). To determine the foundational research design and in preparation for engaging in multicultural, multiracial, and intergenerational research, I analyzed my relationship with the home and family; I am a descendant of European, Salvadoran, and indigenous ancestors. I grew up with mi mamá, mi hermana, mis abuelos, y mis tíos in South Florida. I was the first in our familia to be born and raised in the U.S. I remain close to my Salvadoran roots through inherited lands and privileges that have allowed me to visit my family there throughout my life.

Although I am losing my Spanish, I make a point to incorporate it into my personal and professional life through translanguaging to retain what I do know. I am also beginning to reclaim my indigeneity. One of my indigenizing practices is through the learning of the Nahuatl language. I am fascinated and empowered by the ways this language and my heritage has endured the violence of coloniality (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Bautista, 2019). (Re)learning, (re)claiming, (re)discovering "denied knowledge" about the Latina identity "is not the only quest" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 259) in BMF research. I will honor my

ancestors by continuing their legacy through my work as an activist, a writer, an educator, a third-generation doctor, and second-generation doctora. I currently reside in a rural community near where our university buildings stand. Due to the normalizing narratives that monoracialize Latinx, it's important to mention that many people label me as white because of European phenotypes that I possess and that challenge monoracializing stereotypes. I own my proximity to whiteness but do not identify as white because doing so would erase and deny my family's migration stories and my indigeneity, specifically the influence my mestiza mother and her family had in my life as well as the many fuerzas I inherited from them and our intergenerational survival.

### **¿Como Seramxs?**

Nepantleras in the group are mestiza and/or possess all races (black, indigenous, and white); they use many different “labels” and terms to describe their ethnicity, and neither of us feel like we have landed on a term that makes us feel seen as a whole; some describe themselves in their ethnicity: Latinx, Latine, Latina, Mexican(a), Cuban, Dominican(a), Boricua, Salvi, Cuba-riqueña. Everyone in the group was assigned female at birth, though the call for Montañeras—Nepantleras with a Mountaineer identity—was open to trans women also. The Nepantleras all identify as nonbinary or are questioning their gender identity; they all identify as Queer, with most of the group identifying as pansexual. They came to me with hopes of finding a community among their intersectionality. Though we lost two, we found a few and have continued to grow in this bond—somos individuales pero somos juntos en comunidad. In total, there are four individuals who chose to include their narratives in this dissertation: myself, SI, Fire God, and Pérez.

## **Core Group Curriculum**

In this research, I have taken on the *metología de cariño, conocimientos, encuentros*, and Latinx political narrative as critical *trenzas* in the broader borderlands *trenzas y mestizaje* methodology selected for the framework of this research. In *cariño*, a primary role I possess with these students is as their mentor and guidepost during their enrollment at Appalachian State University (de los Ríos, 2013). Participants actively engage in decision-making around the curriculum and pedagogical foundation. Through storytelling in *conocimientos* (Calderon, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2002) and *encuentros* methodologies—conversations and meetings/gatherings where critical dialogue is shared (Ayala et al., 2020)—I was able to discover individual and collective interests in order to work with the students in shaping what they frequently referred to as a "safe space." Beyond the core BMF concepts of *coaticue*, *testimonio*, *corridos*, *pláticas*, and *encuentros*, all participants worked in contradiction to the norms of their university curriculum. In co-constructing our contra-curriculum, we used the epistemologies of BMF as a pedagogical home as we decided on platforms for communication, group norms, supplemental content/materials, and events for the group that expressed as well as honored shared values, needs, and goals. Offering a counter-curricular space was conducive to processing our counter-narratives, which still included signs of deficit-based (neo)liberatory theories but extended with and beyond the narrative; distancing ourselves from the colonized curriculum, we processed ancestral trauma and pain without the omission or minimization of the *fuerzas*, or cultural advantages, that we carry as well. Our narratives are a processing of our experiences toward healing and justice for our intersectionality group. They are college students at the university, where I have been working and/or studying for the last five years.

Below, I describe each individual participant in narrative form. These narratives are a testimonio from my perspective and experience. They are written expressions of how I was able to know them and learn from them with my positionality in the group as their mentor and from a recollection of their shared stories. Each student was given the opportunity to review and offer feedback or suggestions for changes before the work was submitted for publication. I accepted any suggestions the participants gave for representing themselves, our group, or the analysis. Where applicable, I provide appropriate credit for original ideas in text.

***Participants: A testimonio in Positionality***

**María Conchita (She/They/Ella).** I had done all I could to prepare. As much as one could in the middle of a pandemic, in the middle of a job search, in the middle of a divorce. I had invited so much change in my life at such a critical time, I questioned my sanity, my worthiness.

In all the ways my identity felt messy, I had spent my life worrying about being seen as incomplete. My studies, this work, had helped me see the whole of me, and I hoped to share, exchange, learn, heal, and grow with a new generation. I feared causing harm. Generation Z has grown up with many instances of white female appropriation of race and ethnicity; though I have direct claim to Latinidad and indigeneity through my immediate family lineage, I knew my Anglican-presenting phenotypes might trigger feelings that threaten the security of the group. I had to trust that my cariño, authenticity, the knowledge, and communication skills I possessed were enough to establish a foundation of trust that the group could build on.

I prayed to los ancestros to guard me and to protect me from the harmful effects of imposter syndrome that would surely come with each step forward. I belong where I am because I am: an affirmation I consume since writing my prospectus. I am choosing to step into my power, if not for myself than for these impressive womxn.

**SI (They/She).** SI is a non-traditional student who is in their late twenties. They shared with the group that they are pansexual. They radiate great love and a desire to have that love returned. They are several years older than the others in the group and only five years younger than I am. This didn't seem to be an area of concern for anyone in the group; the only person who struggled with popular culture references was I—and that is often the case even in my own age group! SI had recent traumas that seemed to bring them to the group in search of community connection. Having recently left what they often refer to as a chapter of their lives behind in an entirely different region of the United States, SI felt the sting of isolation and the bitterness that comes from being on the fringe of many if not all their social groups. They expressed not fitting in with other transfer students, with cis-women, with the Queer community, not even with Latinos/es/xs because of how dominant the use of Spanish is in this part of the U.S. They introduced themselves as not knowing much Spanish.

As the group continued, I noticed their comprehension was greater than those words had implied. SI communicated a lot of personal insecurities and doubts for how they categorized and fit in with the "Latino" identity. Though in my perspective, there was no salient reason this person might not fit within my understanding of the term, in my role as mentor, I held space for the complexity of this emotion. As a person with my own complex intersectionality, I could relate to the emotions communicated and wondered what



experiences shaped SI's insecurities within their respective communities. I also turned inward after hearing their story.

How many times had I said similar words? I wondered if others ached to comfort me and embrace me in my Latinidad, to assure me of a reality I had to arrive at on my own. I inhaled deeply. Images of each Latina who I knew had *seen* me flashed through me, and I felt comfort, pride, and the soreness that comes when a wound is first mended. I wanted that feeling for SI. Over the course of the semester, I watched in support of the bruja y chingona emerging in and through SI. I witnessed them being kinder to themselves, seeing themselves as belonging in their community, advocating for justice.

Although the group was certainly a source for intersectionality development. It was definitely encouraged and implied that the students take their experiences with the storytelling and apply them in their own lives, outside the group. SI did this by seeking out new ways to connect with the Latinx community in Boone. They had already had a Latino friend who was also a transfer student with whom they connected regularly. In addition to that friendship, they sought out cultural events and organizations to meet other Latinx.

For one event, SI reached out to all the Nepantleras for support. They wanted to go to Latin Night in downtown Boone but wanted to go with someone else who had their intersectionality. One of the Nepantleras was already scheduled to work, and the other was not old enough to meet the 21+ requirement, so I committed to going. Since SI was bringing their partner, I decided to bring someone as well. This was my first time bringing a same-sex partner out where I knew students would be, so—although I don't think anyone but me knew—this was an incredibly meaningful and healing moment for me. Me and my date,

Christina, met them a little after 10:00 p.m. for a double date in downtown Boone, North Carolina.

Because I know so many of the Latinx students, it was a challenge to be so visible in a social setting like that. We had a great time. It was peace-giving to see SI connecting with their heritage in Boone. We danced, laughed, and I watched SI participate in popular Chicano social dances that—in my identity as a Salvadoran-American, I have never learned. SI joined in on the gritos and affirmed their place and space. SI participated flawlessly in the dances. SI knew every word to every traditional Chicano canción, even the corridos that played while we were there. It was a magical moment for me. We spoke to other Latina students there. One who was in the writing program that I was about to start teaching in; she danced with our group for a while and expressed excitement for the prospect of a Latina faculty member joining the department. Another Latina asked if I was Cuban, which is a very common identity people assign to me because of my light features and my level of proficiency in Spanish. I let them know that my mother is from El Salvador, and they were very enthusiastic about pupusas in response. This is a microaggression that occurs in the Latinx community that I have grown to accept. Pupusas are good, and—hopefully—someday people will know more about nations in the Northern Triangle than just our food.

There were also white people in the crowd, not just my date and SI's partner. SI and I commiserated on the MANY ways these individuals commanded space at an event that wasn't designed for them. One young, white woman questioned, "What is this?" with a face of disgust in reaction to a corrido. Two white men mocked the gritos as they came on over the speakers. White women frequently pushed us and bumped into us as we danced. Because of my age and future professional status with the university, I did not feel comfortable or safe

addressing this aggression. SI did, and refused to move. This impressed me. I am still learning how to affirm my right to physical space in interracial company. SI and I both expressed before, during, and after a wish that they had played a broader variety of diverse regional trap—a genre which includes deep and meaningful music that is fun to dance to from phenomenal poets and musicians from across Latin America—not just the U.S., Mexico or the islands.

Overall, we left on a positive vibe, as the undergrads—and I—would say. We had connected and engaged with people from our community. Though white people attempted to occupy space, they did not dominate it, and we enjoyed time immersed in our culture in our little town—if only for a night.

**Pérez (They/She).** Pérez and I met at a local café for our first one-on-one, instead of a virtual meeting. Because there aren't many places to sit outside at the location we chose, we walked across the street around campus. We shared stories about and talked about the group. In that meeting, I learned that they are interested in starting their own childcare/summer program. Later in the semester, after a relationship of trust was built, I offered to have them join the board of my nonprofit so that they could begin networking and building some professional experiences. They were very excited at this prospect and have since made some plans to organize their day care to begin shortly after they graduate in May 2023.

Pérez has the desire and capacity to be spiritually present in our storytelling encuentros. They have a strong bond with their mother and their partner. Pérez shared in their stories that their partner is an atypical white male who was very supportive of Pérez and their identity and that he was influential in encouraging them and supporting them in joining the narrative constructive.

After exploring and processing through their storytelling and personal journaling, Pérez identifies as a Cuba-riqueña. This honors both their Cuban and Puerto Rican heritage. Throughout our storytelling, Pérez expressed insecurities identifying as a Latina. They felt that, because of their lack of Spanish proficiency, their U.S. citizenship, and their gender fluidity, they could not claim this identity in the way most other Latinas could. They told stories that highlighted that race had come up historically in family dynamics, specifically in the way phenotypes present themselves with some family members being lighter in skin-tone than others. They seemed to identify among the lighter skin-tone group in their family. As with SI's stories, I held space for and resonated with all these complexities. I appreciated the ways in which Pérez was able to show up in our fireside pláticas with vulnerability.

At our third encuentro, I inquired if Pérez identified as being an empath. This term was familiar to them, but they asked for clarification. In this moment, I was very grateful I had branched outside of the Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist framework in locating identity-centered sources for embarking on this journey with the Nepantleras. We delved into some of the psychological healing frameworks I learned about in the process of preparing for this dissertation. Some of the sources in healing frameworks fell within Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism, and others were adjacent to it. We discussed the power of empathy, and I was able to offer some resources to extend information on how empathy is created in people who experience or inherit trauma. This information helps create strength-based building blocks in those who experience trauma that debunk deficit-based narratives that often emphasize the pathologization of Latina experience with trauma. I shared summaries of the data on social trends that are more prevalent in Latinx families as a result of (neo)colonialism, which names and identifies the source of violence and cause of harm (Cerdeña et al., 2021; Garcia, 2019).

This seemed to resonate with Pérez; many of the themes surrounding these discussions were featured either directly or indirectly in their narrative contribution.

Pérez was employed by the university in two part-time student positions. They worked in a campus coffee shop, and they also worked as an R.A. I was very impressed by the ease at which they managed their schedule while maintaining success in their clubs, organizations, classes, and social circles. They shared this information with the group in kindness, humility, and graciousness. They never compared their value or abilities to others in the ways I am interpreting here by labeling them as having had success, but this was an observation I noted—as their chosen framing of their stories when sharing their accomplishments with the group parallels Marianista trends that value humility, explored in feminista literature (Pappa, 2019).

Pérez is a natural writer. In our fireside storytelling exchanges, they often shared written works from their journal. I recognized their work as poetry with my previous experience as a literary editor in the field of creative writing.

At the start of the semester, Pérez was the only participant who was in a committed partnership. The sexual orientation, gender and sexuality terms they felt comfortable identifying with—at the time—were nonbinary, pansexual, and monogamous. I learned a lot from Pérez about my own sexual orientation; through their stories, I gained a better conceptual and contextual understanding of pansexuality. In my interactions with them, I realized that this term is also something that I feel comfortable identifying with.

Of all of us in the group, Pérez seemed to have the strongest interest in spirituality outside of a world religion. They engaged in a regular spiritual practice, reading tarot and

expanding their understanding and knowledge of Taino culture. They often brought this knowledge with them to the fireside pláticas.

**Fire God (She/Ella—Still Questioning).** The Fire God is the youngest member of the group. They turn 21 in Spring 2022. Because of their level of emotional maturity, this age difference did not bother the other undergrads, nor did it bother the Fire God. I first met the Fire God in a virtual dialogue, coordinated by the university's counseling center. My first impressions were that we shared the blessing and curse of possessing a face that revealed our unverbally expressed emotions. The topic of the dialogue was "code switching," and it was coordinated for the Latin Hispanic Alliance and the Latinx faculty/staff to exchange their experiences. I was the only Queer and femme present in the faculty and staff representation, which included myself and two male staff members. This event occurred before my resignation from my position as Assistant Director for the Scholars with Diverse Abilities Program. The two Latinos present were cis-gendered and neurotypical naturalized citizens. They expressed the benefits of codeswitching. Based on the expression of the students, and the number of videos that began to turn off, I could intuit that others felt similarly about the perspectives being shared. When it came to be my turn to speak, I validated the historical experiences that benefited from code switching in order to survive the violence of colonization. I acknowledged the current and ongoing existence of colonization, even and especially in the university. I also challenged the perspective that code switching is a benefit to the community or a strength that we should continue wielding. I problematized the concepts for the ways in which it affirms white supremacy in the institutional discourse. In response to my comments, one of the Latinos expressed that—for him—he did not feel a need to create space in the institution because he had other spaces where he belonged off

campus. I used that as an opportunity to point out the gender disparities between the students and the university personnel on the call; there were more female-identifying students but a dominant number of male-identifying personnel. I acknowledged the wisdom in what the Latino shared about having a work life balance and creating spaces outside the system when a sense of belonging within the system is not present; I also affirmed the challenges that poses for intersectionalities with multiple positions of subordinated identities. I gave examples from my personal life at the time; when I am at work—I pointed out—my boss is a white female; her boss is a white male. Every week, I experience microaggressions; every day, I am overworked and underpaid, and then—I revealed—I go home to a husband who loves me but who does not proportionately share in domestic responsibilities. Unlike the Latinos on the call, I had no space where I could rest in equality or in a position of inherent social power—unless I were to decide to exit my full-time position and or my family role as a wife. Interestingly enough, since then, I have done both.

This story is essential to understanding my experience with Fire God because an essential core of the Fire God's strength is in their ability to observe and discern. I shared my email address in the chat for any students who wished to engage further. A few reached out to thank me for my participation, and Fire God reached out within minutes of the meeting ending.

Hi,

I was in the code-switching meeting. I ...wanted to say thank you for being there and co-hosting, I honestly didn't know there were Hispanic faculty at Appstate,

and it was very helpful to hear your experiences and perspectives. The meeting, but you specifically, made me feel heard and understood, so thank you very much.

With gratitude and respect,

FG

Months later, when I sent out the call for participants, I was so pleased to see their email and survey submission to indicate their interest. For marginalized educators, seeing any sign of lasting impact made in a student's life because of your emotional and intellectual labor is motivating.

The Fire God and I met online in a virtual meeting on zoom to talk more about the group. My first impressions from this one-on-one was that they seemed to have a very strong handle on their identity as a lesbian. They spoke of their identity as a woman of faith, specifically of a dogmatic Christian religion. They were very close with their family and have alluded to some toxicity present between their parents on more than one account. Their ethnicity originates in the Dominican Republic and Mexico. Very early on in the pláticas, Fire God shared with us that they recently experienced a break up from their first love. The parting went badly and was complicated, with the partner ending up married to a man.

At some point in the semester, I broke ties with my biological father who I believe is a narcissist. I contributed stories in our encuentros, surrounding my experience in this narcissistic bond. Fire God asked what narcissism was. For this, I added a disclaimer that I don't know too many qualified sources, that much of my knowledge on the topic is from therapy and referred resources I have encountered in my therapeutic treatment. With that disclaimer, I shared with my experience what my understanding of a narcissist was. Fire God



became visibly uncomfortable and expressed sadness. They realized that this may have been something they have experienced. This was something the full group had experienced and had processed enough to be able to show up for Fire God. We continued the evening, holding space for these complex feelings. We ate, listened to music, and processed feelings we felt safe sharing.

Even though Fire God was more than willing to share vulnerable stories, their energy was one of positivity, light, and comedy. They have a brilliant sense of humor and sharp wit that they take pride in. They felt more comfortable owning their comedic skills than they did in some of their other strengths—which I perceived as including a high intellect, high levels of emotional maturity, wisdom, among other cultural wealths that were evident in the way they cared for others.

The Fire God was very edifying in their verbal communication, frequently expressing gratitude for the ways in which I showed up and helped secure a safe space for the group. I know that a lot of this is true, but it is actions of vulnerability like that expressed in the narrative descriptions of the participants above that made the space sacred.

For their undergraduate journey, the Fire God seems focused on looking for professional mentorship, which I have offered to them. In this capacity, I have connected them with some local organizations that might give them some experiences to see where their interests are. Another journey they shared with us in our pláticas is that they are not sure what their gender identity is. They once felt confident in their identity as a female, but now they aren't so sure. They are growing in their understanding of this term and who they are. They expressed that when I have used the singular they in reference to them, they have really felt seen. Though they still use she/her/hers in most settings—because of the feedback they

have given me—when we are in the safety of the Nepantlera group, I refer to them using the singular “they” pronouns.

### ***Group Structure***

For the majority of our meetings, we met outside by the fire at my home, which is just outside of the university town limits. The fire was set by the Fire God, who found the exercise something of somatic therapy for them. They were nicknamed the Fire God by the other Nepantleras. At the first fireside meeting, the group was having such a great time that they wanted to stay past the allotted time, so I proposed the option that we could continue planning to meet monthly or we could plan to meet biweekly—with the goal of one meeting each month being specific for learning about storytelling and writing. The latter routine was something the whole group wanted, so we agreed to that. As the weather got colder, the group met once virtually in November for our encuentro on testimonios, and the final encuentro for pláticas to read and analyze nuestra narrativas was December 8, 2021. Other than the last two meetings, all meetings were scheduled in advance so that the Nepantleras could make and hold space in their calendars for the group.

### **Figure 1**

*Fireside Encuentros y Pláticas*



The group began with six participants who committed in writing through email or text to join the narrative constructive. One of the original students interested never showed up to

the meetings; the other student who did not complete the constructive Fall 2021 activities left the group after attending three meetings. Although she never provided an explanation for her exit, it can be reasonably intuited that she had too many commitments to balance with her many responsibilities. Among her responsibilities, she had a full-time job, shared a vehicle with family who lived outside the county and was enrolled full-time at the university; she was also in her final term of enrollment. This description is not an uncommon one for Latinx students and aligns with feminista literature that identifies the Marianista “struggle with the ‘good Latina woman’ cultural stereotype,” which expects Latinas “to prioritize family needs over their own” (Pappa, 2019, p.4). This stereotype can conflict with broader Latinx/e/ cultural expectations of “hard work over everything and compliance” when being hard working and compliant within the college experience means diverging from family roles (Pappa, 2019, p. 76).

### **Encuentros**

The call for participants included an agreement form. This form outlined the commitments they agreed upon by continuing with the group. Nepantleras had the option to sign these documents for their records, particularly if any of their classes or programs offered extra credit for such group involvement and if they had any concerns over their security with involvement. Because the study was not considered one that needed IRB purview, this documentation was a courtesy to the students in respect of their time and energy as well as to clarify group expectations. Some of the students heard of the opportunity through my professional contacts—many who also advise marginalized students in their undergraduate and graduate enrollment—who also received a copy of the communications. My professional contacts shared news of the group, campus-wide.

The university website still has samples of these materials available for public view (McDowell, 2022). There was also a push on social media—namely a student-only Facebook classifieds group. This post contained an image of a flyer created for the initial campus mailing and communications push with less content in the written message. Those reading the message were prompted to email my Appalachian campus account. Only one student who heard about the group from Facebook reached out with interest in the group and communicated plans to attend but never did.

Before the first official encuentros with the group of Nepantleras, I formed cariño bonds through initial one-on-one connections between myself and each member/participant. For these encuentros, I met with all participants virtually on Zoom to engage in pláticas—except Pérez, who I was able to meet with in person because they arrived in Boone early before the semester for their job. These virtual pláticas did include some prepared guiding questions, the wording of which was adjusted to fit the organic flow of the conversation. Topics discussed during these virtual encuentros included: how the student identifies, their understanding of expectations, the student's intentions or interest in joining the group, what needs surrounding anonymity and time each student would have for Fall semester, and any communication preferences the student had for engaging individually or as a group. Through these virtual meetings, combined with interest form responses helped us co-select the time and location that best fit all our schedule and personal needs. That time was Fridays from 4-5 p.m.

### ***Familiarizando***

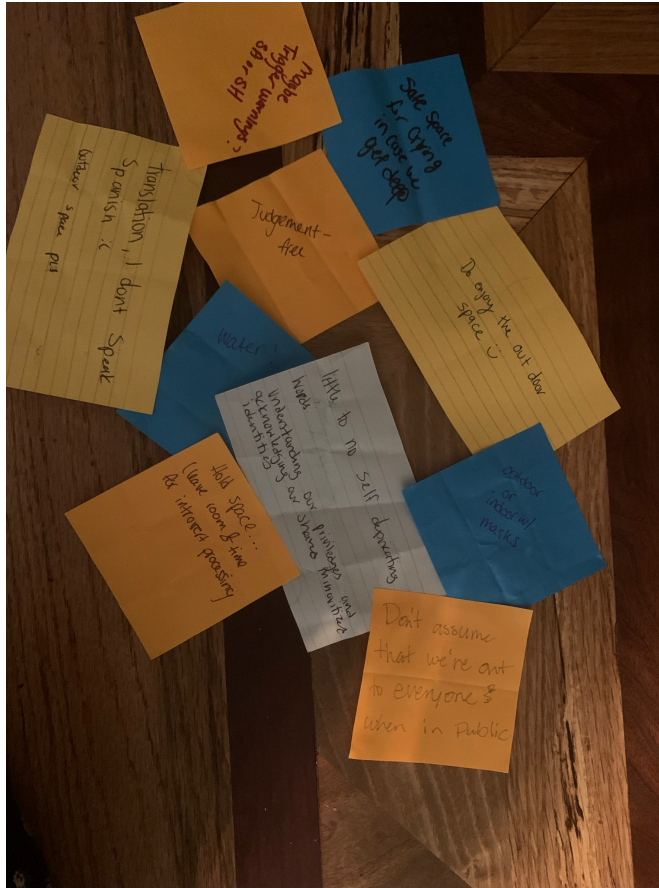
We, the Nepantleras and I, met once before the start of the Fall 2021 semester. We all voted through a Google form and follow up GroupMe polls to coordinate logistics for this

pre-semester gathering. These methods helped us decide as a group to meet in the open air at a park, due to pandemic concerns. I held two tables for the group in case the students wished to remain 6 -feet apart, even in the open air. I left a large hand sanitizer dispenser at one table, along with individually packaged snacks. Pérez arrived early and had name tags with them so that each Nepantlera could take one to write down the names they would like to be called by and their pronouns. As each student arrived, they took a name tag and applied them on their shirts. After they finished with their name tag, I asked each Nepantlera to take a “thank you” card and some index cards or post-it notes in their colors of choice. After they selected their preferred color index cards, I directed them to a basket, filled with pens. I had prepared written notes with instructions for the writing exercises, which I shared with the Nepantleras aloud as well as in text through our GroupMe chat. The text read:

For the "thank you" cards, write a note either to your future self or to your ancestors. We will open these cards in May 2022 to give us some room for personal growth between now and then. In May or June, we can meet to share what we wrote with one another as a group. For the index cards, write down anything you can think of that you need in order to show up authentically in this group. We will use these cards to share with each other anonymously some ideas about how to make this group a welcoming space that challenges our perspectives but holds space for the ways we differ.

**Figure 2**

*Participant Needs Notecards*



Below, I typed out the handwritten letters each of the participants wrote in contribution to the group and to their own respective healing. They represent their knowledge and strengths before engaging with their new Nepantlera community. Nepantleras embodied fuerzas in common, as shown in these, their oral storytelling, and written Nepantlera narrativas. These fuerzas are shared, disembodied from the work of each respective author, in this and the following chapter. Chapters Five through Seven connect these themes to Nepantlera conocimientos and culture. Bullet points transition the reader visually from one letter to the next so that the individual voices and text flow without disruption or

disembodiment from nuestra voz, our collective voice. The author of each letter is shared either as a digital signature that parallels the format chosen by the author in their handwritten letter or in parenthesis if no written signature was originally included.

**Letters to Our Future Selves.**

•

Dear Future Self,

I am proud already of who you are because you have taken the time you needed to begin the healing process and work in support of others with the energy you have cultivated.

<3, María Conchita

•

A thank you to my future self,

For still being here and pushing through when times are tough. For providing to not just family but friends, too, even when you don't have enough for yourself

You remain strong, fierce & beautiful through it all, even when you don't feel like it. Thank you <3 love you <3 give the kitties a kiss for me <3. (SI, 2021)

- To the future Fire God, thank you for trying your best to do the right thing and love yourself. Others may not understand, but it's okay. You are valid, and you are loved. No one can know what is best for you, only you can. Thank you for choosing yourself.

—Love

Fire God (2021)

### *Letters to the Ancestors*

- Mis abuelos queridos,

Como te extraño. I am writing today in hopes that, as I embark on this next chapter of my life, I can continue to have your guidance, and the guidance of our ancestors along the way.

I would like to think that the person I have become is making you proud and extending our family legacy—that, despite my distance from our lands, from our language, from you, that you have somehow remained with me and I with you...

Papi didn't just leave me with a legacy for leadership and justice, for creativity and peace, for organizing and language; mi abuelita, Conchita, didn't just leave me with a passion for education and a sense of self-worth; my mother didn't just pass on the ability to make space for myself wherever I choose to be, or the courage to adapt and grow in any environment. No, you all modeled what it was like to be seen, nurtured, and developed not just on



the grounds of a shared goal or vision—but on shared principle and values for life, healing, and equity.

<3, María Conchita

•

To those who loved me before I loved me

To the ones who have loved me most,

Thank you for the whirlwind of love and care you gave me before you knew my soul. I know your life was not easy. I know you wanted better things for our family and I hope that my life has brought you peace and calm.

I do what I can to honor you every day. I learn more about you and myself every day. I hope that you are proud of who I am. Thank you for your energy that you give me. How could I thank you enough for your life? <3 You.

(Pérez, 2021)

### ***El Primer Encuentro***

After the Nepantleras finished writing, I had a box prepared to store the cards and a basket for the index cards. Before drawing the index cards, I began the encuentro by thanking all members for their time and interest in the narrativa group. I shared a recap of the materials that had captured their interest, an overview of the schedule and minimum commitments of the group, and reminded them that they could exit participation at any time. To introduce everyone to the group, I asked everyone to share their name, pronouns, major or concentration, and what brought them to the group. Some of these details are documented

later in the chapter, where resonations and distinctions that came up during encuentros are analyzed.

After introductions, we went through each index card with written needs and preferences for group norms that were documented anonymously. Pérez volunteered to write these down on a large, portable dry-erase paper I brought with me. On that board, the following norms are included: "Outdoors [weather permitting], confidential space, safe space for emotions, agua, self-love, translations, understanding privilege, acknowledging marginalities, trigger/content warnings, leave mental space, no assuming people are out."

The participants didn't feel safe meeting at the university or in public. In troubleshooting alternative solutions to meeting on campus, I used *cariño* methodology—which I describe further in Chapter Five. *Cariño* centers the needs of a distinct group. As a methodology used in a broader *trenzas y mestizaje* research project, *cariño* guided ethical decisions to prioritize participant needs with respect and relation to their lived experience during their enrollment; one of the participants recommended meeting at someone's home. Because I value healthy boundary-setting in my relationships, I had some concerns for personal boundaries and safety in the pandemic with these requests that had to be weighed with relationality. Factors considered in the final decision to meet outdoors at my home for the storytelling hours: we were all adults at the start of the project; no alcohol was being served or even anywhere available on the premises, as I have been sober for over a year; all participants unanimously preferred this option; I was no longer employed by the university, and the university or other public spaces did not offer the environment we needed to meet the stated needs above in a safe and equitable way for everyone in the group. As an anticolonial

project in the Borderlands, this research used Leigh Patel's (2016) seminal Decolonizing Educational Research to create a mestizaje for the cariño trenza in relationality.

This mestizaje in relationality aided in adapting this research, centering "well-being and balance in the face of contradictory Western frameworks..." which perceives the university as a safe center for intergenerational engagement but ignores the geographic as well as relational mapping relevant to group organizing. Relationality values:

Knowledge and practice emanating from knowledge is always in context. Seeing all knowledge as contextual and shaping context is neither to capitulate the shape of educational research to contextual realities, such as the prominence of certain definitions of science, nor to hold it overly powerful and agentic in its own right. It is tied to and ties, binds up with humans, human history, physical objects, the planet, and the intentional and unintentional practices of all of these entities. (p. 51)

In consideration of the participants needs, the current environment, and the tradition of coloniality and oppression that the university and public spaces in the town of Boone represents for the Nepantleras, I offered up my home for the encuentros. This offered an outdoor space that satisfied all the group's expressed needs to curate a safe space, where we could meet with optimal adherence to COVID-19 safety recommendations. There, the group had access to things like food and water to meet their biological needs so that they could feel ready to show up emotionally for the storytelling and learning.

## **Chapter 4**

### **La Plática:**

#### **Authentic Analysis and Representation**

“I change myself, I change the world” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 70).

This chapter focuses on the final encuentro, where the Neplantleras engaged in a plática surrounding their written narratives. The chapter provides for context for these narratives, the narratives, and a summary of the group analysis, using a Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist lens. Neplantleras picked their audience: others like them, who experience intersectionality with gender, race, and sexual orientation; they had full authority of their written narrative from start to finish as well as the experience of four months of encuentros and storytelling in Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism to equip them with methodological structure to keep the distinct narratives interwoven with one another. After writing independently, we each reviewed individually over this scheduled break, then reconvened as a group December 8 in person. For this last meeting, a GroupMe poll was sent out in the GroupMe Group Chat to gauge interest in meeting at a local cafe or taking an excursion to Asheville. The participants unanimously voted to take a day trip to Asheville to analyze our narratives at a tea house there.

Once in Asheville, we shared a meal. Some members expressed periods of financial insecurity during the semester, so to alleviate any feelings of burden, shame, or guilt that come with social environments that include eating and/or spending money, the menu to the venue we would visit was shared in advance, along with my VENMO account. The idea was that I would pay for the group in the moment, and participants would bring the amount in cash or Venmo that they would be able to contribute. Some members paid more, some less

than what they ordered; they paid as they could, and I covered the rest of the expenses.

Cariño is a methodology in community care, and I was very proud of the sensitivity and care each of the participants showed for others in the group so that all of us could enjoy this time together without stigma.

### **Nuestra Voz: We Mol Pelaina (Lencan for will speak) from the Margins**

After eating, I had brought printed copies of participant narratives, and shared a link in the GroupMe to my poems. We each took turns reading, not in the order listed below. In real time, Fire God volunteered to start, followed by SI and myself; Pérez closed the plática with their reading. Below, I will include a brief introduction to the narratives read by the students. The written versions of the narratives may have had alterations and edits since the reading. Any changes made were with the approval or at the request of the participants in order for the intent of their message to be communicated and amplified to their intended audience.

These narratives are benchmark representations of the Nepantleras: how they want their voice to be heard and how they want to be seen in the context of what they are experiencing during their college experience at Appalachian State University. The late bell hooks (1989) was one inspiration for this research in her call to action for those within the margins to speak in resistance, in a dissonant discourse; she suggested that marginality—which includes the in-between spaces of identity that liminality encompasses—is "a position and place of resistance" (hooks, 1990, p.342). The collection of written narratives shared by the Nepantleras below is *nuestra voz*, responding to hooks' feminist imaginary to "greet you as liberators..." as those "in the margins...who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of dominance but a site of resistance" (p. 343). Hooks addresses "liberators" not currently in the

marginal spaces of resistance—those allies and co-conspirators seeking diversity, equity, inclusion but who may be working in dominant discourses or marginal spaces that replicate them rather than resist them. To these "liberators," she implores:

This is an intervention. I am writing to you. I am speaking from a place in the margins where I am different—where I see things differently. Speaking from the margins. Speaking from resistance. I open a book...A message from that space in the margins that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves. Enter that space. Let us meet there. (hooks, 1990, p. 343)

Similarly, these narratives—though some include topics related to pain—speak from a place of resistance and dissonance to normative discourse. The Nepantleras taking the self-directed steps required for this research to (un)learn, share, create, express, discover and decide the narrative they have shared in contribution to the literature is part of their individual journey. Among the self-directed decisions made for their narratives, Nepantleras decided that the term *Latine* was a better fit for how they defined themselves. Therefore, for the remainder of this chapter and for respective analytical elements of the conclusion, "Latine" is incorporated into the text. "Latine" is used, in most contexts, interchangeably with *Latinx*. The term, "Latine" utilizes semantics within normative colonial linguistics in Latin America, which makes it easier to pronounce and "fit in" with spoken Spanish. Because the undergraduate Nepantlera participants have a strong affinity for the Spanish language, they decided this term best defined them. For the purpose of indigenizing research, I continue to problematize colonial blindness in Spanish linguistics as well as in the language of identity development. I encourage readers, especially those with liminality, to find and apply ways to queer and indigenize colonial language.

The anticolonial practice of storytelling that led to these written narratives for—according to the Nepantleras and the scholars framing the research—is healing justice (Chioneso et al., 2020; Bautista, 2019). As chapter one of this dissertation outlined, higher education—especially for rural PWIs like Appalachian State University—is at a critical juncture in its progress to supporting equity. Though not every submission explicitly mentions the university, these narratives work as research texts in BMF exploration to suggest the institutional normalizing narratives that may be influencing the Queer Latina experience during their enrollment at Appalachian State University. More specifically, the narratives are a healing methodology, an expressive art from the voice of the liminality in response to the second research question, which asks, "How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?"

### ***SI, Free Verse: Fight Club Lyrical Narratives***

In the group analysis of SI's work, SI asked us if we noticed that the font size was unusually small. Most of us had not. "I did that intentionally," she said, and I affirmed the style choice, which reflects the minimization that often occurs in Latinx cuerpos y mentes. As a result, the font size in the publication of this piece within this work has remained reduced in comparison to the rest of the text, to honor the Nepantlera's style choice as a concrete poetic symbol that is significant to the message of the work. SI expressed to the group that these poems were their stories in progress, the stories that emerged when they answered the questions: "What's blocking you? What's keeping you from telling your story?" SI submitted four poems to the group. All four of these poems are included in this section; however, the participants selected three of SI's poems to focus on for the discussion and analysis: "Naïve," "Roots," and "How does anyone know?" For these three poems, a brief

summary of the group analysis, exchanged during the final Fall 2021 encuentro and plática will be shared after the presentation of the respective piece.

**naïve.**

Every time I do something wrong,  
or someone I trusted hurts me. I think  
this is because I allow people in  
too much. *You're so naïve, Sammy—*

My sister said to me as I cried  
in my room as a child. And that stuck  
around in my head,  
longer than I feel it should have.

In my life, I've heard her voice 4 times  
already. Of course, the first time when she  
initially was upset with me.

The second was when I was so in love  
with this man, who wasn't ready for what I  
wanted. And when he left  
to start my dreams with another woman,  
I cried; *you're so naïve, Sammy.*

Then again, when my next lover spoke  
a world of promises but brought sorrow.



I remember he slept on the bed  
while I silently cried on the bathroom  
floor next to my cat, bleeding from my  
medically-induced miscarriage.

*You're so naïve, Sammy.*

All I wanted was to feel loved.

It always ends the same.

I am always the one to blame.

*You're so naïve, Sammy.*

**"Naïve" Analysis.** This poem is a representation of one possible answer in response to the second research question, "How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at App State?" Liminality, according to Borderlands theory, is the identity "in-between" identity categories. As an identity, liminality serves to challenge norms and question binaries; it is a cultural coming-of-age, emerging from and navigating between multiple social spheres. SI identifies as nonbinary Latine with feminine energy. Their work shares the voice of a womxn in transition from child to adult, in that liminal space where identity is being explored. The poem is expressing the subject's experiences from a high-level to show the gradual emotional growth through the work. The other two participants expressed experiencing, in response to this piece, both resonance and dissonance to topics brought up in the work. Everyone in the group could relate to feelings of guilt and shame brought upon by self-blame with roots in childhood trauma. We each identified words that, if we replaced "naïve," we would see ourselves more clearly reflected in the lines. Fire God expressed, "For me, it would be, 'You're so sensitive, Fire God...' that's what I've been

told," whereas Pérez felt "dramatic" is the term that comes up for them when she is in a similar emotional state.

Though the institution is not the cause of the childhood traumas their students pack with them when they enroll in college, the question of how institutions reinforce the cycle of self-blame and cultural or emotional shame in students begins to emerge after reading these raw reflections of the participants' emotional processing.

**Weight of Family.**

It surprises me that there is such  
negativity to a heavier  
body in Hispanic households. I don't  
feel like I should blame just that for my  
eating disorders and body  
dysmorphia, but I do feel like it  
contributed heavily. I stayed  
3 months in Mexico and came back  
looking like a new person. My tía,  
whose life revolves around looks, whispered  
loudly to me. "Oh, Sammy, you lost  
so much weight! You look so good;  
that's amazing! I  
don't like fat people."

Not only was I just 16, but she  
said this as my two  
other cousins, who were heavier, had  
just sat down in the room to eat. I now

realize we are a family  
of self-projection. I blamed myself  
for eating and looking how I did.  
But I see, it was how they were raised  
that is why they acted the way they did.  
This isn't to say, *get over it*.

Emotions you feel are valid, and I  
wish I had that validation then, but  
now I see  
I am in charge of healing  
myself. At times, I realize  
this is the generation of mental  
forgiveness. Our parents or guardians  
did not have the chance to heal. It is  
a lot to ask of ourselves,  
but we deserve to feel

validated  
and happy.

### **How Does Anyone Know?**

How does everyone know  
who they want to be?  
For the longest, I assumed I knew.

Once I moved away from my family—  
this time by choice—I realized I have

no idea at all.

The seclusion of a new state, new town,  
new school, and a global pandemic has  
allowed me to be alone to reflect.

I did not need the pandemic,  
but it did speed things up—realizing  
I was raised with misogynistic  
and homophobic ideologies

Although it was not mainly in my  
immediate family who portrayed this,  
the community of others  
I surrounded myself with did  
if not upfront about it,  
then in microaggressions.

My want to fit in blinded me  
of my own values. I am now seeing  
there is no timeframe for self-  
discovery; I'm 28 and have  
just started to scratch the surface. I have  
patience with myself; I was raised by  
people who never dealt with their trauma.  
I'm learning to allow myself to  
love who I want  
and look how

I want,  
regardless of fitting in  
the box. Putting a timeframe on this is  
unrealistic.

Although I cannot change my past,  
I am in charge of what happens next.

**"How Does Anyone Know" analysis.** Although I did not insert myself in the selections for analysis, I was very pleased that SI wanted to discuss this one. What was expressed during our day-trip/excursion to Asheville—and is also reflected in Borderlands literature—was the figurative world of intergenerational and family traumas Nepantleras navigate that only adds to the usual challenges associated with the typical college experience (Cerdeña et al., 2021; Pérez Huber et al., 2015). "How Does Anyone Know?" shows connection to multiple trauma-informed and trauma-centered social theories, designated to the focus of healing trauma. The poem alludes to the combination of pressures SI experiences regularly in a body with gender, sexual orientation, and cultural differences subordinated within the "seclusion of a new state, new town,/new school." SI's poem, "How Does Anyone Know?" acknowledges and alludes to a series of culturally-relevant topics, including: (1) separation from place, (2) colonial norms that proliferate "misogynistic and homophobic ideologies," and (3) BMF axiologies in healing justice (Mody, 2017; Anzaldúa, 1987 & 2009).

This poem unpacks deep and dark emotions surrounding eating disorders and how they may have manifested for the speaker. The context of the poem follows the trends noted in psychological theories surrounding intergenerational trauma-dyads common to Latinx

intergenerational trauma (Cerdeña, 2021, p. 3). Though SI's poems explicitly mention the term microaggression, their poems do not spend as much time reflecting on microaggressions as the time they spent sharing about microaggressive incidents in our encuentros. SI's narratives give a landscape of their experience during their enrollment—their Nepantla, the world in which they exist in all their complexity. As with SI's previously presented work, this piece speaks to longstanding trauma that the author is working to repair while also being enrolled full time at the university. They close with a message of empowerment and hope for a healthier future: "Although I cannot change my past, I am in charge of what happens next."

Before this final line, the poem also speaks to societal pressures the speaker feels to understand themselves, to fit in boxes, and to do so within a timeframe that falls into a normative timeframe; these themes show self-discovery and the desire for belonging. It speaks to the aspirational fuerza, the hope that the normative discourses—of the PWI higher education institution, the Latine family, machista-dominated Latinx community, the whitestream Queer community, the cis-gendered, and the natural-born-citizen dominated "American" discourse that has criminalized the immigrant and children of immigrants according to the generational proximity to our countries of origin (Marmo & Gerard, 2020)—might see the participants as "enough." This hope was prevalent in all our pieces.

Pérez even alluded to this practice as:

...doing the impossible. We are trying to live a fulfilling life between birth and death.

There's always something else you can do. There's always something else you can learn to love, something else you can learn to see, to be, somewhere else to go. To me, it's impossible. And there's a lot of pressure to try to do it... lately, I've been taking that pressure off because of this idea. (2021)

These sage words and signs of emotional healing were not all accomplishments that could be shared across the board by participants. Fire God was drawn to the power in the lines that spoke the truths: "I'm learning to allow myself to/ love who I want/ and look/ how I want/ regardless of fitting in/ the box."

Fire God's analysis of the piece demonstrated aspirational *fuerzas*, believing strongly that these words were "something to aspire to" but acknowledged this was an emotional freedom they could not access "right now in a safe way." There were so many points during this *plática*, where it may have benefited institutional knowledge to press for more information; however, I followed anticolonial and decolonizing frameworks when engaging *Nepantleras* in inquiry. The *cariño trenza* methodology in the research guided the decolonizing methodology of refusal to include details, based on what most benefits the participants—refusing the colonizing disembodiment and removal of their stories from their existing state into the literature (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Calderon, 2014; Ayala & Contreras, 2018; Whetung & Wakefield, 2019). I took great care to trust my instincts and the *Nepantleras'* in knowing their own limitations and what they felt safe to share in this space. Where there were obvious tones and context connected to deeply-rooted trauma that the student was still processing and/or experiencing, I left the group and the research in the discomfort of unknowing on behalf of care for that individual who was exerting so much to show up in this space on behalf of themselves and their community.

Related to these words they shared in response to "How Does Anyone Know?" Fire God expressed in storytelling hours that they have not been "able to embrace" their gender, Queer identity or sexuality fully because of their position in their faith and in their family. Our narrative collective is the only space where they are completely "out" in their gender and

sexual orientation identity. The other participants could not relate to this compartmentalization of identity. They neither had family nor religious bonds that were pressuring them to do so; I, however, related greatly with these challenges and hoped that, one day, Fire God would be able to clear their own path to living their life of love in their fullest self.

### **Roots**

While going on a hike with some buddies,  
I realized that I was secluding  
myself—walking ahead of the group,  
allowing nature to cure my soul.

Eventually, I realized I  
was getting really  
angry at my friend  
for speaking loudly  
the whole time. I took  
a step back to process my emotions,  
and asked myself, “Why are you so angry?  
No one else is angry right now.” I  
walked a little faster to get some time  
alone, and it clicked. She was probably  
never made to feel  
like everything she did was “annoying”  
or that she “talked too much” growing up.  
This is *my* issue.

Realizing that it wasn't okay



for my family to make me feel  
like I was a nuisance in their life—  
like my laughs were too loud, like I was  
making a scene, or being too much.

In reality, I was enough.

I had to center myself  
in an awakening moment  
to try to fix my open wounds.

And it was not okay that I project  
these traumas on someone else,  
someone I care about.

This is healing.

**"Roots" analysis.** "Roots" was a poem that SI wrote during one of our Borderlands writing exercises. I was thrilled to see it here, as I felt it spoke to some of the dynamics that come up in their social life. It also brought up a shared microaggression that all of us, myself and the participants, have expressed experienced either implicitly or explicitly at Appalachian State University. This microaggression involves statements and behaviors that assume the stereotype and negative stigmatization of the "loud Latina."

The poem evoked the ways in which this experience with microaggressions on campus has clung to their association with college at a PWI:

I really related to the "she was probably never made to feel like everything she did was annoying or like she talked too much growing up." My mom used to call me Perico, and it was a sweet, endearing thing, but it was also like [saying] "Fire God, shut up." You know? Like a...microaggression. And, as I've gotten older, I'm very

loud. I'm a loud Dominican woman...being at a PWI... "you're being too loud; you're being too much," that's something that ...I've heard a lot. Even if people don't say it, you see it ...on their face.

SI's poem was affirming to all of us, an affirmation for us to carry with us when we face microaggressions, that "in reality, I was enough." A belief, perhaps, we were struggling with but that—as Fire God surmised—we could "aspire to" believe. Pérez also found SI's poem aspirational. They connected with most of the poem but felt a distinction in the lines, where the speaker gave themselves grace to feel, sit in, and process negative emotions. This was something that Pérez said they wanted for themselves, but they expressed that they were not far enough in their emotional development to feel this as a natural practice. This—along with the participants—is something I am also learning: how to give myself permission to be angry, and how to process that anger toward healing.

### ***The Fire God, Testimonio: Honest Answers to Simple Questions***

I was not surprised when I saw the content of Fire God's submission. I have spent over a decade contemplating the very questions surrounding the same unavoidable, problematic boxes. Our identities are constantly being monitored and managed by governing institutions. Even at the young age of 20, these minor steps—second-thoughts to most—are burdens and barriers to Latina/e/x Queers. I was surprised to see the Fire God embrace the writing process the way they did. Of all the participants, the Fire God was most against the writing process. They agreed to the group because there were no other groups for this intersectionality, and they needed more Queer, Latinx/e friends—but they were very vocal about not being a fan of writing.

I remembered feeling this way, at some point. My high school English teachers said that the way I wrote was "awkward." When Fire God shared their dislike of writing, I shared my negative experiences with English instructors who were not of immigrant-origin. I shared how the feedback was always brief, nonspecific, and unhelpful if not assuming that I was incapable. I shared that the only reason I chose my major in English was to improve a deficit they had perceived that I thought would impair my chances to succeed in the U.S. I shared that, when I did take English classes at the college level, I was penalized for using the singular "they," so I could understand why writing might not appeal to all of them. I did leave it up to the group for them to submit alternative forms of story, like a video essay or oral recording. Even with these options, Fire God selected testimonio.

They shared that this testimonio was them processing answers to literal questions but also the questions they had about themselves, that they still have. So, like SI's, Fire God's work is a story in progress.

**Fire God - Plática Transcript: Testimonio Introduction.**

I am Fire God...Okay, so, I'm gonna explain a little bit, I guess. It's called Honest Answers to Simple Questions because, um, you know how, like, on any form you have to fill out, it asks you, like, "ethnicity," and you put in, like, the answer— Things don't normally ask about sexuality, but I imagine that would probably also be a question if people thought...they could ask, you know.

[all others respond with affirming "mmhmms" and nods in agreement]

And so, like, you like check off and you don't get to really elaborate on what that means to you and how complex and especially when it comes to like

gender for me that's not simple as I once thought it was and that's why it is kind of like "Ethnicity" the answer, but then the elaboration."

### **Honest Answers to Simple Questions.**

#### **Ethnicity:**

- Latine

I used Hispanic for years, but like my gender, I didn't give it much thought until recently. At which point, I started using Latinx. That had more to do with me wanting to wave at Queer people in my community— this coming around the same time I realized I liked women. I think it's interesting, though, how I felt like "Hispanic," erased Queer people. More recently I started using Latine because I liked that I could say it both in English and Spanish. It sounds like such a superficial reason to change identifiers, but— to me— it isn't. Latine lets me describe my heritage, wave at the Queer community, and speak about it in both of the languages that make up my identity. It's comforting to have such a clear answer about something that describes me. That isn't the case in other areas of my life. Sometimes, I wish it were.

#### **Gender:**

- Woman?

I have been thinking about this one for a little while now. I have discovered that the answer to the gender question, for me, is a little more complicated. It used to be so easy, no second thought, just "woman." Now I've discovered that I don't actually know the answer or that sometimes the answer

isn't exactly as easy as "woman." Sometimes it's "woman-adjacent? I think? Maybe. Clearly I've got it all figured out.

**Sexuality:**

- ...

I may not have an answer for this one yet, I thought I did, but I don't. I do have peace, though, for the most part. It comes when I flirt with a beautiful woman, and she smiles back. Or when I'm sitting with all of my Queer friends at a table. It's not constant, though. Sometimes—when I think about family, love, and future—my peace is interrupted. I think of family, then feel shame and regret—not for whom I love, but for the lies I've had to tell to keep my family. I think about the future and wonder what it will look like, who will want to be a part of it when I am finally able, and—in some ways forced to tell the truth. Isn't it interesting how family comes first, and love is unconditional until it gets hard? *Family first, family above everything.* Just not this, not love. What a contradiction. The thing is I know, I know that for them loving me is dismissing how I love. But what does it mean when your definition of love means never speaking to your child again? When your kindness and respect have conditions? When having to accept that your daughter loves a woman is too much? I guess that's the future, too; me loving and being loved.

I lose sight of that. I get so caught up in the feelings that my family and loved ones will have about who I love that I forget the most important part. That I will love. That I do love. Their approval does not change that. In those moments, in this one. I feel happy; yes, a little bitter-sweet, but still happy.

**"Honest Answers to Simple Questions." Analysis.** The storytelling hours were a unique window into the submissions of this group. After the "Hispanic Heritage Festival" celebration, hosted by the university's Latin Hispanic Alliance—the student organization, led by and for Latinx/e students at the university—both Pérez and Fire God reported back to the group with their experience. They felt the usual anger and frustration toward exhibitionism, the ways in which white students used the event and consumed the culture Latinx students brought to campus as a way to benefit their own educational and social experience for "extra credit" or even graded course assignments. Beyond that, they shared added disconnects with their own racial and ethnic groups—moments when their experience was overlooked, unnoticed, or even intentionally bypassed for the "greater good" or unifying collective of Latin American groups on campus. The words Fire God took away from their experience with the Hispanic Heritage Festival were present in this work, where they—like SI—also begin to process some family and personal traumas.

The words, "isn't it interesting how family comes first and love is unconditional until it gets hard. Family first, family above everything...Just not this, not love, what a contradiction," resonated with the other two participants. Because I am processing these concepts later in life, I am not as enmeshed with my family as I once was when I was in college. At the beginning of this semester, I did fear coming out to my family. I knew, however, that if ever it was a question of myself and my values or theirs, that I would be ready to speak my truth. When I did, sometime in 2021, my mother did take the news poorly. Over time, it just became a topic we did not discuss much. She was curious about it, but I was not concerned with gaining her approval. Eventually, her care, love, and respect for me

strengthened our bond by knowing that part of me—even if she did not understand my identity and the values that have grown from my ontology. What I needed before I felt safe coming out to my conservative, self-identified cisgender, heterosexual Latina mother was to be prepared for abandonment—either emotional or physical—that might come up because of my mom's internalized oppression. This expectation seems to be something Fire God is also struggling with. The other participants in the group could not relate to this, as was discussed in analyzing SI's work. They grew up in homes where LGBTQIA+ culture was already introduced and—at least somewhat—normalized, and they were not shamed for either their gender, sexual orientation, or their expression of the former. With this distinction, Pérez found a way to connect to the work in aspiration, in "taking the bravery and the courage from this because I've needed that lately ...this demanding of your own space and sacredness and what you need for yourself that you're talking about. I needed that."

Something that resonated with all of us was the struggle with identity questionnaires. In SI's words:

We all relate to how when we're having to answer a question of what are you; What's your ethnicity? What's your gender? And then you kind of ...made us all think that there is more thinking when you are answering that question...looking within, it's not that easy of an answer that I'm giving you, but you [institutions] want easy answers to harder questions.

This was the focus of Fire God's reflection outside of group storytelling hours. Feelings in response to institutionally-enforced questionnaires on identity, and the redacted or omitted questions about our identity that we seldom get to share with the university.

These grappings in process were relatable to at least one other participant. Pérez expressed a feeling of "confusion" surrounding their gender that led them to connect most with this section of Fire God's work. In Pérez's analysis, they shared:

I think the gender, personally, resonates the most with me because I've always been...a Tomboy, but then being a Tomboy turned into, wait, do I actually wanna be a boy, which turned into... nah, I think I am gender fluid. And now, that's just how I live. LATELY, it's been really hard because I present very feminine, and I feel very feminine, but there will be just a day when I am like, "I AM A MAN!" I don't know, I don't know why that happens. So, anyway, just the confusion, the general, I don't know what I don't know about gender. I'm just learning through the nightmare.

In response to this vulnerable share, Fire God shared their most recent experience with this normative-counteracting emotion, sharing that they had recently undergone this switching from feeling like a male and then feeling like a female at different points throughout the day, only two days prior to our group meeting. After hearing these experiences, I affirmed this experience as something that happens. I shared, from within the Borderlands perspective, that the gender binary system is flawed and that many indigenous Latinx tribes embrace gender fluidity and the existence of multiple genders in one body.

***Pérez, Strings and Boxes: Lyrical Narrative, Corridos Hybrid***

For this submission, Pérez submitted a work that was a hybridized corridos work. Since submission, the work has been revised with the feedback and approval of the student to reflect the intended image of the duality of voice present in the work. In the final plática, Pérez explained their writing process. They followed the thematic structure of the corridos, which was outlined in Chapter Three. Then, they wrote their narrative poem in mostly free-



verse to incorporate their intended written text. After meeting with the Nepantleras and hearing their analysis and feedback, they decided to utilize a mestizaje of concrete poetic structure for the stanzas to represent themes symbolized in the poem. Pérez, like many Latinx/e, is mixed-race and often struggles to find belonging. They have grown in their conocimientos before and within the timeframe of the Nepantlera group. In this poem, Pérez speaks from their higher self to their ego, the part of them that is still burdened by unhealed childhood traumas. To help amplify and signal this to Pérez's intended audience—others like them, with identities that don't fit well into society's defined categories—the original structure and line breaks of the poem were changed. Starting with the voice of higher self, enacting emotional processing through the presentation of visual images. As the voice shifts, "strings" of shorter lines lead us to empty space between stanzas and new insights from the mirrored speaker.

**Strings and Boxes.**

Hello to the people  
who feel like me: to the world,  
a proud Cuba-riqueña  
But to myself... Alone  
in my room, picking each piece  
of myself apart in the dark  
a reflection in front of me  
I don't understand  
A person, with  
No name

No gender

No ethnicity

When I was young, I  
wasn't white enough to hang  
out with the white people  
I wasn't black enough  
to slide with the black folks,  
and I didn't speak Spanish.  
I didn't hang with Hispanic girls...  
I think they would have let me,  
but I never really tried

I still don't  
speak Spanish  
The need to  
fit in  
lingers  
slowly learning  
the curvature  
of my thoughts,  
recognizing

similarities  
between me  
and my mom,  
identifying  
with my culture  
more, deciding  
I will invest  
in who I am,  
rather than  
who I thought  
I should be

In this dystopian society  
The truth is hidden  
in plain sight, actively displaced  
by the majority, gerrymandered  
into unsafe spaces, distorted  
for the benefit of the many...  
*Stereotypes are a tool*  
The so-called "truths" of life  
were not, are not, cannot be mine.

I opened

my eyes.

There is a box, hanging in front of me

So bright I almost couldn't see past it

I blinked. Attached to the box

was hundreds of glaring, red strings

Those strings attached to millions more boxes

with a billion more strings...

The mechanics of

society are so complex; seeing

it doesn't mean you understand

it, but it does mean

that it's made up. You can

beat this. You can maneuver around

the strings. You have the wisdom of hundreds

of years, the blood of familia, the wit

of Cuba, the strength of Puerto Rico.

We are the tree of life—our roots, inching

deeper into Mother Earth. Every

moment, grounding our souls in our

culture

lives

voices

minds

This realization

is scary

I'm sorry;

it shouldn't have

to be, but I

couldn't let you

continue on

like this, not

knowing yourself,

living with

a stranger, not

seeing who

you are

is enough.

I will be climbing my way through  
the strings and boxes  
for many years to come—crying while  
mourning the little girl who  
couldn't see that she was exactly who  
she was supposed to be, smiling  
while facing these hard truths. I know there is  
a way  
out

Now take this, and run as fast as you can  
we will all leave this place exactly how  
we came: living, breathing, fully-formed—  
humans with a gender, a name,  
an ethnicity.

Grow as tall as you can,

and I will do the same.

**"Strings and Boxes" Analysis.** Fire God described their experience with the poems as connecting with the fear involved in the process of uncovering one's truth, along with some personal revelations that:

It's kind of like me figuring out that I was Queer; this realization is scary...it shouldn't have to be scary. Like, I could see myself [in the poem], choosing to address it instead of internalizing [homophobia or forgetting] about it like I had for a while, so it's kind of like you're speaking to me in the way that I look at it now and can speak to my younger self.

"Strings and Boxes" as well as some of SI's work both revealed a theme of transformational narrative that often appears in Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) approaches to treating complex post-traumatic stress; using NET, the writer who experienced trauma reclaims their narrative and escapes (re)victimization by writing their own story and claiming their own narrative, directly in response to their trauma; NET narratives contain heavy content with positive morals, such as: lessons learned, alternative endings, or spiritual transformations (APA, 2022). Here and in SI's work, the reader is assumed to be someone with liminality in PWIs, someone who is navigating a predominantly cisgender, heterosexual, white, male, U.S-born space but the whole of who they are exists in a liminal category; in social constructs, their race is often perceived in connection to their ethnicity and their gender is assumed—as is their sexual orientation. Pérez and SI both offer examples of apologies on behalf of traumatic experiences that the reader will go through in their healing journeys, in the process of claiming their identity. Unanimously, the Nepantlera undergraduate participants felt strongly that this was a unifying message that resonated with them. Based on the experiences of the Nepantleras, receiving and offering an apology for intergenerational traumas becomes a rite of passage in liminality healing justice.

### *María Conchita, Poemas*

My poems were all written at different time periods of 2021. Including my work in this project was critical to the pedagogy of the contra-curricular collective; "Vulnerability is essential in building rapport and trust with students...bridging, healing, and it becomes a reciprocal process that I model for students when I share" my story in the narrative exchange (Cavares, 2014, p. 116). I submitted a broad variety of poems, much larger than what I included for the dissertation, to see which poems resonated most with the participants for discussion. For the dissertation, I am including the poems submitted to the *Nepantleras* that were directly related to my experiences in relation to the university. The first selection, "Marsinski Missionary," was written in Fall 2021, shortly after meeting my first openly Queer romantic partner, a nonbinary woman, who I met through my connection with a colleague in the department of social work.

"Apnea" is a poem I wrote after a particularly violent nightmare that put me in a dissociated state. Potential side effects for people suffering from PTSD and managing Complex PTSD include dissociation, nightmares, and sleep apnea. These symptoms amplified and increased after I was sexually assaulted on campus at my doctoral program orientation, a moment that was traumatic on its own but also led to the uncovering of repressed memories from past traumas. These symptoms, and my adept ability to mask them, left me struggling to keep up with and maintain my health while meeting the demands of my doctoral program.

While "Sestina in Power" and "Storyteller" both speak more openly to my experience with colonial discourses, many of my poems contain allegory to safely channel my voice and express the complexities of my experience that academic language cannot possibly capture in



the same light. Greenway Gravel Lot was a "found" piece that presented itself almost instantaneously while taking a moment to escape in an area of town, where I visit to think and be alone with my thoughts. "Mami's Jocotes" represents immigrant- and indigenous-origin reclamation, growth, and sovereignty in Borderlands. In it, I offer an allegory of an "illegally" transplanted tree from El Salvador and allude to my own growth since and because of my undergraduate experience at a PWI in the South. The students selected the following works to discuss in our final encuentro: "Greenway Gravel Lot," "Apnea," and "Storyteller."

### **Marsinski Missionary**

The waves are swelling. The raging impulse,  
a Taurus rising moon works  
perpetually unseen behind  
a blinding sun— dehydrating white, red,  
and toasted skin along a dew-soaked beach  
out of turtle season. I am

lingering sargassum drying, clinging  
to the poison of tantalizing  
man o' war. My body presses yours.

Slowly  
wanting to delve in deeper

waters to feel the pull of my ebb

against your flow, but we are in the half-  
wet sand—getting blasted with cold, humid  
air. Making awkward love beside

discarded cigarette butts. The scene is  
less than perfect, and the world less so. I  
would wish for simpler times, but for Womxn

like us, there have never been. We create  
the simplicity that isn't. My mind  
drifts in and out of view like gulls gliding

parallel to shore, scanning for  
microbial and cretaceous life. I  
am an empty shell that passersby gaze

upon—wondering if I am worth the  
walk to collect me, to cleanse me, to hold  
me, to make space on their alters each night

I drown in this ocean we lie before.

You aren't here. You don't need me to heal,  
but part of you wants me to. I don't want

you to heal me, but part of me fears  
I need you. Shut my eyes. Open my lips.  
I want to feel the undercurrents' pull  
from this mental prison

I once knew  
where to dive, how to hold my breath

Emergence. Stand.

Ride

Return.

I can relearn.

### **Apnea**

I am thrashing and screaming  
Weeping and pounding  
My fists on uneven floors until I bleed  
Grinding my teeth until I taste rust

But on the surface

Of this mixed shell, all is quiet, smooth.

My body takes up

As little space

As it can

And I long to shrink myself

My body is mine

But I wish it weren't

My mouth stays shut for so long

Maggots could form

I breathe softly

As though there was someone around

That I could possibly disturb

And I don't scream. I don't even whisper.

So, the screams they get trapped in me

They ricochet around my gums,

Shoot up my skull

Until I have a migraine

And the anger and depression

Lingers for days

My eyes show hope, love, passion

But those designs were

Sown into my irises  
Long before I knew  
My potential was a fake flower  
with real thorns

However long it takes for me  
To let myself feel  
Cry  
Is how long I feel pain  
And it travels  
It doesn't stay in my head  
It moves through my neck,  
Stabs my shoulders, presses  
On my hips, and makes every usable joint  
Throb, burn until I'm willing

Pound my fists into the pillow  
Exercise until my body  
Catches up to my racing heart

Today, I can't move  
Or won't  
There is someone

The pain is in my neck  
In a memory telling me to—  
My elbow is cramped from trying to—  
Lie perfectly straight  
*lay still*  
*be quiet*  
Not to stir

*It will all be over soon.*

I live in two worlds at all times  
Afraid of merging them.  
Wondering if I lose one, how would I  
Escape the other?

**"Apnea" analysis.** Apnea adds to other works shared in the Nepantla Narrativas that locates misogyny in relation to the Queer Latina liminality as it is represented in the works. The intersecting poetic discourse from the vantage point of liminality in an ethnicized, racialized, gendered, heterosexualized and often hypersexualized body echoes social discourse reflected in intersectionality discourses on sexual violence in the U.S. Though not all the participants have experienced sexual or physical assault, they could relate to the feeling of losing control. Fire God and Pérez alluded that what they related to most in the work was the panic and dissociation implied through the imagery. SI has experienced assault

of some kind, though they have not shared any details. It is not surprising that, in a group of four indigenous-origin Latinas, two experienced sexual assault.

Violence against women is not equal across race or age (RAINN, 2022, Ohio Alliance, 2021; Crenshaw, 1991). The participants involved in this research are, statistically at higher risk of sexual assault during their college enrollment because of the intersection of their age, race, and gender; over 50% of women who are sexually assaulted are between the ages of 18 and 34 (RAINN, 2022). Most of my sexual assaults happened in college, and I remember looking forward to when I would turn thirty because I somehow thought others would somehow respect me more as I grew older. I was 30 when I was last sexually assaulted, and it was the first time I was assaulted on a college campus. I spent the next two years in legal processes without meaningful support from the institution that was both my employer and place of enrollment. This lack of support was backed by institutional policies and procedures that determined through Title IX office processes that the university “was not liable” because the assailant was not affiliated with the university.

Female college students between 18 to 24 years of age are three to four times more likely to be raped than women in other categories. It's also important to note that neither of the Nepantleras feels fully comfortable with the female category as it is defined; they have expressed more alignment with gender nonconformity/nonbinary identities. According to national data, 21% of gender nonconforming/nonbinary college students have been raped, which is higher than the one-in-six chances for the general female category. Also following national statistics, people with indigeneity "are at the greatest risk of sexual violence," being twice as likely to be sexually assaulted than other racial groups (RAINN, 2022).

The participants connected with the anxiety and dissociation represented in "Apnea." Anxiety and depression are two common symptoms connected with post-traumatic stress and complex post-traumatic stress disorder. 30%-94% of women in general experience these symptoms after an assault; comparable data on Latinas, indigenous women, or gender nonconforming victims with PTSD was unavailable on the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN, 2022) site. The liminality of our narratives in the context of national statistics on violence perpetrated against those with intersectionality exposes a high threat of risk and serves as a reminder of the barriers those risks pose to education. Recent literature in trauma-informed studies suggest the challenges victims of sexual violence may face in university and professional systems without support (RAINN, 2022; APA, 2022; Cerdeña et al., 2021; McCormick, 2021; Garcia, 2019). Liminalities are and have been at greater risk of violence. Liminality—the identity in-between—is unrecognized energy with both transformational and destructive potential. Liminalities exist within colonial structures where they can see and problematize damaging patterns from their lived experiences in the intersection of subordinated social identity. For the Nepantleras, their narrativas speak to a fear of continuing in the trauma that brings a determination to heal, to repair.

### **Mami's Jocotes**

He asked me what a jocote tastes like

What a silly question

What does a peach taste like?

How do you describe a familiar

flavor in words to someone



who has tasted less

Google says that Jocotes taste

like citrus and mango

I would describe them

like a mango-flavored plum,

tossed in limón

She brought them over as a branch

and some seeds from our apartment in San

Salvador after I left for college

They were redder there, and now the harvest

is mixed with green, a dull-ripened

red-orange that almost looks sun poisoned

the fruit has grown so

heavy they start to fall

to the ground before they are ripe

my mom wraps them in a Publix bag

to sweeten them

once a branch, the tree now

takes up most of the space in the yard

### **Greenway Gravel Lot**

Oh hello, unassuming apple tree  
with only half your branches full  
rooted in front of a parking lot  
You are sick, your energy low.  
Branches that still bear fruit  
are weighed down, only a handful are ready  
for harvest—a beautiful testament  
to survival, a living testimonio of lucha and love.

I wonder how many have noticed you  
as they park vehicles that drive  
us, not only through socially-constructed hustle  
but also to your eventual death  
I remember just yesterday, sitting yards away  
I didn't see you then. The family  
of doe that emerged from the forest and  
river came to greet me before walking  
your way. They must have plucked your fruit,

tasted you for as long as they could,  
until the next car came  
or the next truck went

How does it feel? To just be? To have roots  
that won't be moved? To be overwhelmed  
with fruit on your small frame? To live  
in the sun, if only for a season? To exist without  
competition because there are  
those who care, at least a little, that you exist?

When winter comes, you rest in the comfort  
of knowing you fed many, and spring will come

I've never seen an apple tree so small  
or one so full of fruit.

**"Greenway Gravel Lot" Analysis.** This piece resonated with all the participants. Specifically, they all related to the subject of the poem: a fruit tree in a park. The first theme that resonated with us as a puente for us was what Pérez mentioned about how "we can all relate to this, 'how does it feel to just be, to have roots that won't be moved' because all of our roots have been moved, and we all want to know what that feels like." There is a figurative and literal displacement and transplanting that is well-referenced in Borderlands theory.

Pérez's analysis reflects the emotional, or figurative border-crossing—a displacement that, their tone alluded to, is not of their own enthusiastic will.

Mention of the roots image in the piece brought up something different for the Fire God:

For so long, I was a very religious person, and I really resonated and connected with that, and part of me now still really wants that to be a part of my life, but I just haven't found a way to really balance [my sexuality/gender with my faith]. I think I was like 7 [when I first started identifying as having religious roots]. I was very, very, young...I know that— when I was ...really, really, little—I didn't like going to church because it meant sitting still and reading the word, but I started singing in church, and for the longest time... that was something I did because my mom pushed me to do it, but then I remember that there was this one time that I was singing, and I felt very connected to the words I was singing, and I cried. And for me, it was a very spiritual experience; it was... a warm memory for me...the holy spirit...So, for me, it feels like a root, but it also feels kind of twisted. In my head, I felt kind of poisoned.

They discussed that, even with this strong belief, they were in the process of processing how their faith has influenced "internalized homophobia" for themselves; I shared a similar, past experience with my own faith. Ultimately, for me, I came to a different conclusion about the "religion root;" Because of how young I was when I came to the faith group that had first instilled that self-loathing and shame, I interpreted my religion as indoctrination—not something that originated or resonated with the core of who I am. The root of faith that had once weighed me down, I determined, was a root system belonging to someone else that had become entangled with my own. In my own experience in processing my identity, I was able to separate that root from myself because I did not see it as a core part

of who I was or am. In that moment of distinction between my story and Fire God's, which ran parallel at many points, we held space for the ways in which our stories differed and did not place judgment upon the other's experience.

Also resonating with the subject, SI noticed the strengths in the tree that subverted expectations, saying it reminded them of "people who think so small of themselves but have so much going for them." Mirroring the connection to cultural wealths alluded to in the poem, Fire God formed an interpretation and connection that was unintended but not completely outside of the realm of discussion being introduced in the allegory:

I don't know why, but the part, "when winter comes you rest in comfort of knowing you fed many and spring will come..." speaks to me... With my family and my relationship with them, I know that—for right now—they're peaceful thinking that I am something. I've given them this facade that's very easy for them to absorb and handle.

Fire God's response highlights *fuerzas* in cultural navigation and perseverance; their interpretation of this image mirrors their expressed desire to keep peace with their family, which brings them to code switch as a survival and coping strategy. For their family, they bring the pieces of themselves that prove most beneficial to their family's sense of normalcy. The cultural value of family is very much reinforced within the context of the Latinx/a/e campus organizations. In Fire God's testimonio, they use phrasing that they shared in their storytelling from their experience at a Latin Hispanic Alliance event. Fire God, explicitly, expressed feeling marginalized in their identity within the Latin Hispanic Alliance because of the heavy emphasis on "family first, family above everything."

What Fire God is expressing in their storytelling process, in their narrative, and in their analyses reflects their liminality—which puts them somewhere between their Latine family and their Queer identity. Fire God's encuentros revealed to the group that the college experience, specifically multicultural groups that center Latinidad, reinforce the Catholic/Christian-dominated or machista cultural values of family that evolved from intergenerational colonial traumas. The process of healing for Queer Latinas involves—at the bare minimum—navigating the homophobic, racist, anti-immigrant, anti-indigenous, misogynistic, and anti-black discourse that exists within all the spaces they navigate—which may even include spaces like their family, their university, and their social groups. Through this testimonio, Fire God grapples with their sense of belonging, making it an essential step on their own healing journey. Giving themselves the time and space within their Nepantla to self-identify in full context, regardless of the complexities surrounding their identity that they struggle to share with others, Fire God is reclaiming control over their narrative. Fire God's reclamation of power establishes their own belonging and agency in their college experience with the encouragement of their healing justice narrative to support them along the way.

### **Storyteller**

Drench me in your plotlines  
so that I take new form  
Transform me with your narrative  
until the chapters that led me to this page  
seem empty backstory

to the sections ahead

I'm searching  
for an omniscient narrator  
to save me from the downslide  
before my denouement

I've passed my climax now  
all my scenes are muted, numbed  
by the quiet wake of aches  
lingering after assault

there is no sharing, no exchange  
for you to see

I have never been a character  
I'm narrating a story  
that may never be mine  
hoping for an outcome  
that only exists in the surrealist  
literature of my youth

and so, I exist in another world  
of my own creation

where my story can have alternative evolutions

where my story is not linear

and I am not stuck. I choose to stay

because the world has nothing better

but exhaustion of efforts exerted, hunger,

thirst, an insatiable ambition for an uncontainable force.

when my mind visits this realm others

call home, I drive through — emergency

brakes down, grinding and whittling away highways force me forward to destinations

I don't want to go:

wealth for most of my ancestors

death to my indigeneity

the stench of burning

rubber

All roads lead to...

Colonial roads are designed,

interconnected to move society toward the

center of imperialism.

The Native in me drowns when I wake



if I rest, I risk losing

if I keep moving, I risk disappearing.

**"Storyteller" Analysis.** "Storyteller" revealed areas of distinction for the participants. SI alluded to relating to the parts of the poem where I am processing my sexual assault traumas; whereas Fire God, once again, brought up connections to control or a lack thereof over their narrative, sharing with the group that they don't believe they "have much control over [their] story at the moment, at least not every part of it." Pérez could not relate to the sentiments shared in the work from the perspective of their personal life, but they saw the emotions, the loss of control, and the colonial-dominated presence in their academic journey. They expressed a feeling of lack of life experience or attachment to the present when they said: "colonial roads are designed... I feel that in an academic way; I think I do, but at the same time, I don't think that I've gone deep enough in this world we're all sitting in to [fully understand] that."

Indigeneity, in fact, was not a concept that was often discussed in the group by the Nepantleras. Pérez's response shows that they, individually, have begun to process intellectually their identity within colonial constructs, but the whole of the group has not yet begun to locate themselves in the aggregated "Brown" or people of color (POC) categories, at least not in ways that explicitly express a processing or questioning of their racial origins to claim indigenous- or African-origin.

## Chapter 5

### Relationality Conocimientos con Cariño:

#### Mapping Queer Latina Liminality with Narrativa Methodology

“Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar. (Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.)” (Moraga et al., 2015, p.254).

Borderlands educational research has been pressing against and through the boundaries of educational research for the last few decades; resisting and refusing normalized practices in research, borderlands integrates works into the academy that creatively center liminality, which is a combination of identities that exists in between categories of identity that have been created by patriarchal and colonial hegemony (Bhabha, 1994; Canagarajah, 1999, 2013; García, 2009; de los Ríos, 2017); borderlands explores identity and critiques identity eidetics through liminality in a form that acknowledges the realities of institutional impact as well as the power liminal Latinx possess in overcoming and crossing the boundaries set before them. This chapter provides a landscape for the ethics, care, and creativity were woven into this project throughout conocimientos with cariño and considering relationality in a trenzas y mestizaje narrative project. Not only did trenzas y mestizaje ensure the project’s ethics through cariño, but it also helped direct Nepantleras through their decisions surrounding narrative form and representation in their contribution to the conocimientos processes, or the transforming of circumstance into a story with identifiable and relatable patterns. To better understand the significance and need for identity-affirming projects like the Nepantlera narrativa research, it is important to remember the history of deficit framing that continues in many quantitative and qualitative methodological research studies. Some examples of deficit framing in education that the

Nepantlera narrativa project rejects, resists, and actively rebels against include but are not limited to research that labels Queer Latinas and other marginalities.

Categories like "minority" or others that also assume powerlessness, impoverishment, or lack of ability because of race or ethnicity are often assigned to the Latina identity within Intibucá educational research (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Calderon, 2014). The Nepantlera narrativa project offers just one Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF) alternative to educational leadership that confronts and divorces healing work with marginalized groups from the damage-centered and damaging traditions and trends in educational research (Calderon, 2014). The remaining content of this dissertation will offer a contextual summary to illustrate how race and belonging flow thematically toward a BMF decolonial imaginary in the storytelling *encuentros*, written *narrativas*, and the final *Plática*. Poetic expressions and scholarly work of Queer feminista, Gloria Anzaldúa, identify the Nepantlera experience as a crossroads; following this Borderlands concept positions Nepantleras in their *mentes y cuerpos*, the mental and physical space they occupy, as a crossroads for the university. The Nepantlera experience may challenge the ways Appalachian State University currently supports marginalized students. How the university responds to liminality will determine its direction and effectiveness in enhancing the overall college experience for marginalized students. Using the Nepantleras' final *plática* in Fall 2021, Chapter Four situated the group analyses of each respective work within the broader Borderlands and feminista theory literature that highlighted throughout this dissertation that I will expand on in this chapter.

Chapter Three begins to intentionally shifts the focus away from the future of the university and its potential paths for decisions or improvement. Instead, Chapter Three and the following chapters focalize liminality as a symbol of the Borderlands—a crossroads to

delineate the contranarrative, indigenizing, community-based storytelling methodology used in this research. The purpose of this research, as explained in the first chapter, was to explore experience through Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF) narrative in a way that benefits those with marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys to our collective future. Because of the deficit-centered narratives and healing methodologies present in institutional discourses for the Queer Latina at Appalachian State University, the participants joined the project to learn the answers to the questions the project was placing at the forefront of the discussion:

- How do institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at Appalachian State University?

AND

- How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?

Through our storytelling and the analysis of the written narratives, the *Nepantleras* revealed that their takeaway was *the process* of writing and thinking through their experiences. The benefit participants receive from contributing to this project is immediate and will have the potential to make a lasting impact.

### **Methodology: Trenzas y Mestizaje**

With this research, I am planting a seed, using González's (2001) *trenzas y mestizaje* methodology. *Trenzas y mestizaje* is a methodology, often used in BMF projects to enable the design of a methodological framework to blend culture with theory in a meaningful way in meeting Borderlands tenets of culturally affirming epistemologies (González, 2001; de los Ríos, 2013). *Trenzas y mestizaje* should, ideally be used by Latinx researchers to benefit

Latinx pensadoras— “active thinkers who build on their cultural foundations to form identities and integrity, as well as to attain academic achievement” in order to remain authentic and respectful to the culture that inspired it (González, 2001, p. 641).

A trenza is a theoretical element in the methodology of a trenza y mestizaje project. Trenzas “illuminate theoretical grounding for learning about particular cultural, social, and academic worlds including an overlapping imaginary” (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 645). This work presents other methodologies as trenzas critical to the trenza y mestizaje research with consideration to Borderlands theory.

We are Nepantleras, womxn who must refuse to be anything less or other than ourselves. Trenzas y mestizaje empowers participants to honor our liminality through Borderlands methodologies that encourage and nurture Nepantla, a decolonial imaginary I will describe in more detail in this chapter. These methodologies charge us to holistically care for one another as Queer Latinas through *cariño* as well as to openly welcome and express personal experiences and cultural knowledge into educational research in a way that acknowledges and invites political transformations (Duncan-Andrade, 2006; de los Ríos, 2013; Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Urrieta & Villanes, 2013). There is healing from past traumas in nuestra comunidad; together, we may grow from these lived experiences and move forward toward a future in which we—Queer Latinas—are recognized for our cultural strengths and appreciated as powerful contributors to the university.

***Relationality: ¿Por Qué Este? ¿Por Qué Yo? ¿Por Qué Ya?***

Anticolonial theorist, Leigh Patel (2016), recommends a series of questions for anticolonial research(x/ch)ers that have become a part of my daily reflections; "*Why this? Why*

*me? Why now"* (p. 57)? The answers to these questions directly relate to my research questions, which I believe hold the potential to examine our interactions with normalizing patterns as well as our self-determined movements toward our futures. These questions, along with the broader research questions that explore our relationality in the context of institutional normalizing power and our personal growth during our enrollment, were considered in designing and communicating methodological intentions for this research. I believe the methodology of relationality was an important methodological *mestizaje* for the *cariño trenza* in this project, due to the rural location of the university. Care for the student faces distinct complexities within a rural environment. Relationality can assist *cariño* researchers and educators in making sound, ethical decisions within their framework.

This project is educational activism, using methodologies from BMF to enact *rebeldía* in exploring the research questions with the voice of three Queer, Latina, undergraduate students from Appalachian State University. BMF scholars "reject simplistic and dualistic research endeavors in order to complicate the research process...providing decolonial moments and 'moving beyond binaries and toward intersectionality and hybridity' (Arredondo et al., 2003, p.2)" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 263). This BMF project uses creative, autobiographical, and activist narrative in *poesía* (poetry) and *testimonio* form with personal observations of my time at App from my subjectivity as a Queer Latina enrolled at Appalachian State University to speak with other *Montañeras* Queer enrolled in the Social Work and Global Leadership programs at the institution.

### ***Mestiza Relationality in Research Design***

Relationality is a means for researchers to strategically redistribute power by consciously challenging any external influences of colonial institutions through the refusal of

complicity and internalized oppression/white supremacy. Reflecting on my own identity as a “mestiza” educator—someone who comes from both the colonizer and the colonized, whose very name is chosen by the colonizer and is weaponized to reinforce social stratifications affirms my liminality in the academic process. My liminality—particularly with epidermal phenotypes as a white-passing Latina—poses a threatening symbol of a history in white-washing, colonial violence, and white supremacy. Mixing white with indigenous blood is an *Intibucá* practice in “civilizing the native” (Bautista, 2019, p. 61). The presentation of my body represents violent traditions of assimilation. Relationality with the *fuerza* of *rebeldía* empowered me to consciously unlearn and resist in preparation for and throughout the research and analysis process.

My racial identity in the context of history is inherently colonized to uphold white supremacy and white settler colonialism. My positionality is a potent weapon. Through this research analysis, I remain transparent about the areas where my privileges might pose risks to perpetuating harmful patterns in educational research and practice, and I also take action to divest from coloniality and White supremacy. *Por que yo? por que ya?*—Why me? why now (Patel, 2016)? In the last five years, I have been writing and sharing stories, mostly personal narratives that only I read. In therapy, I say things like, “the world isn’t ready for my story yet,” and my therapist always disagrees, saying, “I think the only one not ready for your story is you.” I have been writing since I was five, and I believe my love of narratives comes from my maternal grandfather, Papi—Dr. Joaquin Hernández Callejas—who helped raise me. Papi was a multiracial Salvadoran with Lencan heritage. He was a musician, a composer, a writer, a judge, a philosopher, and a politician before migrating to escape the war in El Salvador after I was born. After he passed, I took the advice he gave me as a child and put my feelings

into narrative. My love of language brought me to working toward an Master in Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing; my experiences make me uniquely skilled at using narrative as a tool for expression beyond the typical conduit of exposition, and my research interests embrace this gift as a critical tool for decolonizing educational research.

The specific forms selected for this research design embodied one of the main ways I have explored, expressed, and grown in my liminality during my doctoral studies at Appalachian State University: political activism. *Yo sepa* that everything is political, and my work in the doctoral program has rallied me to organize, lead, and support an anticolonial career in higher education. This section and the subsections within it will share more context for the forms and inspiration behind the structure of the political, healing justice narratives in Chapter Four, written and selected by the Nepantleras and myself for publication in this dissertation.

### ***Mentes y Cuerpos: Relationships Between the Self, Others, Time and Place***

Feminista literature documents Latina experiencias with internal pressures "to speak for others" (Moraga, 1983, p. v); Intibucá research makes it easy to fall into those sociocultural impulses. BMF theory and scholars whose works inform it, like bell hooks (1989), proclaim that "when we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce or perpetuate domination" (p. 43). While I proudly own mi identidad as a Latina and have experiences that are distinct from my non-ethnic European relatives, light pigmentation and a white biological father privileges me; colonizing systems regulate and perceive my body and my hermana's body differently than our brown ancestors (Cruz, 2001; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). I accept the responsibility of my liminality as one that



must challenge the colonial discourses nuestra comunidad navigates (Moraga, 1983; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Urrieta & Méndez Benavídez, 2007). I respect and own that my experiences do not speak for, reflect, or represent the majority of Latinx students. The research uncovered in this dissertation reveals more of the respective experience of the *Nepantleras* as independent examples of the complexities of *Latinidad* to dispel the stereotypes and essentializing myths normalizing narratives impose on Latinx communities.

My dissertation research was conducted during the pandemic, just before the emergence of the Omicron variant. A recent diagnosis of liver disease makes me high risk for COVID-19. By the start of the first *encuentro*, all of the participants were fully vaccinated. During the Fall 2021 semester, a booster became available to prevent contraction of the Coronavirus. To my knowledge, though it was not a requirement of the group, all participants got a booster. University students are incentivized by the university and off-campus venues to vaccinate in order to participate in raffles or exclusive events. This sufficiently reduced my risk and risk to other at-risk participants, promoting a safe in-person environment for our *encuentros*. Together, we practiced community boundary-setting, making decisions collectively through our GroupMe chat. In this platform, we adjusted our COVID-19 boundaries as needed to retain full bodily autonomy while also meeting emotional needs and meeting the healing justice progress goals of the collective (de los Ríos, 2013). Through the use of methods, such as GroupMe polls and Google Form surveys to collect anonymous responses, all participants had some level of concern for safety surrounding COVID-19; therefore, everyone followed World Health Organization guidelines for social distancing and other pandemic recommendations: staying socially distanced, keeping our hands sanitized, facemasks when indoors as well as individually wrapped snack and beverage options.

Nuestro cariño made collaboration in a pandemic a nonissue, and the participants expressed gratitude for this space that respected the reality of a global pandemic and included them in finding solutions to meet their needs.

Combined with this global event, continuations of racial tensions compounded actions from the government across the nation due to immigration and police brutality. At App State, faculty of color were exiting, many choosing to retire early in order to escape what they believed to be a toxic environment (Stuart & Moore, 2021). Colonialism has created *mentes y cuerpos* (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008), which is the ontological phenomena that conditions or positions the mind and body of Latinx within the white settler spaces. Present Latinx ontology is being impacted by racist climates in a pandemic, increasing the already heavy psychological burdens that *Montañera mentes y cuerpos* carry while enrolled in a predominantly white institution (PWI). I took every caution not to augment these burdens in my process by being mindful of *los mentes y cuerpos* and *las experiencias* of the *Nepantleras* (Anzaldúa, 1987, Cruz, 2001; Cruz & McLaren, 2002; Hurtado, 1998; Moraga, 1983; Saavedra, 2005; Trujillo, 1998; Yarbro-Bejarno, 1999; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008) with *cariño* methodology.

### ***Cariño Trenza***

Throughout the research, I employed *trenzas y mestizaje* as a critical methodology. *Trenzas y mestizaje*, introduced in Chapter One and in this chapter, is often used in BMF projects to meaningfully blend culture with theory within the culturally-affirming tenets of Borderlands epistemology (González, 2001; de los Ríos, 2013). A prominent methodological *trenza* in this research is *cariño*, which is defined as mutual care and respect in the relationship between the researcher and the individuals, groups, or communities being researched

(González, 2001; Morga et al., 2015; Montoya, 1994; de los Ríos, 2013; Sandoval, 1998). Anzaldúa (2000) and borderlands methodologies "illustrate how we are in each other's world, how we're each affected by the other, and how we're all dependent on the other" (p. 215). Cariño implies shared identities or experiences between the researcher and any participants or featured communities (de los Ríos, 2013).

In order to approach the inquiry of how institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at App State, I took steps early in 2021 to identify the willing participants from the previous chapter. Using Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism (BMF) as a guide, I delivered a call for participants through targeted campus outreach in the form of email mailing lists and CampusSync announcements. In the announcement, I explicitly mentioned and requested that those interested in exploring their Queer Latina intersectionality through writing contact me. In the written communications distributed to campus, I explained that writing is activism in alignment with epistemologies from the framework discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter and Chapter Six offer more details on specific methodologies used in the research process to engage participants as co-conspirators in the *Nepantlera* narrative research and *conocimientos* process.

### ***Nepantlera Narrativa Process & Selections***

The participants decided which written narratives would be included and what names would be used to represent them for publication. Three of the names mentioned in this work are self-selected pseudonyms: SI, Pérez, and Fire God. Each participant received draft copies of the work and of the *plática* transcript months before the scheduled dissertation defense. This transparency was methodologically relevant to *conocimientos*. Borderlands scholar, Caraves (2014), explains *conocimientos* as a healing tool from Feminista pedagogies: "While

embodiment is essential, consciousness and healing are also essential to Feminista pedagogies. Anzaldúa's (2002) concept of *conocimientos* is also tied to theory in the flesh and knowledge production from the mind, body, spirit" (p. 112).

**The Seven Stages of *Conocimientos*.** Anzaldúa (2002) highlights seven stages in *conocimientos*, including: "el arrebato, *Nepantla*, *Coatlicue*, the call, putting *Coyolxauhqui* together, the blow up, and spiritual activism" (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018; Cavares, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2002), which I will briefly review in this section. Stage one, *El Arrebato*, is the rupture or breaking point; here, subjectivities are shattered, and the experience as well as the forms of knowledge that the *Nepantlera* offers are "taken for granted" (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018, p.16). The following subsections in this section will explain the rest of the *conocimientos* stages, used to inform and educate the *Nepantleras* during *encuentros* in Fall 2021.

***Stage Two—Nepantla: Strategic Liminality & Decolonial Imaginary.*** The second *conocimientos* stage and Nahuatl concept, *Nepantla*, in this *trenza y mestizaje* project serves as a decolonial imaginary in educational research (Pérez, 1998), "to reexamine how we recognize hybrid identities, practices, and histories as well as how we theorize the physical, social, and discursive spaces of contradictions and possibilities" (de los Ríos, 2013, p. 62). Using *Nepantla* as a *trenza* in the methodology can hold me—as a *Nepantlera* student, researcher, educator and activist—culturally accountable for the methods I use in conducting and presenting research that centers the Queer Latina identity. Many in the BIPOC community, not excluding the Black Indigenous students of color enrolled at Appalachian State University, accept our existence as a form of resistance (LaPointe, 2018). Exploring the research questions that examine liminality—personally and with the participants—to seek

methods of resistance and healing justice in that liminality, within the contexts of institutional normalizing narratives and discourses.

This Nepantlera project aspired to explore a new Nepantla with participants as part of the practice in co-selecting stories that are most meaningful in their empowerment, self-growth, and in the reflection of their interactions with norms that have most shaped nuestra vivencia—our lived experience—during our university enrollment. Where a Nepantlera represents the whole Latinx in their spiritual and physical identities, Nepantla is the plane where all Nepantlera identities coexist in peace—even ones that normalizing narratives would define as contradictory (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Anzaldúa reclaims and honors Xicana/Latinx indigenous heritage and history by renaming liminality, using the word, “Nepantla, a Nahuatl word meaning la tierra entre medio—the land ‘in-between’” (Anzaldúa, 2002). La tierra entre medio is a critical and creative concept as well as a grounding principle in *Borderlands*; it welcomes the whole of the Latina’s identity and respects the fluidity of her journey in the physical and metaphysical planes (Anzaldúa, 1987 & 2002; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Gonzalez Ybarra, 2018).

*Borderlands* recognizes that the Latina may hold one identity as more salient in the physical or metaphysical worlds than others and that these saliencies may shift at any given moment in her life. Each Nepantlera's Nepantla is different, because each Latinx liminality is distinct to the individual; though, the lessons learned from the voice of a Nepantlera reveals truths that impact the whole of the community as powerfully as it has the individual who speaks their experience.

***(Re)Attaching and Healing the Dismembered Self & Community.*** Following Nepantla is *conocimientos* stage three, “Coatlicue State,” which is an emotional processing

or “internal whirlwind” (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 68) that serve as catalysts to transformation. Coatlicue, according to Borderlands theory, “involves dismantling or undoing what is no longer connected to the individual’s process for spiritual activism;” this stage in the *conocimientos* process “is the intentional act of confronting the evils that have colonized the mind and body (Anzaldúa, 2012)...a process of deconstructing and cocreating knowledge from within...” (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018, p.17). The Coatlicue state, though personalized and unique to the individual, “as an act of decolonization cannot happen in isolation... Individuals must be in relation with others to understand how the liberation of a person is tied to the liberation of others (Martín-Baró, 1984; Sandoval, 2000)” (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018, p.17), which means that all *Nepantleras* must eventually reach the *conocimientos* fourth stage, “the Call.” Here, *Nepantleras* focus on building community before “Putting Coyolxauhqui Back Together,” the fifth *conocimientos* stage.

Coyolxauhqui is a Mayan goddess who was the daughter of mother earth, Coatlicue. The myth of Coyolxauhqui tells the story of a daughter who learns her mother is pregnant; ashamed of Coatlicue’s sexuality, Coyolxauhqui convinces her hundreds of siblings to murder their mother. As Coatlicue is under attack by her children, she gives birth to her new child, Huitzilopochtli—the sun god and would-be god of war—who dismembers Coyolxauhqui; her head becomes the moon, and her body is dispersed across celestial space. The “Putting Coyolxauhqui Back Together” stage of *conocimientos* with the birth of new knowledge and growth in identity acknowledges the ways we as liminalities have internalized deficit narratives; it stresses our decolonizing role in restoring and healing to reconstruct ourselves and repair our relationship with Coatlicue, our cultural and indigenous origins. (Rosen, 2014)

Stage six is “The Blow Up,” which signifies tension and contention; in this stage, Nepantleras form new ways of thinking and expand personally within their community relationships on their way to the final *conocimientos* stage: Spiritual Activism (Fernández & Magaña Gamero, 2018, p.18). *Conocimientos* stages do not necessarily occur in a convenient, linear or chronological order; even still, they are critical to “consciousness awakening and consciousness raising” within decolonizing, Borderlands activism for Latinx identities; Borderlands theories show what Caraves (2014) describes as:

Necessary for inner transformation and ... to contribute to social change and collective consciousness raising. Through doing the ‘inner work’ of healing, we engage in “public acts” which take the form of “writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism...” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 542).

*Conocimientos* becomes a motivating force that pushes one to use newly gained knowledge to push one’s culture and communities forward to “create new paradigms, new narratives” (p. 558). (p. 112)

One semester is simply insufficient time to confidently claim that each Nepantlera completed their *conocimientos* process, and decolonizing literature suggests that processes like *conocimientos* are cyclical. The work that began in Fall 2021 will continue within the Nepantleras; they will carry the stages with them in their future relationships and within their current and future discursive spaces.

**Conocimientos in Progress.** In order for the circumstances of our *encuentros* to be authentically transformed into story in this dissertation, to foster *conocimientos* within such a short time period, the participants' input and feedback was encouraged throughout the Fall 2021 semester and following it; *cariño*, which is explained in sections above, directed the

decision to make direct feedback to the dissertation from the participants optional after the official close of the Fall 2021 semester. Given the length and time-sensitivity of the dissertation, it seemed just to share the work openly with the participants but not set any expectations for their engagement beyond their Fall 2021 commitment. Still, the methodology *trenzas* of *cariño* and relationality continued throughout the dissertation drafting and defense stages, leaving *Nepantleras* with the space and power they rightfully deserve to occupy within the project and within the academy.

The *nos/otros* dichotomies are inherent to the *mentes y cuerpos* of Queer Latinas in higher education and *Intibucá* research (Saavedra & Pérez, 2012). The narratives present in this work queer the *nos/otros* gendered binary; they represent perspectives from Latinas with different national affinities, gender/sexual identities, and lifestyles. I don't assume or aspire that my stories or the stories of others belonging to any other *Montañeras* who chose to participate unveil explicit solutions to reconcile our irreconcilable realities (Tuck & Yang, 2012); nevertheless, I believe—along with BMF scholars—that "speaking secrets is an uncomfortable, yet perhaps necessary, tactic needed to rip open spaces where dialogues and conversations can occur and where homophobia and misogyny can be, at the very least, unveiled" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 266). In reading the narratives and group analyses from Chapters Three and Four, readers can see the participants' processing in action of gender, ethnicity, and belonging; even though *Nepantleras* placed high emphasis and value on their Latinx families, few of the narratives named the oppressive forces working against their ethnicity or race, nor were they able to specify or locate the *Nepantleras* identification with race. If it was a known identity to them as authors, their likely connections to indigenous and/or African ancestry was kept a secret to their audience. *Nepantlera*



connection to whiteness, where applicable, was open and explored early and throughout the encuentros.

**Muting: The Self-Silencing of in Early Conocimientos Practice.** The ubiquity of whiteness in the institution leaves space for affirmation and awareness of proximity to whiteness where antiblackness and anti-indigeneity left Nepantleras to silently question this aspect of their racial identity when given the opportunity. In oral storytelling during encuentros and pláticas, at least two of the Nepantleras strongly identified as passing or feared a lack of belonging within ethnic and BIPOC groups because of their whiteness. This group's dynamic suggests that whiteness, though privileged in dominant groups, may be perceived as marginalized within the Latinx/mestiza/mixed-race racial community.

Anecdotally, the Nepantleras shared their understanding of their whiteness but did not have a language to express their race that did not mirror the essentializing labels that dominating groups use to subordinate non-whites. Even when explicitly given the opportunity to explore indigeneity and blackness in a secure group, where signs of trust are present, the Nepantleras chose not to think or speak deeply on their race.

The Nepantlera contranarratives' silence surrounding indigeneity and blackness conjecture social constraints that structure limitations surrounding racial dialogue within the Latinx and educational communities. These limitations exist in the wake of centuries of violence and material impact, intergenerational traumas that coerce indigenous groups into hiding to survive continued threats by colonization. At least myself and one other Nepantlera know that we are the grandchildren of some of these indigenous groups, and it is likely—given the political history of the countries of origin that the other Nepantleras claim—that all of us have recent indigenous ancestry. This dissertation speaks to and works to disrupt the

normative discourses that suppress Latina voices and decolonizing Latina identity development; through BMF analysis, this research aims to disquiet the Latina silence that continues in higher education today.

### **¿Quien Somos? Who are Montañeras Queer, and Where Will We Go from Here?**

Literary, educational, and political trends hierarchize and essentialize identity categories to fit expectations set by dominating identities within various groups, even marginalized ones—as I introduced in Chapter One. LatCrit is one of the most commonly used theories to examine Latinx identity; it was the first Latinx-specific theory that I was introduced to in my educational leadership coursework. In this theory, originally created for legal fields, one with metamarginalization must view experience with how it intersects with—first and foremost—race (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013).

Before and alongside Borderlands theory, educational research on intersectionalities that most commonly centers or features Queer Latina liminality have largely prioritized one identity or section of identity as more significant than the other. Race and ethnicity are not the only identity categories within identity-based research that has a history of hierarchization and essentialization. Even some queer theory projects—which explore experiences with gender, sexuality, and expression in order to challenge and diverge from cisgender, heteronormativity—have detrimentally hyperfocused on certain aspects of the LGBTQIA+ experience at the risk and result of racial/ethnic or other marginality/liminality erasure (Valdes, 1997; Rodríguez, 2016; Jackson et al., 2021). I posit that these trends are effectively suppressing indigeneity within the Queer Latina liminality, adding to the contributing factors that deter becarias—Latinx/a scholars—from (re)claiming their indigeneity as they have other elements of their cultural heritage.

### *Somxs Completas*

While there are many theories and projects that broadly claim a culturally affirming or culturally responsive framework, these same theories and research projects are structured to fail liminalities in the ways they permit continued colonization of identity, knowledge, and experience. Outside of Borderlands theory, there are other social theories working at centering the whole person, allowing the experience of the person or group to emanate more authentically, organically, and syncretically in the research (Sandoval, 1998; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). An example of a theory that centers the whole, intersectional person is intersectionality feminism. The creator of the term, "intersectionality," in feminist and Critical Race Theory literature is Kimberly Crenshaw. Crenshaw (1991) uses "the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact" (p. 1244). Intersectionality feminism demands the researcher refuse to disconnect "positionality, knowledge, and freedom" in research (May, 2012, p. 156) and to "think critically about male domination and the intersections of race and class" (hooks, 1994, p. 106).

Latinx scholars are more than a liminality; we are more than a marginalization; we are those things, and we are a hybridization of many worlds, trapped in one body; each body is witness to present acts of violence, resistance, alliance, and settler-colonial construction; each voice has the power to impart knowledge based on the experiences of those mentes y cuerpos, bodies and minds (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Calderon, 2014). Anticolonial theorists using BMF must consider personal and community relationships with land, geography, indigeneity, and coloniality to structure conocimientos—a transformation of circumstance into a story with identifiable pattern(s) (Calderon, 2014; Anzaldúa, 2002). As witnessed by these first five chapters, BMF offers theoretical space for the Queer Latina to

explore the gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in a way that meaningfully decolonizes them and their spaces.

### *Narrativa Trenza*

Educators of color, including those with liminality within that category, have cleared a path for students to continue learning from and building on their respective "experiences through autobiographical assignments, critical race reflections and dialogue, participatory action projects, and community/trust-building orientations" (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 320). My research similarly centers my own liminality as a Montañera Queer and offer other students navigating the university an opportunity to exchange narratives as a method of healing and a call for justice. As suggested by many Latinx educational researchers (Yosso, 2005; Ramirez-Escobar, 2019; Jimenez, 2019), this collection of contranarratives includes the many advantages that contradict or transform hegemonic deficit-based narratives that shape my experience with the institution. Through this research project, the Nepantleras explore experience through BMF narrative. The relationality of the group and the Nepantlera narrativas benefits those with marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys to our collective future as a representation and model of healing justice in progress.

In this section, I will elaborate on narrative and storytelling methodologies used for Chapter Four in this dissertation. Contranarratives challenge normative perspectives through narrative; the critical distinction between the Borderlands contranarrative I am creating in this dissertation and other theoretical storytelling applications is that "Borderland theorizing seeks social transformation...for all whose voices have been silenced la(o)s deslenguada(o)s" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 256). Furthermore, "contesting and writing back to empire is an important part of BMF," (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 260) a tradition which is honored

by both corridos and testimonios (Elenes, 1997, p. 366). Scholars employing healing justice narrative in "The act of writing the pain," specifically through experiences of the liminality of the Queer Latinx identity, identify narrative expression as self-healing (Caraves, 2020, p. 110). Finding methodologies that blend *mentes y cuerpos* to take our realities and release our futures from as many normalizing restrictions as possible is essential to our survival and success in the institution as well as to our personal growth and development.

As I alluded to in Chapter Three, I often struggle with language and ontology surrounding my mestiza identity. The hesitancy surrounding naming indigeneity among the *Nepantleras* in the research parallels my own internal struggle and falls into the complexities of our liminality. Cultural intuition, within a *trenzas y mestizaje* research project, brings mestiza lived experience into Borderlands literature through the complex mestizaje interweaving of identity and subjectivity (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Delgado Bernal (1998) and other feminists identify cultural intuition as an anticolonial *fuerza* in educational research (Calderon, 2014). Cultural intuition was considered in selecting the narrative forms that would be used as a starting point for the *Nepantleras* to learn both a new theory and a new craft.

In my own personal experience exploring my cultural identity through narrative, in my academic experience in creative writing, and in my professional experience in student advisor roles, I carefully selected written forms for the study. Cultural intuition brought me to selecting *narrativa trenzas* that I believed would speak from and to the *Nepantlera* liminality in the fashion; corridos and testimonios embody Latinx creative expression and are ideal for Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist research because of the ways they merge personal experience and politics to document and incite social change. Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF)

research must "at every step attempt to decenter Western modes of thinking" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 262). Corridos and testimonios do just that in speaking from the robust and rooted experience of a group that daily crosses physical, sexualized, gendered, racialized, and ethnicized borders. BMF scholarship reports the crucial progress made by the Queer female voice in contesting the patriarchal and colonial, machista conquest in educational research (Córdova, 1999; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008; Calderon, 2014).

The Nepantlera narrativa research project expands knowledge to reveal creative and politicized narratives that contextualize and problematize normative discourses from the subjectivities and perspectives of las Montañeras Queer conocimientos. Borderlands-mestizaje feminist methodology serves as a practice in healing, expression, and growth within the borderlands—crossing the research borders between researcher and subject. Chapter Four reveals the inclusion of my own poesía in this BMF project in contribution with other Montañeras Queer. Before including my poems in the constructed dissertation, I invited participants to write and/or speak their own narrativas in testimonio, corridos, or poetic form; all who engaged with the process allowed the flow of creative exchanges to inform the analysis of the trenzas y mestizaje project, based on the group plática on the written narratives. Using testimonios and poesía as BMF methodologies helps expose and challenge the nos/otros border in research by weaving "the personal, political, historical, and cultural into a messy text where the subject of our gaze may have started out as the participant but then ricochets back to the researcher, the history, the culture, and the political" (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 263).

## **Sin Superioridad: Relationality in Non-Hierarchical Storytelling**

The non-hierarchical, emotionally-validating, storytelling exchange between me—the researcher—and the Nepantleras—the participants—revealed deep-rooted personal and intergenerational traumas we were experiencing during enrollment. Concentrating on our healing, our narratives became political and spiritual activism, and it became clear that I needed to augment the original curriculum to find methods from other fields that might support the healing justice narrative work we were engaging in. Using Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET)—introduced in Chapter One—in partnership with the Indigenous-inspired practice of *conocimientos*, Nepantleras learned how to reclaim their narratives and escape (re)victimization by writing their own story and claiming their own narrative (APA, 2022). This theory connects directly with the Nepantleras' dedication to therapy, and was added to the curriculum after the participants joined the group and shared their interests. Using methodology from the field of psychology offered some epistemic and methodological bridges to strengthen their understanding of Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism, specifically how they might use BMF narrative directly in response to their trauma to heal themselves and help their community.

The way NET gives space for writers to express painful emotions within NET stories, framed within positive morals (APA, 2022), aligned well with the goal of this research to directly benefit the participants and other marginalized students. NET also equipped the students with additional strategies for approaching the research questions:

- How do institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at Appalachian State University?

AND

- How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?

Though not all testimonios, the written narratives selected by the participants for inclusion in this work are all political. They represent the healing justice in progress by students with liminality—specifically, those identifying as Queer, Latinx and who also believe they possess feminine energy as a core component of their identity. Their participation co-constructed a local grass-roots, contra-curricular narrative group that moved beyond deficit-centering research to benefit them on their own journeys toward our collective futures. At many stages of the research, I (re)oriented methodologically—grounding myself as a practitioner and the storytelling methodology within the context of the research to its guiding questions. Routinely reflecting on relationality also helped to understand my positionality within my role in BMF theory and practice, specifically within the locality of the research; my selections of medium and research methodology were strategically made to align with the theory’s epistemology.

### *Testimonios as Healing Justice Literature*

Educational research centering the voices of educators of color emphasizes, “The act of regularly writing and sharing testimonios” as a means of facilitating “deep levels of engagement to self and others;” sometimes confused as a theoretical method, testimonio extends beyond method—serving as “a methodological, pedagogical,” approach that speaks from both political as well as personal standpoints throughout the narrative works (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 322). The personal is political, which makes testimonio an ideal space for empowered voices who remain unheard by dominating forces in the university. Testimonios made the jump from heritage and tradition to academia by the works of feminists who—



following intersectionality, Borderlands, and Xicanx/Chicanx/Latinx feminist epistemologies—sought methodologies meaningful to acknowledging and valuing the marginalized voice of the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity with race, indigeneity, sexuality, class, ability, language, citizenship and religion (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Collins, 2009; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). Incorporating testimonios into academic research as an anticolonial methodology is significant to those with Latinx intersectionality because it proffers up control reclaim our own narratives centers for activist voice within the university (Sosa-Provencio, 2015). Testimonios and other political narratives not only reclaim space but visibilizes dynamics of power that are invisibilized by colonial blindness. Latina testimonios are quintessential to contemporary humanities research and other fields as “a form of storytelling that exposes injustices and disrupts silence that radical Latinx women of color such as Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983, 2015) and others (Fuentes & Pérez, 2016; Sanchez, 2009) have utilized as a way to testify and theorize lived experiences navigating various forms of oppression” (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 323).

The meaningful connection of testimonios to Latin American storytelling traditions makes it ideal for methodologies of social healing and transformation (Sosa-Provencio, 2015). A testimonio must be written, according to tradition, by the narrator or by one who is a close witness of events (Sosa-Provencio, 2015). The positionality or subjectivity of the researcher/author is intrinsic to testimonio methodology (Sprague, 2016). *Trenzas y mestizaje* testimonios go beyond counter-storytelling in that they claim space in *contranarrativas* form to incite action for a more prosperous future. Testimonios is not only the sharing of a story; the methodology demands social justice through the intentional and political act of storytelling as a rite of passage (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012).

Testimonios place a figurative torch, illuminating systemic failures and gaps, in the hands of the next generation or others who share a similar identity and can contribute to and/or retell the building blocks of cultural knowledge (González, 2001; Pérez Huber et al., 2015), and this proyecto—this project—allows the light from Montañera torches to illuminate anticolonial pathways in the institution. Through the encuentros, written narratives, and pláticas, the university is a static, apathetic character at best in our narratives. Nepantlera narratives speak as a dissident dialogue in the unveiling of their identity-development that questions colonial norms. In spite of the barriers enforced by colonial-dominated institutions, Nepantlera storytelling evidences strengths in resistance and repair.

### *Corridos*

Corridos are ballads, poetic forms which are presented in lyrical form from the authentic voice of the speaker. The corrido follows a culturally-relevant and familiar pattern that includes a narrator who, similar to the testimonio, is directly involved in or witnessing an event. The narrator, at the beginning of the poem, asks for permission to begin the story. Once the implicit permission has been requested, the narrator introduces the characters and presents a warning to the audience within the context of a challenge. Once the scene is set, the corridos moves forward with the conflict and inciting incident, which is often a tragedy.

Once the events have been described, the corridos explains the moral and gives the audience a farewell. As poems, corridos are less challenging to teach in participatory groups than the larger body of prose, testimonios, or than other, more complex narrative poetry forms. Corridos blends well with testimonios in a narrativa trenza entangled with Nepantla, as it speaks in adaptable form for the complexity of multi/transcultural lives, where the dominating or “adoptive community may contradict the norms and values of the students’

home community;” corridos are a “border rhetoric,” often told in the voice of artists who are citizens of or are descendants of people from areas in what is now known as Central America (de los Ríos, 2017, p. 455).

Authors of corridos and the style of writing are described using the term, *corridista*. Corridista tradition continues in its popularity as *poesía callejera*—street poetry—that aims to decolonize and indigenize throughout Mexico and in the U.S. (de los Ríos, 2017, p. 456). Corridos speak to, for, and by the indigenous and Mestizo population of what is now known as Central America. Corridos prepared an introductory platform to culturally-affirming verse to the *Nepantleras* for us to employ the methodology of *mentes y cuerpo* into the *trenzas y mestizaje* project. Corridos, as poetry, grants me more freedom in form to flow translingually, to break, to leave emptiness, to fill space in a way that symbolizes my body’s experience in verse and in a way that both communicates and realizes my *facultad*, or cultural intuition. Breaking away from expository form will shred the fabric of colonial research traditions in a way that prose cannot—even with the flexibility BMF epistemology proffers.

Ultimately, only one participant chose to incorporate corridos in their written narrative. Even without following the complete structure of the corridos, the exposure to a culturally-affirming Latinx ballad inspired most of the participants to write poetry as their written narrative genre submission. Pérez utilized the *trenzas y mestizaje* methodology to hybridize the corridos poetry form with free-verse and concrete poetic styles. More specifics on Pérez’ creative liberties and stylistic choices for their *mestizaje* narrative are described in Chapter Four in the section with their written narrative, titled “Strings and Boxes.”

This chapter focused on the structure, ethics, and relationality of the group in connection to the research purpose and methodologies that most benefited the Queer Latinx/a

participants on their healing justice journey. Through Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism (BMF), Nepantleras leaned into their aspirational fuerzas to embark on their self-determined journeys toward our collective futures. The Nepantlera narrativa research project equipped participants with a healing justice practice while also amplifying the authentic voices representing these experiences, which Chapter Six will continue analyzing from a BMF lens.

## Chapter 6

### Mestizaje Narrativas:

#### Blending the Personal and the Political through Narrative

To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*

be a crossroads. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.195)

This chapter continues the Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF) trenzas y mestizaje research design, which strategically braids and blends theory and culture—symbolizing how the personal and the cultural are inseparable from identity and, therefore, are a means of contributing to knowledge. The cultural fuerza of rebeldía that emerges in this research and is inherent in the subtext of the quote above is illustrated throughout the Nepantlera writing process and their selected written narratives. Rebeldía as a fuerza in the Nepantlera's healing justice narratives is an act of defiance against colonial structures that lead to soledad, and the fuerza blended and braided with the practice of writing parallels the entrusted trenzas y mestizaje methodology used to explore the guiding questions in this research:

- How do institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience at Appalachian State University?

AND

- How do Queer Latinas explore, express, and grow within their liminality while studying at Appalachian State University?

#### **Sin Fronteras—without Borders: Community-Based Healing through Storytelling**

The themes in this chapter highlight ways Nepantleras explore, express themselves, or grow. One expressed, collective interest in healing justice pairs with the stated purpose of

the project to benefit those who the participants represent more so than institution's research procedures and traditions. The Nepantlera interest in healing justice dramatically transformed our collective ideas of storytelling. Understanding institutional normalizing narratives was certainly critical to the project in both the preparation and in the co-construction of the contra-curriculum once participants joined, especially in the earlier encuentros; however, the participants prioritized and emphasized their *conocimientos* processes in exploration, expression, and growth. The participants focused their narratives and analyses on their own personal healing.

In Chapter Five, I offered a narrative context to suggest some social and structural influences behind the range of identity exploration expressed by the Nepantleras. To reiterate, their narratives seldom explored subjects related to the first research question explicitly, which requires writers to go beyond acknowledging oppression to understand or work to understand the structure of that oppression. Without the explicit identification of an oppressor or “normalizing” force in their written work, further analysis is needed within the thematic context of our fireside stories during encuentros. In this chapter, I illuminate more shared interests and *fuerzas* that contributed to the activism of their written narratives. Some of the themes in this chapter may not be explicitly present as an element of the participant-selected stories; however, they capture my interpretations of the project's process as an educator and storyteller.

### **Storytelling Hours**

Because I live in an area where All-Wheel-Drive (AWD) or Four-Wheel Drive (4WD) is best to access the roads safely—and because one of the Nepantleras did not have a vehicle, we agreed to meet at the Lowes Foods in town—where there is a public bus stop.

From there, we carpoled to my house, where the Fire God set the bonfire. I had a container of hand sanitizer, water bottles and a basket of snacks that was filled with food items for the Nepantleras to enjoy during encuentros or to easily take with them. I pushed together two picnic tables at a safe distance from the fire so that the Nepantleras could remain socially distanced.

To mitigate the threat of essentializing and dualizing in the construction of scholarly work, *cariño* guides BMF researchers to “continuously be self-reflective” in our relationality and subjectivity as critical considerations in the relationships of trust and care that researchers develop with participants and vice versa (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, pp. 263-270).

Borderlands theory (Bautista, 2019) suggests that in resisting the colonized value of individualism that has been instilled in our communities, we begin to decolonize our minds; in doing so, we begin healing our own colonial blindness to see the conditioning that primes us so well for division (pp. 57-60). To help me understand the way the importance of self-reflection connected to the value of community as a way of following the methodological framework of the project, I used Leigh Patel’s (2016) relationality; though Patel’s work is housed more accurately in broader decolonizing theories, their work speaks to and with the epistemologies of Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism (BMF). Myself and the Nepantleras were all sharing from individual perspectives, and it was important to the research for respective Nepantleras to feel seen in their fullest selves as they saw themselves and wanted to be seen. Though understanding the self is important to indigenizing BMF research, decolonizing also means (re)attaching ourselves to communities coloniality tore us from. This mirrors the axiology of Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism—rooted in “indigenous concepts that promote

truth seeking, interconnectedness, respect for others, critical consciousness, and love” (de los Ríos, 2013; Rodriguez, 2012).

### ***Cargas y Regalos: Burdens and Gifts***

To start each encuentro, I asked the Nepantleras to share their *cargas y regalos*; this was an ice breaker that I learned from my work with the LatinxEd Fellowship (2021). As a check-in and as the first exchange of stories, I asked the question, “¿Cuales son tus *cargas y regalos*?” The direct translation is awkward, but the general one is, “What are the things you are bringing into this space that have been taxing or weighing on you, and what are the things you are bringing into this space that have been a gift to you?” They shared things that had been weighing on them since the last time we had met, and they also shared some highlights of positive experiences they had. Sometimes the same event or issue represented both the positive and negative experience for the week. For example, after the Hispanic Heritage Festival, two members of the group felt empowered by being in a Latinx space, but they also felt their gender identity was marginalized and/or repressed by that space because of the Latinx value of “*todo para la familia*.” This phrase was echoed in a fireside story told by the Fire God, and it is also a common saying in the Latinx/e/a community. It places family as a priority over everything and—for some Queer Latinx—can mean choosing family over living our lives in our bodies as we identify ourselves. It is an example of many areas where our *Latinidad* can give us a sense of community, even while isolating or erasing our Queer selves (Enamorado, 2020).

Empathy in research development demands a higher level of vulnerability, compared to those found in relationships formed or depicted in Intibucá educational research processes. I was very careful with how I framed things and mindful of the energy I had when entering



any space with the *Nepantleras*. I used empathy in exercising *cariño* methodology. If the energy in the room seemed uneasy, I volunteered to share first. Anything that could be taken as advice, I was mindful to phrase in story form. These stories during *encuentros* were our healing narratives in process.

Responses to the *cargas y regalos* prompt revealed the mutual struggle *Nepantleras* had in finding affirming ways to express their lived experiences, especially ones that related to their family traumas or problematic patterns that they, themselves, or others in their families were following. These brief story modes were an entry point for the *Nepantleras* in the self-decolonizing process, strengthening exercises that reset expectations for sharing personal information outside of the family unit. The responses to the *cargas y regalos* check-in exercise showed their progress in understanding and applying the *Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF)* concepts we were learning as they found new ways to frame stories that contained negative experiences or evoked negative emotions; instead of the normalized practice of self-gaslighting or toxic optimism that benefits heteropatriarchal, colonial institutions, they processed their difficult feelings through oral storytelling and written reflections. What's more, they began to uncover their own power in directing that self-reflection process. The openness of the prompt left intentional space for interpretation and for natural flow, deviation, and circulation of the dialogues as directed by the *Nepantleras*.

Reflecting back on the terms the *Nepantleras* felt comfortable using in their stories, I don't recall either of them naming "white supremacy" as an oppressor; though, based on the representations of what that phrase means in the anticolonial literature that informs *BMF*, it is clear that white supremacy was impacting their daily lives. *Nepantleras*—evolving from their responses to *cargas y regalos*—did share some negative experiences that affected their

ability to equitable educational and social access when compared to their hetero-Latinx, cis-male Latino, or white female peers. Interactions with white males, except in opposite-sex partnerships, were never discussed—in neither positive nor negative light. The absence of this was surprising for me; however, it was also understandable, given that the university already offers many spaces in which students can process their grievances with white male dominance in the institutions. What made this group so special for the students, to paraphrase their remarks, is that it offered them the only safe space in Boone where they could be fully and wholly themselves—complex, college students still figuring things out, “just scratching the surface” (SI, 2021). It was the only space where their experiences as racialized, ethnicized, gendered, and sexualized beings in the margins could face and process the source and degrees of their subordination. Even more, in this space, their identity—all of it—was seen in its fullest potential as a power they already possessed to satisfy their aspirational *fuerzas*.

Through the *cargas*, *Nepantleras* discovered or uncovered their *luchas*, their struggles; their struggles were distinct with some overlap: homophobia in the family, fear or uncertainty surrounding their gender and sexuality, the male-dominant (*machista*) culture (*machismo*) of the “Latino” community as well as the deficit-perceptions we face distinctly as Latinas or as Queer Latinas in our daily lives. These themes are explained more in the next section. These themes connect to broader concepts in *Borderlands* theory and other theories centering the identities, which compose the Latina Queer intersectionality; overlapping themes in our narratives offered a point of illumination for the participants in processing and analyzing, respectively in relation to our collective narratives. In the previous chapter, I position our narratives and my experience with the process of facilitating this project to offer these

overlapping experiences as a potential for reattaching the individualized stories to the community; the Latina Queer reality for the participants in this study is still facing deficit-framing and deficit-perspectives that threaten the Latina Queer imaginary; we cannot erase these perceptions, so it is healing to understand them in the context of our stories and to offer alternative futurity that benefits those with marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys in relation to their respective communities. Although it was challenging to hear of the struggles *Nepantleras* faced in the home, I felt confident that—with time—the students would also discover that they are enough; that they already possess everything they needed to work with their *familias* and heal their intergenerational wounds.

### ***Cariño Boundary-Setting***

My relationality in the research made me susceptible to retraumatization, specifically of wounds I believed were caused by my educational and professional journeys in higher education. The *Nepantleras* chose not to center experiences specific to higher education or Appalachian State University in their selected written narratives, at least not explicitly; however, our *encuentros* stayed true to the name, often opening up discovery dialogues. In one check-in, Fire God had a white female student tell them, “I would never fight a Latina,” implying that Latinas were in some way more violent and capable of more harm than other races or intersectionalities. Seeing distinctions and resonations, or connections, within our narratives aided in our trust-building. As a group, we validated each experience in the safety zone we co-constructed, a dignity that is seldom granted to marginalized identities whose experiences with microaggression are often met with gaslighting or other victim-blaming behaviors. Having our experiences validated shifted our vantage point so that we could see agency. The agency we saw was in ourselves, and it was in the collective.

To optimize the Nepantleras creative range in the healing work, it was imperative that I fully embrace my role in *cariño* methodology. Participant process was significant to the work of this project. To follow the methodologies of healing justice set through the political narrative forms of *testimonio* and *corridos*, I lay the foundation for Nepantlera processing with *mentes y cuerpos* so that they could learn through first- or second-hand lived experience and application. It was important for the project to remain focused on process and to include the Nepantleras as orchestrators of that process out of consideration for the group's fullest potential to experience the theory. Rather than give them a technical guide, structured in a similar way to their assignments or other projects, I considered their *mentes y cuerpos*; indeed, some logistical teaching of the methodology was still needed to have a shared epistemology within the group; these lessons were planned and an overview of topics shared with the Nepantleras before meeting with them.

Before the first official *encuentro*, we established our group norms together. The norms selected by Nepantleras were reinforced throughout the semester as reminders when needed. Reinforcements included reminders in-person when group norms or boundaries were broken, norm-affirming messages through the GroupMe to offer encouragement and inspiration between *encuentros*, and individuals owning up to mistakes after breaking a group norm during *encuentros*. My role as researcher and participant had a different set of guidelines, for which I relied on my methodological framework to lend in decision-making. When stories were shared that posed points of connection to my own experiences, I entered the dialogue only when called in by Nepantleras inquiry or for advice, affirmation, general contribution or guidance. This small refusal on my part, sharing only selectively as the group communicated a need or desire for my input, was a way I ensured that I was sharing space

and that the Nepantleras shared collective power over group construction and the healing space. This concept marries the decolonizing research methodology of refusal with an indigenizing methodology of reciprocity, where one enters a space with intention but without motive and moves in reciprocation rather than in reaction to the energy around them (Hernández & Tenesaca Guaman, 2021). Occasionally, I would have concerns in how the students perceived themselves, as my interpretation of the perceptions was that they posed potential barriers to healing and justice. SI struggled with self-identified body-dysmorphia; Pérez expressed feelings of disembodiment from self and community; Fire God admitted to having patterns of self-minimizing behaviors and deflecting through humor. These cognitive distortions follow intergenerational patterns that may have once been effective survival and coping mechanisms at different stages of our ancestral history with colonization.

Verbalizing any concerns that I had was a challenge in wordsmithing. As Chapter Two alluded to, silencing can be reinforced within marginalized spaces. I took care to frame my own narratives as a model in connecting individual experience to community care, healing, and transformation. During storytelling encuentros, I shared my experiences for context, how I benefited from my choices or how I might reconsider my approach if met with the same decisions today. This chapter and the one before it explains the different measures taken to ensure that as much power as possible remained with the Nepantleras. Part of the work of this contranarrative group was in identifying not only our emotions, some of which were negative, but also the coping mechanisms we use as a deflection or avoidance response to these emotions or those experiences that cause them; our narrative process gives us an alternative strategy in understanding our methods to reclaim our experiences, discover nuestras fuerzas, and make empowered decisions on personal boundary-setting between

nuestros mentes y cuerpos—the context of the figurative and literal space that our minds and bodies occupy and navigate; the process of this dissertation represents such a brief period of time but offers a lasting hope that reflects the aspirational fuerzas, embodied in the Nepantlera narrativas, to suggest that the methodology in this study can help marginalized communities lead higher education forward in healing justice toward our collective futures.

Other than the initial “cargas y regalos” inquiry, there was no standard series of questions asked during our encuentros. The encuentros were part of our shared space, where Nepantleras had co-authorship; therefore, they could share power in developing the project and its corresponding dialogues with each other. It was an organically, co-constructed space that honored the knowledge existing within our cuerpos y mentes. Knowledge, like other abstract concepts, has no globally agreed upon definition. Different languages reflect the varying ways of knowing and values of knowledge behind every culture. What most transformative, normative-challenging, and antiracist theories have in common is that they have unquestioningly shared values with settler-colonial research processes to push the proverbial needle forward. Colonial conditioning takes the stance that the less white, the less able, the less male, the less cis, the less “American” we are, the less power we can or should possess (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Puar, 2017). Colonial research perpetuates deficit-centered ideologies when applied without care, intentionality, and attention to the ways in which colonial influences are arising in the process. With every element of this project, great attention and intentionality was made to unsettle colonial patterns in effort to challenge the processes leading to deficit-centered thought in relation to Latinx/a Queer intersectionality.

## Monthly Guided Encuentros

There were monthly guided sessions, using materials cited and described in the narrative trenzadas and methodologies descriptions in previous sections of this dissertation. These were scheduled as a group, using GroupMe polls to decide which of our planned Friday times would be best to meet. The vision for these encuentros was to empower the students with the theoretical frameworks and methodologies guiding the project that would inform their choices for narrative construction:

1. In August, for the official first encuentro, I introduced the *Nepantleras* to *Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism* and the feminista who inspired it: Gloria Anzaldúa. With the introduction of Gloria Anzaldúa, I also introduced poetry as a form in BMF storytelling. After gaining an understanding of the definition of BMF, the *Nepantleras* exchanged oral stories that came to mind when hearing about the theory.
2. For September, the guided encuentro focused on Coatlicue. This encuentro expanded on the concepts introduced in August. Coatlicue is stage in the *conocimientos* process. When applied to the writing exercises use in the encuentro *Nepantleras* focused on a time when they felt lost, or in a whirlwind, because of how their intersectionality was viewed in social contexts. They took time to write independently, and then the group returned to the fire when their writing was complete. This exercise proved difficult for the *Nepantleras*. They needed at least 10 minutes before they effectively disconnected from their digital devices and began the writing. Once they had completed the exercise, those willing to share, did.

3. In October, the students learned the structure of corridos and how these poems had been used as a method of political resistance and rebeldía in Latinx history.
4. For our final guided encuentro, before submitting our written stories in November, the guided encuentro focused on the methodology of testimonio; we discussed the distinctions as well as the similarities between corrido and testimonio. During the guided encuentro that focused on testimonios, Nepantleras read aloud testimonios from “Latina testimonios: a reflexive, critical analysis of a ‘Latina space’ at a predominantly White campus” (Flores & Garcia, 2009) and Anzaldúa’s (1987) testimonio, “Entering the Serpent” (p. 29). At this meeting, the weather had started to become colder, so we all discussed the likelihood that we would need to adjust our group’s expectation for meeting outdoors for our last encuentro/plática.

### ***Recurring or Shared Themes in Storytelling Hours***

Some common themes for the Nepantleras that revealed themselves in the storytelling hours of los encuentros, prior to submitting our written narratives. Utilizing intentional methodologies like those in BMF frameworks are key to diverting theory and education away from the reconstruction “of new discursive ideologies that seem liberatory but indeed are colonizing and regurgitating the same hierarchical, patriarchal, homophobic, and capitalist relations” that we so wish to eliminate and eradicate (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 262). In the same way that BMF frameworks secure boundaries between the decolonizing research and colonial discourse, Nepantleras are exploring their needs in creating boundaries between themselves and others. This emerging theme of a desire to grow in our understanding of and skills in boundary-setting was unanimous in the group. Through our stories, we learned of



our concerns surrounding boundary setting and affirmation; respectively, we show strengths in honoring and identifying them.

All of us wanted to explore or examine existing boundaries between ourselves and our parents—many of us, though not all, had a desire to distance ourselves from our biological fathers. The mother-daughter bond, identified by Borderlands and Feminista scholars as inherent to Marianista culture, was important to all of us (Pappa, 2019). Our boundary-setting goals were not limited to our families; all of us were in different stages of romantic relationships throughout the semester; Fire God was more actively dating to explore potential new romances; SI met and partnered with an international student very early on in the semester; Pérez had been in a long-term, long-distance, monogamous relationship with her partner, and I was open to but not actively seeking new romantic connections. Toward the middle of the semester, the trust was so strong that the group felt very comfortable sharing personal and intimate details of their lives. There was a lot of challenges around learning their own personal boundaries in relation to sexual relationships with partners and casual “situationships,” which was a term they used to describe a relationship or sexual/romantic connection that did not have expectations for commitment.

Another theme that emerged in our stories is silence. This theme whispered in reply to the ways institutional normalizing narratives and discourses shape the Queer Latina experience during their enrollment at Appalachian State University. It was not just the silencing of our people by hegemonic forces, but the self-silencing, the unspoken stories that are broadly understood within our intersectionality. They told stories of joy, love, laughter, strength, and resilience. Nepantleras spoke freely without external disruption, but that did not mean they were free to speak. Some stories were unspoken or shared in pieces because they

were too painful: stories of partner betrayal, of isolation, neglect, abandonment, misgendering, being hyper- and hetero-sexualized.

Some things were never spoken aloud because—in our intersectionality group—it did not have to be. Sepamos. At least within the context of this group, we were seen as the categories and labels we identified for ourselves; our “Identities played a significant part in [our] relationships with” with each other; not only in securing attachment to an “identity but also by providing a sense of acceptance and legitimacy in a world in which [we are] often marginalised because of [our] identities” (Bhopal, 2014). Having this commonality, we went beyond what would have been a surface-level exploration in other groups to transcend the deficit framing of (neo)liberatory theory and extend research past pain to emphasize cultural advantages as well as immediately benefit the participants through a practice in healing justice narrative methodology.

### ***Therapy was a Non-Negotiable***

During the timeframe of the semester, all Nepantleras—myself included—were routinely active in therapy. We all prioritized mental health, and I believe this is one of the many ways we curated the emotionally safe space that we had co-constructed in our group norms. All of us had secure bonds with our therapists, except SI, who was still getting used to their therapist. They often felt like their therapist wasn’t digging deep enough or like therapy wasn’t going anywhere. I shared my own experiences with therapy and having not felt comfortable changing therapists because of how much I felt I had already shared with them.

In reality, it took me over five years to feel truly comfortable sharing my fullest self with my therapist because of some negative stigmas I had internalized about the process. The issues related to SI’s therapy remain unresolved, but the rest of the group remains in good

standing with their processes in counseling. What these experiences point to is the hard tek (Lencan word for work) that spiritual, emotional, and mental healing entail. Integrating Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET), mentioned in sections throughout this dissertation, into the Nepantlera curriculum supported Nepantlera conocimientos within nuestra comunidad to supplement their individual tek in therapy. Combining this methodology from the field of psychology with BMF theory served to satisfy the goal of this research: to directly benefit the participants and other marginalized students. Through this research project, Nepantleras reclaimed their narratives and saw transformation realized in their daily lives as a result.

### ***What's in a Name? Claiming Space by (Re)Claiming Names***

For over 30 years, I have been misnamed, “Marie,” “Marsha,” “Marissa,” or any other whitewashed variation of María that might make me more palatable to the subconscious white mind. On my biological father’s side, no one in my family can pronounce my name the way it was intended to be pronounced, even though the Dutch pronunciation—a culture my biological father claims—and the Spanish pronunciation of my name are very similar. Though my biological father and his brother had a great grandparent named Anna Maria who migrated to the U.S. from Germany—which should have familiarized them with the name—my paternal uncle would still sometimes “forget” that my name is María, calling “Marie” instead.

Maria is a very common and global name. Its pronunciation, except in the U.S., does not vary significantly across the globe. Still, when I turned four and started school at a predominantly white k-12 institution, my mother told me to expect that teachers would call me “MUH-ree-uh” instead of “Mah-REE-ah.” She told me not to correct them and, if possible, not to tell anyone that she was my mother. Eventually, I learned that the reason she

told me this, and the reason she gave me my father's last name—despite his lack of participation in my upbringing—was to prevent some of the discriminations she faced before she had the privilege of a white name. A couple of years ago, I started introducing myself in social settings with the correct pronunciation of my name. I am still okay with those who cannot roll their Rs using the American pronunciation, but I no longer default to this by adjusting who I am in how I present myself to the world. I reinforce the pronunciation of my name by sharing audio clips of the correct pronunciation with those who are curious and using the accent mark over the “I” whenever possible.

One initiative I have been grateful for was supported by the Appalachian State University interim CDO and her office. The initiative rolled out in October 2021, which also coincided with Hispanic Heritage Month; it was intended as a way to offer safety and support for trans and nonbinary students at Appalachian State (Stuart, 2021). With this initiative, I was able to correct the spelling of my first name. Even with a legal name change, the U.S. would not allow the accents in my name, so being able to choose how my name appears will affirm my identity in my professional space within the university. In December, I changed my last name to my mother's maiden name. I was raised by my mother and her family; it always hurt not to share a last name with them. My mother's *fuerzas*, her *experiencias*, her *historias*, her presence in my life are what shaped my existence; it is her legacy I wish to continue in moving toward a decolonial imaginary for myself and for my family.

The participants also shared in variations of their own reconnection to culture and reclamation of power through name. In fact, it's an ongoing movement among the Latinx/e community that has extended beyond the scholarly theories discussed in this work and into mainstream discourse (Pérez, 2021). *Nepantleras* Pérez and SI did not always pronounce

their surname in Spanish. They initially introduced themselves with the English pronunciations. In SI's case, they often introduced themselves and went by the abbreviation of their name. By midterm, both Pérez and SI had identified a personal intention of pronouncing their name the way it was intended; Pérez opted to include it in their narrative submission as a way of emphasizing this proclamation. The Fire God's first name is not a Spanish name. Their last names are names that, in my opinion, do tend to get mispronounced, but this did not come up in Fire God's storytelling as a concern or issue. The way they claimed space through their names was by including their full family name—both surnames, one from each parent—in their signatures, profiles, or other shared written works.

### **Storytelling Captures Healing in Progress**

There is a distinction between Chapter Three's storytelling encuentros and Chapter Four's Nepantlera-selected written narrativas; the oral storytelling and written drafts that emerged during our encuentros before the written narratives were submitted are raw; encuentro stories were shared among and co-authored by the participants in real-time, a collection of our strengthening voices in process. In the written narratives, participants revealed the narratives that emerged in self-reflection from a self-directed process that gave way for independent methodological application and the full manifestation of healing gifts—rooted in their respective identity.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion:

#### Nepantlera Narrativas and Next Generations

This land[...]

was Indian always

and is.

And            will be again. (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3)

Deficit-centering is perpetuated in colonial research and is pervasive throughout the student experience in higher education. This research took great care, intentionality and attention to unsettle colonial patterns in effort to challenge the processes that leads to deficit-based thoughts in relation to Queer Latinx/a liminality. This project extends the literature on educational research from marginalized perspectives through the Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF) methodology, trenzas y mestizajes. Trenzas y mestizajes move beyond storytelling to either indigenize or decolonize spaces. The generational harvest I envision for this research, adduced in this conclusion, will benefit the participants as well as other Queer Latinas who follow.

The Nepantlera Narrativa research conducted for this study embodies decolonizing practices of refusal: refusing to disembody experience from data, locality from experience, and relationality from locality (Whetung & Wakefield, 2019, p. 152). Colonized knowledge places restraints on personal experience and how it can (and if it should) be considered knowledge. Anticolonial and decolonizing research argues that "deconstructing power" is needed instead of the "objective cataloging of observations. Indeed, 'objectivity' is code for power" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). Anticolonial theories, like Borderlands, acknowledge

that "Settler codes express the putative right of the settler to know and thus to govern all the people, land, flora, fauna, customs, cultures, sexualities in his seized territory" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). Deconstruction of power challenges these codes, a deconstruction that occurred during and as a result the research.

"The academy" obsessively produces and prioritizes "original research...[that] hunts for new objects of study, and its favored reaping grounds are Native, urban, poor, and Othered communities" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 813). This classifies research and knowledge construction within higher education as an "Invading structure, not an event" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 813). Because "Invasion is a structure, not (just) an event in time (Wolfe, 1999)" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812), Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist researchers and educators must acknowledge the present colonialities and deconstruct colonial power through refusal. Refusal distinguishes methodology in this work from similar concepts presented in other areas of educational and social science research that have yet to divest from or challenge its colonial origins. The research's perpetual analysis and reflection is a means of "Refusing the colonizing code of research" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812).

Many decolonizing scholars feel very strongly about the careful application of the label "decolonizing" (Tuck & Yang, 2012). I did not, at the start of my work believe the research would be decolonizing; I knew that it was anticolonial—oppositional and contra-curricular to settler colonial educational norms, but I could not know if the work was decolonizing until engaging with the participants. Using decolonizing literature, I can confidently claim this work as decolonizing activism in Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist healing justice narrative. In decolonizing research, this research engaged and engages "after, before, and beyond coding" while it moves to "precede, exceed, and intercede upon settler

colonial knowledge production (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). In the process of designing this research, I prepared to submit to IRB. When I was informed by those processes that my work did not fall under IRB purview, I feared the impact of that on my study.

Returning to my research goal, to explore experience through BMF narrative in a way that benefits those with marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys to our collective future, restituted my aspirational *fuerzas* for the project. IRB, as it is currently designed, governs the colonization of knowledge; it is one of the many ways the institution may "Cover its tracks...making its structuring natural, inevitable, invisible, and immutable" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 813). Even without IRB, I organized a study that was ethically-guided and amplifies the empowered voices of a historically silenced liminality while fortifying them with transformative tools to supplement their existing *fuerzas*—which I will summarize in this chapter. Throughout my own process as researcher, I engaged myself, my committee, and my participants in inquiry that would challenge myself in a practice of refusal so that when it came to the point that the work was “enough,” I could honestly answer the question of “what am I revealing here and why?” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 816). The benefits of this project to the *Nepantleras* are only beginning and are, at this point, unknowable.

### **Borderlands Mestizaje Leadership Imaginary**

What do *Nepantlera* Narrativas teach educators? The narratives and the process the *Nepantleras* engaged in to create and select them offer much needed guidance for leaders and educators throughout campus. Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism extends leadership opportunities to all levels of students, staff, faculty, and administration across the postsecondary institution. Pedagogically BMF leadership imaginaries and applications help



"Educators address intersectionality, make room for diverse ideas and perspectives, and validate the emotional lives of students. Furthermore, educators create non-hierarchical, critical spaces" like the Nepantlera Narrativa group at Appalachian State University "for both students and teachers to learn, and educators become healers and bridge builders between different worlds" (Cavares, 2014, p. 111). Decolonizing questions, "Why this? Why me? Why now?" from Leigh Patel's (2016, p. 57) present themselves in a BMF leadership imaginary within higher education. These questions would better organize strategies to focus the intention of our initiatives, the voices that need centering, and the timing to bring in a meaningful context and awareness to educational leadership.

The marginalization of decolonizing work decreases in BMF leadership imaginaries, as BMF leaders support the development of projects that serve underserved populations in (like the Queer, Latinx intersectionality). With more awareness of the emotional burdens in the workplace and learning environment, BMF leaders establish increased mobility in their marginalized student support and advocacy. BMF leadership imaginary proposes efforts that bring justice, transformation, healing, and decolonization to education. Within coloniality, there is little to no importance placed on relationality. In a BMF imaginary, researchers and leaders engage regularly in self-reflection to connect how they are working in relation to the students whose lives they are impacting. False narratives, which gain momentum in existing university procedures that collect Othered stories of pain, dissipate in the BMF leadership imaginary because the authentic voice of liminality that moves beyond pain repudiates and quiets these stereotypes.

### *Tips for BMF Leaders*

Borderlands Mestizaje Feminism refuses self-silencing that upholds the aforementioned immutable presence of coloniality; it resists the norms of accepting and creating policies out of urgency that can then, by colonial blindness in naming the policy, become a barrier to decolonization and justice. BMF is a process-oriented framework. In leadership, intentionality and relationality throughout all processes of leadership are essential and reinforced.

BMF leaders can expect their proposals for bridge-building initiatives that center marginality or liminality—and prioritize individual and community healing—be met with colonial blindness. In these responses, BMF leaders may be asked that programming avoid "excluding" privileged groups in the name of equality. In the imaginary proposed in this section, I outline methodologies employed in this research that may empower other anticolonial grassroots movements, especially those looking to inculcate contra-curricular programming through healing justice narrative. In my years with Appalachian State University, my Borderlands ideas for programs supporting intersectionalities, marginalities, and liminalities within the institutions have been met with simultaneous enthusiasm and despondence.

My professional roles, scholarship with the Immigrant Mountaineers Movement, and volunteer service as mentor to BIPOC students have brought me to intentionally engage with over 600 campus constituents on topics of liminality, justice, and university transformation. These interactions have shown me that there is intense enthusiasm from professionals about the potential and power in liminality-centered programs, especially from faculty and staff who identify with marginality/liminality; though the energy surrounding these movements is

fueling my aspirational fuerzas, there is still overwhelming despondence when these same professionals think through the logistics and processes of institutional approval and funding. Though this project does not presume to offer solutions, it does offer alternatives in Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist (BMF) theory application. In a BMF leadership imaginary, the future of education—as well as its connection to history—is valued; as such, liminality is prioritized as an investment for the future. A BMF leadership model would minimize the lucha—struggles—marginalized professionals face within the institution.

Until transformative changes at the administrative and systemic levels are made to realize the imaginary proposed above, individual leaders and collective educator groups can work together as co-conspirators in decolonizing higher education through BMF methods. In the sub-sections below, I outline tips for educators who are interested in applying BMF strategies to their daily practice.

**Connect Your Marginalized Students to Culturally Meaningful and Decolonizing Theories.** By virtue of their stated mission, vision, and values, Appalachian State University is ethically obligated to create an environment of belonging for Nepantleras. Without the faculty, staff, and students of color volunteering their cultural wealths toward what minimal initiatives have been set since the promise to "diversify" in 2015, Appalachian State University's actions toward diversity, equity, and inclusion are performative at best. More careful consideration of liminality and intersectionality in university processes or organizations will begin to open possibilities for the asseverated "transformational Appalachian experience" (Wycott, 2022). Without meaningful change to the structure and values of existing practices, university constituents will remain in colonial blindness, unable to imagine alternative futures or solutions to emergent and ongoing issues in higher

education. In a colonially blind higher education system, the normative discourse suggests that the best way to solve the issue of (neo)colonization is to treat all students equally. Doing so gaslights BIPOC students as well as educators of the current, recent, and historical systems that have erased, silenced and sought to limit Queer Latina/x liminalities.

I am a unicorn educator. The structures and systems that govern education are coded against my success. I am openly Queer. I am nonbinary femme. I am Latinx. I am the mixed race, mestiza descendant of Indigenous, Spanish colonial, and white settler "pioneers." I am translingual. I am a writer, and I have worked in higher education for 15 years now. I am authentically and directly connected to the liminality represented in the Nepantlera Narrativa project in a way that elevates this distinct contra-curricular project.

But educators don't have to be Queer, Latina, Indigenous, or formally employed to integrate BMF theory into their practice in educational leadership. What BMF leaders need is self-awareness and a willingness to explore alternative ways of being, thinking, and knowing. Anticolonial and decolonizing theories, like Borderlands and BMF, are rooted in the epistemology that "Research is a fundamentally relational project—relational to ways of knowing, who can know, and to place;" *cariño* is a methodology that often asks the researcher to adapt "projects of well-being and balance in the face of contradictory Western frameworks" (Patel, 2016, p. 48). The purpose of this project was to benefit marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys toward our collective futures. The *cariño* value of "Querer es poder" (González, 2010, p. 651) left much of the decision-making power in this research with the participants.

The Nepantlera narrativa project was designed, (re)considered and examined through "Indigenous epistemologies..." that uphold the epistemology "of all actions, reaction,

practices, and thought," including research, as "being interactive;" decolonizing educational research scholar Leigh Patel (2016) affirms that "such views demand an attention to balance and health throughout" (p. 51). The decolonizing paradigm housing the epistemologies in this research structured the attention needed to balance the spiritual, physical, and emotional wellbeing of the participants in context of our location, the time in which the research was conducted, and the liminality represented in the group. The university is uniquely poised to support Queer Latina intersectionalities, if they choose to. Liminalities, including Queer Latina intersectionalities, offer insight to educators for (re)consideration of the services and initiatives they offer marginalized students.

**Be Vulnerable.** In a BMF practice, educators must challenge themselves to be honest, transparent, and vulnerable with students about who they are. It is imperative educators understand what their identity and roles mean in the context of colonization and in relation to the students and colleagues with whom they engage. Entering this research, I had to work on "unpacking internalized homophobia, transphobia, and sexism within myself" (Caraves, 2020, p. 120). This research offers some narrative to explore some of the ways I have struggled with coloniality in Latinidad, especially in the suppression of my sexuality within the Latinx category.

Because of a series of personal traumas that I have experienced, only some that have been described in this dissertation as they relate to the *Nepantlera* narratives, I developed a *fuerza* of empathy. I allowed myself to be vulnerable with the *Nepantleras* by freely sharing this empathy with them. What I realized "in that...vulnerability," was that "there was trust and community that was built; as they saw" someone they would eventually call a mentor "being vulnerable, being human, our shared stories created a new dynamic in the" group; "my

ability to be vulnerable with my students led them to be empathetic" as well; "it made students feel seen in their struggle to be themselves" (Cavares, 2014, p. 117). BMF educators reflect not only on their innate traits and experiences, but how the whole of who they are in relationality can contribute to bringing out the strengths of those they are leading for and with.

**Focus on Healing, Justice, and Decolonizing.** My vulnerability with the Nepantleras "broke down hierarchical structures within" higher education that Cavares (2014) suggests "Can limit what students take away from the learning experience," and it also showed Nepantleras:

That they can theorize from their own pain and lived experiences. Ultimately, students produced beautiful creative projects that not only showed their deep understanding and application of what we learned...but their work was grounded in their personal journey as LGBTQ Latinx individuals themselves or co-conspirators of the community. (p. 118)

What was evident across all narratives is that "thinking of their gendered self is not something they had much experience with inside or outside of a class setting" (Cavares, 2014, p. 118). Many PWIs, including Appalachian State University, make claims that the curriculum supports the education of the whole student. Conocimientos can empower BMF leaders at these institutions to engage their students with liminality in exploring elements of their identity that might not be available to them in other discourses. These contra-curricular programs move beyond the settler colonial codes of higher education and invites educators to "listen" and share with "someone's process of pain and vulnerability" (Cavares, 2014, p. 120). Shared conocimientos, a meaningful and memorable journey in identity exploration

and lived experience, also presumably minimizes the harmful occurrences of misgendering and other mistakes surrounding gender and sexuality that those with privileged identities in those categories often fear when engaging across identity lines.

**Narrative Healing for Justice and Local Activism.** Before our encuentros even began, Nepantleras affirmed that the university was not a space where they had a sense of belonging. Their narratives, both in their written representations and in their fireside storytelling processes echoed their liminality in their college enrollment. The trust bond established between the Nepantleras in the narrative justice group planted grassroots energy and nurtured an environment for local activism to take root. Nepantleras wrote themselves into a validating "Existence as a body that defies many boundaries. Further," sharing their "awakening" publicly in this dissertation "creates a ripple of awakening for those who are exposed to it" (Caraves, 2014, p. 112).

The justice work that began to unfold in the respective lives of the individuals and as a collective manifested as a result of the healing work in processing intergenerational traumas with a group of those with common identities. As anyone who works in trauma-informed practices understands, processing traumas poses risks to all engaged in the work; my own liminality—as a Queer, Latina educator who not only has professional experience in supporting neurodivergent, BIPOC, and intersectionality students, but is also in treatment for Complex post-traumatic stress and anxiety disorders—was invaluable to the healing component of our narrative process. My background in writing was, as anticipated, useful in helping guide the students with narrative tools for identifying their most authentic voice. This project suggests narrative justice groups require intentionality, *cariño*, and relationality in its construction.

White supremacist knowledge, of a settler colonial design, positions coloniality and whiteness "at the top and at the center of all typologies—as simultaneously most superior and most normal" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). Though the Nepantleras are still exploring their racial identity, the research process exposed them to a new process for engaging with their lived experience, expressing their identity, and communicating who they are with their community. According to anticolonial and feminista literature, "Indigenous students who are culturally secure are least likely to leave school" (Calderon, 2014, p. 89). The *rebeldía* fuerzas, described below, show signs of this cultural security. What's more, *rebeldía* is a sign of the decolonizing ontology of refusal, "a stance in that it is resolute... the posture of an object that will not be removed nor possessed" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 814). Even without a clear language for this expression, Nepantleras are already taking bold steps in their own personal journeys to "Dismantling coloniality" (Calderon, 2014, p. 86).

Higher education is normalized as an "end" to a formal educational process. "For young people of color," and especially those with liminality who exist in-between categories or possess more than one marginality, "schooling has endeavored to control the minds, bodies, and spirits of those deemed subordinate and inferior—those who stand apart from dominant, White, middle-class culture;" the collection of this work debunks the myth, stemming from colonial ideological constructions, that ethical care works in contrast to or in erasure of justice "dynamics of power and oppression" (Sosa-Provencio, 2016, p. 3). Justifiably, whiteness is problematized throughout postsecondary educational research; reminding readers about the concepts of white ignorance—examined most notably by Mills (2007)—anticolonial scholar, Dolores Calderon (2014), surmises:



White ignorance is not confined to White people alone. Similarly indigenous scholars (Deloria, 2006; Smith, 2012), Chicana feminists (Anzaldúa, 1987; Pendleton Jimenez, 2006) and others (Fanon, 1967) recognize that the process of colonization leads to a type of ignorance, which Deloria characterizes as colonization and thus advocates work towards decolonization. (p. 86)

The Nepantlera encuentros and written narratives represented in this dissertation propound an exemplary for anticolonial, Borderlands, and—specifically—Borderlands mestizaje feminism (BMF) in higher education research theory. In the next section, I offer more analysis on how this exemplary of Nepantlera narrativas wane colonial blindness; more importantly, the political narrative as a form of educational justice is a methodology in healing to offer direct, immediate, and lasting impact to participants.

**Narrative Healing Justice: Personal Healing is Political Justice.** Nepantleras, healing through narrative, problematize the community and the self; this process challenges the ways they contribute to the dominant discourse in colonial blindness, through the blind application of social responses to conflict. While the group was taught the traditional forms of testimonio and corridos, the corrido presented by Nepantlera Pérez was only represented in hybridized form. This mirrors the hybridization of the author, who is from a multi-national Latinx background and uses a hybridized word, "Cuba-riqueña," as their self-identifier.

Fire God and I used the testimonio methodology to share the "untold and treasured stories of" our liminal existence that stands in "resistance to social oppression, domination" (Sosa-Provencio, 2016, p. 5). Chicana feminist scholar, Mia Angélica Sosa-Provencio (2016) reminds us of the transformative healing justice power of political narrative—specifically, the testimonio:

The decolonizing methodology of Testimonio...recognizes that the right to voice and the authority to bear credible witness to one's lived reality of struggle and survival is an essential avenue by which oppressed peoples may stake a place of dignity and equity within society. (p. 5)

Through testimonio, nuestra voz reveals stories of survival as well as visions for possibilities beyond it. As we process our experiences, we begin to heal our traumas; healing clears emotional, mental, and spiritual capacity where once colonial trauma-responses dominated.

**The University as a Site of Local Activism for Liminality.** The greatest strength of the group was in its liminality; our respective experiences lended heightened abilities to welcome, hold space for, and embrace the variety of gender, sexuality, and expression that existed within the space we co-constructed. This researx was conducted on behalf and by Queer Latinx students who embrace feminine energies and recognize them as a fundamental part of their identity. The term feminine energy is inherently oppositional; within the patriarchal context of colonial institutions, feminine energy implies a masculine binary in opposition. Research surrounding gender and sexuality is beginning to gain momentum in challenging the binary structure that perpetuates heteropatriarchy. Afsaneh Najmabadi (2006) argues that any transformation of gender that has been made has "depended on the transformation of sexuality" (p. 14). Nepantlera encuentros, narrativas and pláticas question and desire self-determined ontologies. They want the freedom and dignity to express their gender and sexuality as they perceive it. Though the context of this researx did not have time to thoroughly investigate this inquiry, I believe Queer Latina liminality opens a nepantlera gateway for indigenizing paradigms— where sexuality, sexual energy, and gender identity can be explored through intentional analysis in higher education.

This Montañera Queer research project can serve as one example of Queer Latina resilience, success, and overall strength for Latinx students who may be contemplating if continuing their enrollment is right for them. These narratives share nuestra vivencia through empowered voices to overpower the silencing that occurs in institutional discourses.

**Recognize the Power Your Students Already Possess.** Students bring knowledge to the university, and we can learn from them in a way that decolonizes the invasive coloniality of educational research. Another strategy for BMF leaders is unlearning coloniality and (re)constructing anticolonial counterstories and contranarratives. To do this, educators must transcend the deficit gravitational pull of (neo)liberatory theory to extend the narrative beyond trauma and pain to emphasize cultural advantages. Each student or group of students possesses different fuerzas. Nepantlera storytelling, with conocimientos—cultural ways of knowing—and attention to the ways story is used to heal trauma in Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) (APA, 2017), led to the processing and problematizing of the social conditioning unique to Nepantlera liminality.

The Nepantleras' written narratives show the result of these processes and symbolize the next step in their self-directed futures: the story they choose to share in their authentic voice in contribution to the healing justice they seek for our collective futures; this satisfies only a portion of the purpose of this project to explore experience through BMF narrative in a way that benefits those with marginalized identities on their self-determined journeys to our collective future. The decolonial imaginary that was instilled in the Nepantlera group project through theory shifted to valuing the process of narrative construction more than the product that the reader witnessed in the previous chapter. This ideological evolution in the small group affirms the grassroots indigenizing movement of the self and community that resulted

from and was influenced by the research. This concluding chapter takes a deeper, decolonial analysis at the encuentros from the concepts and perspectives shared by the Nepantleras. What Nepantleras valued more than the final product of the narratives was the exploration they engaged in through Borderlands Mestizaje Feminist storytelling during the encuentros.

Nepantleras quickly embraced the BMF epistemologies embodied in the mestizaje methodology, which encouraged the blending of the personal and the political in their encuentros storytelling. This was identity-affirming for those with ethnicized, racialized, gendered, and sexualized *mentes y cuerpos*. Beyond affirming their liminality and leading them to their written narratives, the storytelling shared during encuentros led Nepantleras to paths of discovery and equipped them with a practice they could continue and share with others who have liminal or marginal identities. González Ybarra (2018) explains, “Theorizing in *nepantla*...allows for an analysis that examines particular ways of knowing from living within and navigating this liminal space. From the *Nepantla* created by the participants, thematic *puentes* rise from these stories—theoretical bridges that were evident in our encuentros. I found this significant, given the expressed motivation of the participants for joining the group being to have a space to share a community with other Queer Latines on campus.

*Puentes de fuerzas* carried the weight of our experiences, *experiencias* that all of us needed to make meaning of and that we did not feel we could fully or safely process outside of the "safe space" curated by the Nepantleras: emotional abundance, rebellion, family, love, healing, time, and discovery. I discuss many of these themes broadly throughout this concluding chapter and, more specifically, in relation to the *Nepantlera* storytelling

encuentros below. These themes show the process of each Nepantlera honoring their cultural strengths to reclaim power and control through a practice of healing.

*Emotional Abundance.* Advanced levels of emotions and emotional processing was a strength noted among all the participants. I am naming this particular strength, emotional abundance, to refer to the depths of the emotions as well as the desire to grow in understanding of those individual emotions in relation to their community. The participants needed validation for their lived experiences, and they were developed enough in their emotional maturity to know that validation needed to come from within. This validation surfaced, explicitly, in their narratives. Moving beyond validation for experiences, Nepantleras actively sought ways to repair the damage from negative experiences from their past. Their work values and seeks apologies as a form of healing justice.

Where they do not currently or have not received apologies from others, they create apologies for themselves. The need to apologize also was shared in the form of compulsory apologies for their feelings, which implied guilt and/or shame for them within the discourses they were referring to (campus, home, in other social environments). In some areas, they recognized this compulsion as a form of self-pathologizing, seeing themselves as "too much" or fearing that others would. In most contexts, however, apologies for experiencing feelings were normalized among the participants. All participants acknowledged that they were involved in the constant work of processing their feelings, some more so than others; however, each person in the group had made this emphasis clear enough in their work to show that the processing of emotions was or had become a priority to them.

Everyone in the group desired love—whether self-love, love from one or more intimate partners, or love from familia. This desire was evident in the written work submitted

and in the analyses shared in the plática. The self-validation and repair in their narrativas signal resistance to the dominant (read: misogynistic, homophobic, white-supremacist colonial). Dominant narratives pathologize Queer Latina emotions, classifying them as "too much," priming the university for a culture of silence that targets Queer Latinas. Latinas are caricatured as aggressive in higher education, building on the colonial imaginary of the indigenous as "savage" and the African as "animalistic" (Darder, 2019). The fuerza of emotional abundance—especially when Latinas express emotions outside of colonial imaginaries—is regularly silenced. In navigating spaces, Latinx cultural norms have adapted to suppress this fuerza as a method of survival in white-settler dominated spaces. Resisting and removing the pathology of Queer Latina emotions clears mental space for the Queer Latina imaginary in emotional abundance.

***Rebeldía: The Strength of Rebelling in Higher Education.*** Though rebelliousness is often demonized in social contexts, it is an effective boundary-setting tool in social contexts to combat pathologizing narratives, sustained by one group to subordinate another. Within machista culture, the Latinx Marianista norms of submission to authority is expected, alluded to in Chapters Three and Four and explained in more detail in Chapter Six (Pappa, 2019). In BMF theory, however, rebeldía, or rebelliousness, is a fuerza evident in the Queer Latina imaginaries put forth during encuentro storytelling and in the Nepantla narrativas. The term I am coining to encapsulate the strength evident in the Nepantleras that empowers them with the ability to make space and change is *rebeldía*. Rebeldía is a trenza y mestizaje of cultural wealths—braiding and blending racial/ethnic empowerment, navigational, linguistic, and resistant capitals.

Rebeldía builds on the capital of resistance, explored in the works of Ayala and Contreras (2018), which describes an example of how the university creates an environment that requires resistance for Latinx belonging and success:

Most of the time, student maneuvering of academic spaces meets obstacles. As other research has shown, Latina/o students have to manage economic constraints, as well as limited literacy in the exchange of the normative cultural capital necessary in higher education. Furthermore, students in our sample also confront the social construction of Latinas/os as other and are pressured to legitimate their presence in higher education. (p. 10)

Using a BMF lens, Nepantlera narratives reimagine resistant capital as a *trenza y mestizaje* in building rebeldía as a fuerza against normalizing (read: silencing and erasure) in their higher education experience. In resisting the dominant heteropatriarchal, colonial, and white supremacist narratives in the university that oppose most if not all of their identity, Nepantleras push back. Nepantlera narratives show liminality in the process of unlearning: "These negative perceptions of Latinas/os," motivated by "how they want to change perceptions..." and explore "more about their own culture" from authentic, identity-affirming, intersectional voices in those cultures (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p. 10).

One *trenza* of rebeldía is the identity-resilience development that was expressed in the healing work. In our own ways, and in our own times, all of us were processing our race. Samples of racial and/or ethnic processing in the narratives reflects Ayala and Contrera's (2018) racial/ethnic empowerment capital, which "refers to the sense of pride that students feel by being members of their racial and/or ethnic group" (p. 11). Each student felt a strong sense of connection or pride to their racial and ethnic groups, even if their exact place in that

group was still being explored. SI's work focuses on how their racial category and cultural upbringing affected how they viewed themselves; whereas, Pérez's work unpacks a sense of a lack of belonging that originates with social interactions in their childhood or adolescent stages of development. In Fire God's work, race is not explicitly processed but implied, and ethnicity takes the explicit emphasis. In my work, I utilize *coatlicue* to examine the ways in which whiteness erases indigeneity both internally and externally through *mentes y cuerpos*. Nepantleras used the narrative methodologies they learned—*testimonios*, *corridos/poesía*—as well as other BMF methodologies, like *trenzas y mestizaje*—to internalize empowerment through racial and ethnic pride.

Another *trenza* of *rebeldía* was linguistic capital. Especially in the group's selection of the broader label, *Latine*, to define themselves, they show a strong affinity for the Spanish language. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, the Latinx group is not monolingual; Spanish is a dominant language and possesses risks to marginalize within the Latinx marginality. It is also a colonial language. Higher education literature attributes bilingualism as a cultural capital inherent to Latinx student success. Depending on the degrees of separation the Latinx/a/e liminality has from Spanish colonization—for non-Spanish speakers, or those with self-identified low-proficiency in Spanish—"the common narrative" that welds *Latinidad* with bilingualism can actually be "an added stressor rather than a source of capital" (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p. 7). Early on in the *encuentros*, both SI and Pérez expressed feelings of inadequacy and lack of belonging in the rural Latinx culture because of their limited Spanish proficiency.

My own personal storytelling surrounding language and my translingual upbringing helped Nepantleras find spaces of potential belonging for them respectively on the Latinx



linguistic cartography, where they may have once felt excluded. Our storytelling also highlighted notes of intimate familiarity with language and sound, unique to Mestizo Latinx heritage. These stories helped us recognize the intimate familiarity we had with our languages—Spanish, hybridized English, indigenous phrases or letters—as a strength. Within the context of the U.S., translingualism—the ability to flow through one or more languages—is "a source of affirmation, especially..." in higher education, where "linguistic capital... becomes a form of navigational capital" (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p.6). Navigating through normalizing discourses in liminality is a strength. Ayala and Contreras (2018) define the navigational capital *trenza* in a way that resonates well with the voice and message represented in *Nepantlera* narratives:

These narratives highlight multidimensional agency, which simultaneously adapts, negotiates, resists, and transforms... Furthermore, the narratives speak of navigational capital, the 'skills of maneuvering through social institutions' (Yosso 2005b, p. 80), which allow a sense of belonging at the university and enable competent movement through academic spaces. (p. 8)

*Nepantlera Navigation.* *Nepantleras*, through *encuentros* and especially in their narratives show their competence in the navigational capital *trenza* that "Brings with it knowledge of different cultural, economic, and racial communities, contributing to social capital and intercultural competence. This capital is also accrued while at [the university]" (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p.8). *Nepantleras* use the various *trenzas* of *rebeldía* to claim their own belonging in defiance to the heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, colonial institutions that have not, will not, and possibly cannot create space for them within existing structures. Each *Nepantlera* claimed their space in their narratives to "Develop social networks that

fortified their commitment" to educación (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p.8). They owned their narrative to share themselves with us, the institution, as well as their target audience, students with liminality, and identified the process of doing so as a form of healing in our final plática.

*Familial.* Each of us emphasized family in our storytelling. The familial bonds presented in the narrativas align with existing literature on cultural strengths that advocate for "the emotional support that many Latina/o families—even those who do not have college experiences—provide. This support is especially important because Latina/o students are often bombarded with negative messages about their possibilities of success in higher education" (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p. 7). All of us expressed, at some point in our lives, "the debt felt toward [our] families and communities" (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p. 7). In my encuentro storytelling, I talked about how I went through most of my life weighted down by this guilt, feeling it as an additional pressure or burden that I had to bear—a penance owed as a cost for my liminality.

Over time, I realized that the reason my mother endured all she had—and her parents, and her parents' parents before that, and so on—was so that someday their descendants could live in the dignity and freedoms of being their fullest self, on their own terms. Our ancestors didn't lend us our cultural gifts; we inherited them; our existence is our ancestral investment. We have no debts to pay back, only wealth to share. I remember that afternoon around the fire, all of us in near-tears of joy. I can't speak to the private thoughts of the Nepantleras in that moment, but I found myself imagining that day—the day that I was working toward, the day where I could live and move as I am without having to hide, mask, abandon, or fragment myself.

I wondered if that day would/could happen in my lifetime, or if that was still something I was helping prepare for the future generations. In SI's case, their written narratives processed negative experiences with their family, but their oral storytelling revealed a close and supportive relationship with their mother. Fire God's work showed the conflicting relationship between the self and the family unit in their experience, which reflects another element of Borderlands theory that unpacks the complexities of Latinx family on an individual's development within U.S. systems. Pérez's affection and pride in their family was evident throughout their work in ways that, I believe, would speak to and inspire other students identifying as Queer and Latina to consider the strengths and wealths their culture brings to their respective identities. As for my story, I think that will speak to the second and third generation immigrants well.

My storytelling during encuentros revealed a strengthened mother-daughter bond after coming out to my very conservative Latina mother. This result diverges from Fire God's testimonio about the expectations they have surrounding how their mother will respond when they decide to come out. Like Fire God, I expected an aggressive rejection of my identity; instead, I was eventually met with love and respect. Our countries of origin root us in our familias, and yet our modern lives continue to colonize us further from those roots. Remaining connected with our culture becomes an act of rebellion, and it comes with heavy emotions attached to it that the *Nepantleras* process with their fuerza in emotional abundance.

*Aspirational Fuerzas.* Last but certainly not least in the recognizable themes, evident in the written work and their analyses, is aspiration. Latina scholars Ayala and Contreras (2018) define "aspirational capital" as "the type of capital that enables Latina/o students to

navigate higher education spaces by relying on their hopes for the future" (p. 7). The hope for the future is evident in the Nepantlera Narrativa themes of persistence. Nepantlera Narrativas centralize time as a subject to underline this persistence in their authentic voice and representations. In this presentation of time as subject, a juxtaposition and transportation through past, present and future is assumed through both the works and group analysis.

This reflects the group's passion and action-oriented approaches to regaining control, seeking justice, and making change at the personal and institutional level. Although the need for persistence because of existing heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, colonial structures is regrettable, Ayala and Contreras (2018) provide an argument for the continuation of including "These messages of persistence" in counternarrative literature to:

Challenge deficit perspective assumptions that Latina/o families do not value education and that lower levels of educational attainment are "normal" for their communities. Such assumptions mobilize a culture of poverty conclusion to make cultural arguments about Latina/o underachievement instead of structural arguments that document the institutional racism, ethnocentrism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism that mitigate success. (p. 7)

Though postsecondary education—due to historic limitations, machista traditions, and structural barriers to access—may not be an explicit message in the Latinx family discourse, education is often still generally valued in familias. The familia axiology of *cariño* that guide Latinx through ontologies in mutual care, emotional support and respect for personal goals in the context of the whole self is evidence to support the Latinx cultural axiology in educación (Ayala & Contreras, 2018; Sosa-Provencio, 2016; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

All the work submitted originated with questions, responses to personal struggles that have come up for the student in the process of their college enrollment. The Nepantlera narrativa research project was one of discovery for the Nepantleras that adds layers to the response in borderlands literature to the broader theoretical call for an analysis of "multiple oppressions and multiple privileges in racial/ethnic identity;" in these narratives and the analysis, Nepantleras reveal they are only "scratching the surface." In many ways—logistically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically—the collection of *encuentros y narrativas* show Nepantleras "encountering a set of unknown experiences for which [they] had no prior information to guide [them]..." Some of their experiences "are so outside the familiar, so removed from cultural norms, such violations of expectation, that to undergo them is surprising, upsetting, and even violently disruptive" (Ayala & Contreras, 2018, p. 6). Their reality is affirmed in the broader contribution of their voices and experiences to educational research that brings acknowledgment and "awareness of the ways both our social formations and ourselves as subjects are structured in and through the overlapping experience of race, class, sexuality, culture, and gender" (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1999).

**Give Students Contra-Curricular Options for Learning & Growth: Shapata, Kotik, Tishiuna, Mucha, Tet (Lencan for Discover, Learn, Know, Speak, Work).** The process this research introduced Nepantleras to was shared with them by a source connected to and informed by the cultures they could identify with at their current stage of development; it offered them validating—not pathologizing—resources to unlocking their truth, and it subverted the settler cartographic patterns by centering the Queer Latina as already being whole, powerful, healing, and wise. The process that Fire God noted as their "takeaway" has the potential to expand in decolonizing their self, community, and the power structures that

govern knowledge. Centering the students' needs with *cariño* followed the "analytic practices of refusal" offering both educators and learners "ways to negotiate" knowledge construction "from experiences of dispossessed peoples" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812)—including the Queer Latinx liminalities presented in this work. While *Nepantlera* experiences are "often painful," their voices, *mentes y cuerpos* are "also wise, full of desire and dissent" (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 812). This research was not an exposé to reveal the painful experiences of Queer students of color at Appalachian State University; though, based on the institutional and UNC system history, it probably could have been.

### **La Plática Futura: Hope for the Rural University in Liminality**

In the 1990s, Latinx student support—let alone Latinx liminality—was not considered or valued as significant to research or organizational advancement at Appalachian State University or in the UNC System. This barrier to higher education is reflected in international census data and methodologies, such as *trenzas y mestizaje*. In explaining the methodology, Chicana feminist, Chela Sandoval (1998) expresses the ontology that shaped it through her own personal narrative description: "So much has been taken away that the place we live now is an idea—and in this place new forms of identity, theory, practice, and community have become imaginable" (pp. 358-359). In 2022, those with marginal and liminal identities in higher education are still living in a world of ideas. In this world, they have formed and are owning their own identities, theories, practices and communities that dominant societies have overlooked, silenced, misinterpreted, hidden, and/or erased.

There is power in these liminal spaces; there is possibility in liminality. Deficit narratives in higher education research depict Latinx students as being less likely to value postsecondary education. This framing gives fuel to the "considerable resistance...on the part

of Eurocentric thinking educators, policy makers, and the general public" (González, 2010) and creates a culture of fear within ethnically different students surrounding their heritage. While the fuerzas I will outline below that emerged through the common themes in encuentros and narrativas aid Nepantleras in reclaiming space and resisting these dominant deficit narratives, they historically have caused students to feel hesitant to ask for support in their higher education process (Ramirez Escobar, 2019; Ayala & Contreras, 2018; Yosso, 2005; Flores-Gonzales, 1999). Not unwilling, but scared. This assessment is documented in LatCrit and Borderlands literature speaking to cultural capital, including the works of Latina scholars, Ayala and Contreras (2018), who elaborate that: "The first," to be unwilling, "is a refusal; the second," to be scared, "holds within it the understanding that help is needed, and the knowledge that seeking it might feel diminishing, even humiliating" (p. 5).

Oversimplified and disembodied data, gathered and analyzed without consideration to relationality, erases the longstanding evidence of cultural wealth inherent to Latinidad. Among these fuerzas, educación—"the education of the whole person" (González, 2001, p. 642)—prevails in the literal and figurative discourses within Latinx culture. Educación is a fuerza that Nepantleras offer the institution, and their dedication to working in this narrative collective in addition to their course load shows the many ways they align with the university's stated mission, vision and values. Appalachian State University claims that it "develops individuals who are eager to acquire and create knowledge, to grow holistically, to act with passion and determination, to embrace diversity and difference, and to become contributing members of society" (Wycott, 2022). To ethically meet this claim, the university must, "First and foremost," recognize and compensate the "tireless commitment, in particular on the part of folks of color..." both students and personnel continue "to assert the imperative

of cultural knowledge as a foundation of education, achievement, and excellence" (González, 2010, p. 653) in rebeldía, contra-curricular to the dominant narrative of the discourse.

### ***Implications for Future Inquiry***

"While public education" is "an alienating force...the lessons and knowledge gained from...community are also prominent. In this way, place serves as a powerful force against the process of alienation produced by schooling;" locality of the PWI in a small, rural town in the Southern United States in this research is pivotal to "Understanding these tensions between western and indigenous forms of education," offering BMF educators "perspective 'to critically look at the deep roots of Western-inspired institutions and practices...' in education, drawing on...multicultural experiences" (Calderon, 2014, p. 85). According to Tuck & Yang (2014), "There are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn't deserve" (p. 813), and the students' power was unshackled by this epistemology that freed them from any expectations myself or representations of the institutions might have of their contributions so that they could speak from their own authentic voice and experience. The students may not yet be able to use the language used in anticolonial theory, but they intuitively understand its concepts; they showed their understanding of Tuck & Yang's (2014) explanation of the decolonizing methodology of refusal that acknowledges, "There are stories and experiences that already have their own place, and placing them in the academy is removal, not respect" (p. 813). They shared what they wanted to share—nothing more, nothing less. This was about them; more importantly, it was for them.

I acknowledge that "Research may not be the intervention that is needed" for most BMF projects (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 813). Ideally, I would have performed this work under a fairly-compensated staff position or hybridized faculty role within the institution; however,



because these opportunities were not available to me, research was the only way I could make space for these students' voices in a way that benefits them. The participants' leadership and contribution to challenging, transforming, and decolonizing their thought processes is a step toward challenging, transforming, and decolonizing the university. In using *trenzas y mestizaje*, we blended and braided theory, qualitative research strategies, and a sociopolitical consciousness "As a transformative tool," through "*trenzas y mestizaje*" to imbue the research in "multidimensional, relational, and collaborative qualitative strategies" (González, 2001, p. 646). With *trenzas y mestizajes*, *Nepantleras* could engage in storytelling methodologies that were adaptable to their self-identification so that each participant could benefit. *Trenzas y mestizaje* is a methodology that was specifically designed for educators (González, 2001, p. 646), which will serve the broader purpose of this research to influence change from the self-directed journeys of the Queer Latina. From this Queer Latina imaginary, possibilities for the futurity of *Nepantlera* belonging and healing justice can be examined.

Bautista's (2019) work affirms that "Colonial education" is "marked by paternalism and restricted opportunities...colonized subjects" taking these limited opportunities meet "a glass ceiling in their economic advancement and, thus," any feats accomplished do not pose a threat to" white supremacy and coloniality in the institution or beyond it in professional spheres (p. 62). Though the university's administrative actions have not placed a barrier in my research, they place barriers to my daily practice and engagement with the university. How I continue serving the university in my liminality is limited by the way the university frames its strategic diversity plan in coloniality, exhibited in some of the university-organized (re)actions that were mentioned in Chapters Two and Six. Points of distinction that emerged in the storytelling *encuentros* as well as the final *plática* warrant future exploration in

interdisciplinary fields within higher education Borderlands research: the effects of Christianity on identity development in Latinx indigenous-origin college students; narrative exploration of cross-racial romantic relationships from Queer Latinx perspectives; the various diversity, equity and inclusion portfolios (DEI) and their respective impact on Queer Latinas and the impact of social identities on how college students self-identify.

More importantly, Queer Latinx students are exploring their place and history in the institution, reading about this research can give them pride in all aspects of their identity by reminding them of the strength belonging to the Latinx/e community—a comunidad we can cherish and reach out to when we feel unwelcome and undervalued in the university—and to the Queer community, a community centered on principle foundations of love, identity, expression, and acceptance.

### ***Nepantleras Are Looking into the Future: Focusing on the Next Seven Generations***

Another area where the Nepantleras are decolonizing is in their own approaches and priorities for balancing their curricular programming and priorities for personal development. One theme that seems to be a cultural norm within the group has roots in decolonizing theory, which asks us to act in a way that cares for and takes responsibility, "With the next seven generations of the indigenous community in mind" (Whetung & Wakefield, 2019, p. 151). In addition to the narrative readings and group plática, the last encuentro included planning and decision-making for how the group would continue in Spring 2022:

- How will we share our voices?
- Will we seek to publish our narratives in other avenues: Magazines, journals, social media influencing, etc.?
- Will we continue to meet moving forward? If so, with what structure?

- Will the group continue as a storytelling theme group? Will we have a different theme each semester?
- Will we invite and/or recruit new members?
- If we choose not to meet in a structured way, what will everyone's preferences/expectations be for communication and shared time?

A result of the Nепantla pláticas and exercises that the participants engaged in during our storytelling encuentros was that they developed a desire for their voice to be heard and amplified. They willingly and candidly shared in this project with me and with each other, discovering and imparting their story in their respective voices. They are a small but powerful group of Queer Latina/es at App State who chose to participate in this BMF project; "producing and validating knowledge" (Delgado Bernal, 1998, p. 15), they took ownership over their part as sites of knowledge related to their identity groups and experiences. The participants all had an interest in pursuing publication outside the dissertation processes with the Educational Leadership, Ed.D program. I have, since December, shared with them some submission forms to submit work individually. All participants want to continue meeting biweekly, keeping one monthly encuentro a more organized meeting to build upon what we have learned and one for more casual bonding.

The group was unanimous about its desire to continue meeting, even after the research project completion. They implied that their work, their narratives were a work in progress. Fire God offered this anecdote in our final plática to express their adoption of writing as a process, following their participation in this research project:

I know I was super hesitant to do it, and I think that that's just because...when I first started journaling, before my therapist, I had always done it when I was really upset

and...really angry to process intense emotions...so, for me, it had a lot of negative emotions tied to it, but then... my therapist was like, "Just do it like 5 minutes... when you're...having a minute, just do it..." That kind of normalized it and took away those negative emotions that were associated with it, and while I do it on days when I am...having a bad day, I also do it when I am not having a bad day, and so that allowed me to be able to write this [narrative] without it all being...bad feelings...not...*bad* feelings...hard feelings. Like, I talk about being Latine very easily, and then it kind of progresses, and it gets a lot more heartfelt. But I like the way that it turned out...the way that I organized it. Because I feel like it gets...closer...it starts off kinda distant, and then it gets a little closer, and then it gets a little closer.

These words indicate processing in progress, and the way each writer spoke about their narratives as having potential for future evolution reflected this value of process as well as highlighted their aspirational *fuerzas*. The *Nepantleras* were not ready to decide on whether or not they wanted to add new members, so we decided to hold off until the first week of Spring 2022 classes to make the decision. Prioritizing group decision-making wherever possible continues the co-constructed patterns that founded the group; this is fundamental to *cariño* methodology and indigenous paradigms of the collective that use shared values to situate the individual “within the nest of the collective” (Simpson, 2011, p. 51). It is evident that personal relationships between participants have formed, and I anticipate these will continue to grow—even if we do incorporate new members. It is implied that there will continue to be some storytelling and/or writing element to the group, as many if not all of the participants expressed this as being a helpful tool in navigating their semester.

I have begun a new contract with the university. This will reopen my access to university resources that will help me continue in my practice as a cariño educator on behalf of the Nepantlera students . For this role, I have committed to serve as a part-time adjunct English instructor in addition to my independent work, organizing in the community and serving as an online writing consultant. Initially, I was apprehensive as to whether or not I would be open to continuing to serve students in this capacity without compensation; however, I believe myself to have benefited greatly from the shared experiences with these Nepantleras and believe more work can be done to secure grants. Some steps I am taking now will be to present this work at conferences and use it as a foundation for submitting grant proposals, with the blessing and full anonymity of the Nepantleras. Grant funds could help with basic supplies, such as pens, gas, journals, water, food, self-care and sanitation products for encuentros. As long as I am employed by the university, I will hold space for any interested Montañeras Queer, Queer Latina Mountaineers, to discover, reclaim, and share their empowered voice through narrative healing justice.

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## Vita

María Conchita Genevieve Hernández (She/They) was born in Columbus, Ohio and raised in south Florida by her family, who migrated to the U.S. from El Salvador in the 1980s. Hernández is an emerging poet with poems published in many subcultural literary presses. She now lives in the Blue Ridge mountain region of North Carolina, where she works as a community organizer and educator. Before leaving Florida, she graduated in 2009 from the University of Central Florida with a bachelor's degree in English. In 2013, she acquired her Creative Writing M.F.A from Spalding University's School of Writing before earning her Educational Leadership doctorate from Appalachian State University in 2022. María's lived, academic, and professional experiences have trained her in the power of narratives to heal and transform.

Hernández' mission is to uphold peace in the community by centering social justice and equity in practice. In areas where marginalized voices are silenced and subordinated bodies are unseen, she works with individuals and groups in subordinated categories to amplify their voice and visibilize their experiences from their own perspectives. María's vision moves toward a community that is focused on social justice and healing from the traumas inflicted by centuries of white supremacy and imperial abuse.