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Historias de Éxito within Mexican Communities: Silenced Voices

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I dedicate this book to Charise Pimentel, my wife, partner, best friend, mother of my children, and many other things, for always supporting me and being my partner in life. This dedication is further extended to my three intelligent and beautiful children Quetzin, Quetzalli, and Maya for consistently giving me a reason for wanting me to excel at everything to prove to you that you can achieve all your dreams. Additionally, thank you Quetzin, Quetzalli, and Maya for always providing me unconditional love. Lastly, GRACIAS Dad (I know you are my Guardian Angel), Amá, Estela, Chito, Vicky, and Scott for feeding me the ganas to finish this book project. Finally, thank you Cheryl, Michael, Darian, and Jhane for simply being my family.
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Preface

Critical Latin@ scholars have argued for decades that Latin@s, especially Mexican and Central American (im)Migrants, have been framed in deficit views of their families and communities by the larger white(main)stream society (Urrieta, 2009). These various forms of deficit framings are often based on larger “stock” stories, or mainstream narratives, according to Critical Race theorists, that are told by a dominant group to depict their social reality and sustain and support their privileged status relative to others in society (Martinez, 2013). In the United States this privileged group consists of white, heterosexual, and wealthy males—often lauded as heroes, models of success, and of good moral standing. Such pantheon of “stock” heroes includes from Christopher Columbus, to the Founding Fathers, to Davey Crocket and Jim Bowie, and Ronald Reagan, to name but a few. These same stock stories often depict the opposite view of women, the poor, LGBTQ, and People of Color. In this view, when flaw is found in a white person, especially a white male, it is attributed to personal individual characteristics and circumstance, and not to whites as a group. The opposite tends to be true for People of Color, and as a result there is the highly problematic criminalization of young Men of Color, especially of Latinos and African Americans by the larger white(main)stream society. The white(main)stream narrative, it must be said, is not exclusive to whites and is also internalized through a process of internalized oppression by People of Color, who often also adopt the ideologies and normalization of white
supremacy and hetero-normative patriarchy, primarily through schooling, the media, and other sources.

According to Critical Race Theory, however, counterstories offer counter narratives that contradict, disrupt, and debunk such stock stories. Counterstories are those stories produced by People of Color through individual and collective experiential knowledge and in response to stock stories. Various forms of counterstories have been highlighted and serve multiple purposes including the disruption of dominant epistemologies and ontologies that both intentionally and unintentionally deny the full humanity of subordinated Others in society by blaming them for their own subordination. Latin@ scholars have been instrumental in debunking dominant myths through academic scholarship. Octavio Pimentel is no exception!

In the early 1990s, educational psychologist Luis Moll and colleagues offered the funds of knowledge concept as a counter-discourse that urged that US white(main)stream educators recognize the valuable and useful family and community knowledge Latin@ students possess. Sociologist Angela Valenzuela also contributed by challenging the assimilationist processes of subtractive schooling and by addressing attention to the social capital of Mexican and Mexican American high school students. Sociologist Ricardo Stanton Salazar further explored Latin@ working class social networks to contribute to the disruption of deficit views of Latin@ families as lacking in social capital. Stanton Salazar effectively extended notions of social capital to include Latin@ familial webs and extended barrio social kin based on culturally known concepts such as confianza (trust). Ethnic studies scholar Tara Yosso further challenged white(main)stream notions of Pierre Bourdieu’s “capital” by reframing capital as something that also marginalized communities possess, but that is devalued by white(main)stream standards. Drawing also from Critical Race Theory, Yosso offered a Chican@ community cultural wealth theory highlighting at least seven forms of capital: aspirational, familial, cultural, social, navigational, linguistic, and resistant. Through these forms of capital she repositions Chican@ communities as culturally wealthy, rich in resources, and with abundant assets. These and other scholars’ work reposition Latin@ families and communities as the bearers of long and complex histories, and powerful knowledge(s). These knowledge(s) represent the saberes of Latin@ communities.

Mercado (1994) equates saberes with Bakhtin’s concept of “social voices,” or the dialogic ability to entertain multiple, complex discourses
at once; thus *saberes* are intricate and multiple knowing(s) or understandings experienced within the milieu of everyday social, cultural, and intellectual life. *Saberes* is not a Spanish translation of knowledge or epistemology, but encompass a wider range of “knowledge(s)” including, but not limited to, interrelated forms of epistemic, ontological, and axiological knowing(s) (Urrieta, 2013). Such *saberes* can be as broad and abstract as learning what it means to be a member of a *comunidad* (community). *Saberes* encompass larger and broader knowing(s) about the world and how to live in it and in relation to others.

*Historias de Éxito within Mexican Communities* by Octavio Pimentel contributes to the disruption of stock stories about Latino males at a time when police brutality and the murder of both young Black and Latino youth at the hands of police is a widespread US social reality. *Historias de Éxito within Mexican Communities* is a welcome addition to Latin@ scholarship in that it adds a more nuanced and complex understanding of the realities of Latino (im)Migrant males by exploring the experiences of two men of similar background, Quetzin and Luis, but with very different life outcomes. Through the meticulous exploration and analysis of their lives, their successes and shortcomings, this book further debunks deficit views of Latin@ families and communities by exposing more of the *saberes* of Latin@ knowing(s). Such *saberes* include raced, gendered, and classed notions of being *buen trabajador*, *buena gente*, and *bien educado*. Each of these conceptions manifests in the lives of Pimentel’s participants in intersectional ways through their daily relational ways of knowing and being hardworking, good people, and well-mannered men. These moral positionings of a hard work ethic, morality, and respect for others form the basis for family and community social relations for Quetzin and Luis, and are examples of the social and cultural makers of Latino masculinities. Further, Pimentel builds on the trope of *historias de éxito* or “success stories” to provide a different framing of Latino male social capital. Overall, this book is a powerful counterstory to the white(main)stream narrative of Latino males as criminal, lethargic, anti-intellectual, and socially and morally deficient. ¡Enhorabuena!

Luis Urrieta, Jr
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Foreword

In the pages that follow, we will read of story and counter-story, ethnography and autoethnography, the Official Story and the (hitherto) Silenced Story. We’ll read of history and polemics, rhetoric and politically economically driven ideology no less than economics. And we’ll read of words that get defined differently. Historias de Éxito translates to Success Stories, but at issue here are the ways “success” can be defined—in English, among the ways of US Americans, in Spanish, among the gatecrashers, those whom we are often asked to reject.

Of those we’ll meet, one will state that his first language is K’iche’, the Maya language still spoken among some Guatemalans, with Spanish as his second language; English, his third. We’ll read of a man who has realized a bootstraps notion of success—economic success—Quetzin—a Latino with a common Spanish name imported from Germany, himself sporting light hair and light eyes, we read. This is a story of cultures refusing to melt, cultures and individuals. It is a tale of rhetorics—those asserted and those imposed, of borders crossed.

I have written elsewhere that part of what lends itself to rigid notions of success or belonging is in the rigid conception of the nation, the United States, sovereign, given to equal opportunity, if not quite equality, that, following Benedict Anderson, we accept an imaginary community we call “nation,” and in that community comes the imaginary citizens, even as we know only a handful of our fellows. Quite recently, I spoke with someone who has just moved to Salt Lake City.
“So how do you like it there?”
“It takes a bit of getting used to. I’ve never been in such a white city.”

The speaker is himself white, though very sensitive to issues surrounding diversity. Thing is, as Professor Pimentel demonstrates, that city is 22% Latino. But Latino is not part of his imagined community. It is this imagined overarching entity of “nation” that allowed for the oxymoronic proposition that some of its people could be officially “separate but equal,” a matter that remains, not as segregation but as “community” or “neighborhoods,” a comfort that is so hard to break from. There’s this imagined notion of nation and who its people are. That’s why the Republicans were so vocally surprised a few years back there were Latino and Latina voters—even though Latinas and Latinos were a part of the nation before there were Republicans or before there was a nation called the United State of America. Imagined to be others, the ones who live across some imaginary line that invokes a different imaginary sovereignty. This is how this operates. This is the rhetoric.

And though I begin to feel shrill in always invoking Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), he underscores the rhetoric of this hard and fast and not at all imaginary southern border that lends itself to the sense of threat that permeates rhetoric of the immigrant, the rhetoric that the pages that follow seeks to counter. Writes Huntington

The central issue will remain the degree to which Hispanics are assimilated into American society as previous immigrant groups have been….Mexicans walk across a border or wade across a river. This plus the increasing ease of transportation and communication enables them to maintain close contacts and identity with their communities. Second, Mexican immigrants are concentrated in the southwestern United States and form part of continuous Mexican society stretching from Yucatan to Colorado. Third,…resistance to assimilation…Fourth, the area settled by Mexican migrants was annexed by the United States after it defeated Mexico in the nineteenth century…In due course, the results of American military expansion in the nineteenth century could be threatened and possibly reversed by Mexican demographic expansion in the twenty-first century. (pp. 205–206)

In *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), Huntington again invokes the stereotypes that have long characterized the Latino, arguing for the solidification of
the border, or America’s “national identity” will be altered by a people whose values contain a “lack of ambition,” taken over by a people for whom the “acceptance of poverty as a virtue [is] necessary for entry into Heaven.” The only way that the interlopers will not ruin America’s national identity is for them to embrace the Anglo-Protestant ethos, its American dream, able to “share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English” (as he writes in “The Hispanic Challenge” within *Foreign Policy*, March–April, 2004, p. 36).

As the US’s imaginary unity disallows full entry to Latinos and Latinas, the Latinos and Latinas form their own “national” identities, and those identities seek to define matters in ways that most apply.

So it is that we read of two success stories, the one that fits an American capitalist notion of success—the successful businessman. But one who gives to the community, the Chicano community, and not, it would appear, because of the tax breaks that would arise (his simply pulling out a $100 bill from his register to support a cause—no ability to claim a spontaneous cash gift). The other success attributed to a man who gets swept up in an anti-immigrant sweep explained as an anti-terrorist move, jailed, deported. And nevertheless, a success, as we read—or maybe better said: un éxito if not a success.

We have to make ideological shifts to understand how a man who is described as a good man (*buena gente*) and hard worker (*buen trabajador*) but is nevertheless jailed and deported can be a success. And perhaps that expression, *buena gente*, becomes a way at the kinds of politically economically motivated ideology that we’ll be introduced to. “A good man” is literally rendered as “good people.” And in that one expression we see the difference between a liberal ideology and a collectivist ideology. I am not here making a distinction between liberals and conservatives, but looking to the ideologies that arise from different economic philosophies and their relations to power. Within the liberal the dominant ideology is individualism (which has no bearing on individuality): the solitary being picking himself or herself up by the bootstraps, shoulder to the wheel, nose to the grindstone; the every man who is for himself—pick your bromide (necessarily bromides more than simply clichés because they’re so commonplace as to be rendered trite). It is the ideological reduction of *laissez faire*, let them do, the concept of free competition, freed from government interference. Its opposite is the collectivist, where the collective takes precedent over the individual. And in the United States, we accept “human rights” but otherwise demean the welfare state, socialism,
communism, but a collectivist sensibility can be as simple as “family first.” It is these differences that get rendered in what we’ll read as éxito in relation to (not necessarily as opposed to) success.

In what follows, we are asked to reconsider the rhetorics of the Other to which we have been bombarded—the lazy, unambitious, illiterate interloper—from a different ideological lens, where even a good ol’fashioned liberal success also displays un éxito, where a “failure” displays un gran éxito. And along the way, we rethink what constitutes research, a rendered autoethnography where the dominant rhetorics are flipped, where the story is countered. It is a wonderful journey ahead, as you turn the page.

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Works cited


