

# Learning to Value Cultural Wealth Through Service Learning: Farmworker Families' and Latina/o University Students' Mutual Empowerment via Freirean and Feminist Chicana/o-Latina/o Literature Reading Circles

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*This paper traces strategies and successes—for both students and community partners—in the implementation of service learning within my English 353: Chicana/o-Latina/o Literature classes at California State University Channel Islands. In order to bridge university culture and the farmworker communities that work and live alongside the university, in consultation with community partners, we created bilingual reading circles where students went in to read and discuss works of Chicana/o literature with residents in low-income farmworker housing. Using a critical framework of Freirian pedagogical practice in the classroom and in the community, I explore how first-generation Latina/o students' participation in service-learning enabled them to counter a cultural deficit model of thinking about farmworkers. In the process, students learned how to value their own rich cultural wealth and the familial assets they bring to the university and society as a whole.*

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“There is a big difference between going to class and taking notes on the statistics of people trying to cross the border and *actually hearing the voices of those statistics.*”

—Alejandra, CSUCI student

Fifty miles north of Los Angeles, California, our campus at California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) is nestled amidst a veritable microcosm of California: Ventura County is a racially, culturally, and economically diverse semi-agricultural setting that supplies about one-third of the state’s annual strawberry volume. One cannot drive to campus without witnessing firsthand the sight of Mexican farmworkers hunched over in the sun, harvesting strawberries and other fruits and vegetables. Witnessing this sight every day makes me ever-mindful of the social polarization that exists in our country—of the haves and have nots working across the street from each other in the fields and the university, whose days are spent in the same geographical space but whose life paths never cross.

Addressing this community and its institutional disconnection, difference in privilege, and unequal access to education has become a central part of my classroom and service learning pedagogies. In an attempt to bridge these divides, for the last two years I have developed and taught a Chicana/o-Latina/o Literature course at CSUCI and coordinated student-led reading circles within the farmworker community; this course requires students to read and discuss Chicana/o-Latina/o short stories, poems, novels, and autobiographies with farmworker families living in low-income farmworker housing tracts in Oxnard and Camarillo, California.

More than just incorporating community service into classroom learning to expand the students’ understanding of course materials, these reading circles employ “critical service learning” pedagogies “purposefully infused with social justice components” to help both students and community members alike “interrogate systems of oppression, work to dismantle social inequities, and forge authentic relationships between higher education institutions and the community ‘served’” (Portillo and Hickman 2011, xi). Student demographics at CSUCI create rich opportunities for critical

service learning, providing models to bring forth more equitable collaborations that disrupt the traditional underprivileged-privileged binary that undergirds many service learning projects. CSUCI is the only four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) to serve Ventura County; our student body is 53 percent Latino/a, and 59 percent of our students are first-generation college students. In traditional paradigms of service learning, particularly at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI), more privileged students from higher socioeconomic strata typically venture out to volunteer in underprivileged communities of color that are foreign to them. One example is J. Estrella Torrez's service learning project at Michigan State University, which facilitated an opportunity for white middle-class students to participate in dialogues with Latina/o farmworker students who were enrolled in a high school equivalency diploma program (2015). Scholars are mindful of how participating in service learning with such unequal dynamics can make it "difficult for students to avoid seeing themselves as saviors despite the emphasis on mutual learning" (Grobman 2005, 130) and can too easily degrade into a "liberal do-gooder stance" (Cushman 1999, 332). However, the majority of students who enroll in my Chicana/o-Latina/o Literature courses at CSUCI are first-generation, bilingual children of Latina/o immigrants and/or children or grandchildren of farmworkers themselves who come from surrounding agricultural communities. Most of the students live at home with their parents and commute, so they themselves currently live or have lived amongst the underserved farmworker communities where they are participating in the reading circles. In this way, my students' experiences depart from traditional service learning models.<sup>1</sup>

This paper presents a case study of these reading circles, particularly the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and the benefits that reciprocity created for both the students and the community members. For, as I learned in final assessment meetings and students'

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1 Special thanks to our community partners, Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation (farmworker housing sites: Villa Cesar Chavez in Oxnard, CA and Casa de Sueños in Camarillo, CA), Community Development Director Priscila Cisneros, Manager Dolores Rodiles, and residents from these housing tracts. Also, special thanks to Pilar Pacheco and Dennis Downey in the Center for Community Engagement at CSUCI, who granted us funds for the books used in the reading circles every semester. Thanks to more than 240 students from ENG/CHS 353 over the course of Fall 2014-Spring 2015 and Fall 2015-Spring 2016.

final reflection papers, the mutual benefits were far greater than I had ever imagined or hoped for. Students were able to decolonize their minds by personally engaging with the very populations of whom they had learned to be ashamed; their unlearning of shame was one of the hallmarks of their liberatory education. Through dialogue, the farmworkers learned to own their culture as a productive site of learning. Moreover, one of the greatest benefits that I did not foresee was the power that we, as Latina academics, had to provide models of what Latinas could achieve. We served as mentors to Latina women and children who learned to see university students as peers and the university itself as a democratizing place where they were welcome—a space that now figured into their and their children's present and future reality.

This paper examines how the reading circles implemented feminist and liberatory pedagogies to achieve the following outcomes: 1) enable students and farmworkers to recognize a cultural deficit model and reject it for cultural wealth; 2) build mutual trust; 3) enable the students and farmworkers to become more politically aware and politically active; and 4) bridge the university and community to foster collaborations for lasting reciprocity. I share these narratives and outcomes to provide a model for a service learning course that helps democratize the university and culminates in the type of town-gown collaboration that social justice-minded professors aspire to achieve.

## **PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES**

These reading circles with farmworkers are not the first of their nature; my pedagogical approaches align with those undertaken by similar Freirean service learning projects, in particular, J. Estrella Torrez's project with her university students' participation in trust-building dialogues with Latino/a farmworker students who were enrolled in a GED program, especially in the way that her course "encouraged students to dialogue around issues of race, class, gender, and other forms of oppression" and "foster an exploration of big questions of social inequities dividing communities" (2015, 2, 8). As in Torrez's project, the reading circles created safe spaces and "it was within these particular spaces that students exchanged stories in the process of self-reflexivity" (Torrez 2015, 2). But what most

distinguishes my case study is its focus on establishing connections between primarily Latina/o students and Latina/o community members and teaching service learning at an HSI rather than a PWI.

Teaching primarily working-class Latina/o students at an HSI provides rich opportunities for community building, but it also poses unexpected pedagogical challenges, different than those that arise when teaching middle-class white students at a PWI. Although my students are primarily Latina/o students, the range of their empathetic identification with Latina/o immigrant communities greatly varied. This is because first-generation Latina/o university students face specific challenges in self-valorization and cultural appreciation; they largely attend the university with hopes of attaining social mobility—of not working in the fields, like their parents or grandparents might have. Furthermore, given that the disparagement of their culture is normalized in the dominant popular discourse, identifying as coming from a Latina/o and/or immigrant background can be regarded as a social disability. For example, Dennis Romero's recent article in the *LA Weekly*, "In Order to Succeed at Work, Some Latinos Hide Their Heritage," reveals how Latinos on the job continue to hide their ethnic difference. Citing a report entitled "Latinos at Work: Unleashing the Power of Culture," which was released by the nonprofit think tank Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), the article states that "While Latinos will account for 80 percent of the growth of the U.S. workforce between now and 2022, three out of four of them say they 'repress their heritage in the office'" (Romero 2016). Hence, along with a college degree, the desire to minimize one's ethnic background is oftentimes deemed as the prime strategy for upwardly mobile success. As a literature professor, I have found that teaching students diverse literature that is culturally relevant and responsive to the surrounding community in and around the educational institution (in our case, a predominantly Mexican and farmworker community) is key in helping them unlearn these self-negating ideologies. But it is one thing to read about farmworkers in literature—it is another thing entirely to break bread and share life stories with them. Service learning is the key piece in catalyzing social consciousness.

My pedagogical mission in the classroom is to enable students to unlearn this shame and be able to value and engage with community members as equals; in service learning, I want community members to learn to value themselves. My teaching is informed by a critical race theory lens, particularly Tara Yosso's concept of "community cultural wealth" (2005), because this paradigm-shifting concept enables both students and community members to counter a "cultural deficit" model of thinking about themselves, farmworkers, and their Latina/o culture. Moreover, Torrez's "reconceptualization of the idea of civic engagement by underscoring the consistent cycle of 'server' and 'served'" is particularly useful in understanding the mutually benefitting, non-hierarchical pedagogy undergirding the service learning goals in these reading circles (2015, 4). When she argues that "in transforming this binary into a cycle, students are confronted with the array of differing forms of capital possessed by marginalized communities" (2015, 4), our service learning course's social value takes on a greater valency. For the ultimate result of these reading circles is that both Latina/o students and farmworkers were able to value a cultural capital that they had previously deemed inexistent.

Before students go out into the community, we read the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in order to help them begin to reflect on their privileged social location and prepare them to be mindful community facilitators and teachers. What I want my students to gain from reading Freire is to unlearn the dominant view that their students—in this case, the farmworker families they will meet with—are not "empty vessels to be filled" with knowledge because they lack valuable knowledge of their own (Freire 1970, 79). Rather, I want students to go out into the community to engage in dialogue with residents from an equitable, non-hierarchical position—to become equal partners, facilitators, and co-creators of knowledge and critical thinking via the shared reading of literature. Ultimately, I want my students to create mutual trust, meaningful dialogue, and an investment in what Freire calls "horizontal relationships." The ultimate goal of education—as Freire states, is "to critique and transform the world [through] dialogue, critical questioning, love for humanity, and praxis—the synthesis of critical reflection and action" (1970, 80). These lessons have been reciprocal, as both Latina/o university students' and farmworkers'

participation in the reading circles have enabled them to undergo a process of self and cultural affirmation—a true *concientización*—a critical social consciousness at the heart of liberatory education.

Because the reading circles are composed of female farmworker residents and mostly female students, the course also incorporates feminist pedagogical practices to create true Freirean circles where students are able to create mutual trust between women. I model feminist pedagogy through my own rigorous honesty and vulnerability with the hopes of creating a safe space to enable students to share their own stories, ultimately enabling them to then apply these skills with community members as well. In Chicana/Latina feminist theory, this pedagogical practice is called the sharing of one's *testimonio*—the telling of one's life story. It is “a form of expression that comes out of intense repression or struggle, where the person bearing witness tells the story to someone else” (The Latina Feminist Group 2001, 13). *Testimonio* also involves the unlearning of shame to overcome silence. Because the sharing of once hidden personal stories can develop trust between women, it is “the primary methodology for feminist praxis” that helps create “*comadrazgo*: the Latin American/Latina tradition of women's kinship, reciprocity, and commitment” (TLFG 2001, 15).

To model feminist pedagogical strategies in developing *comadrazgo*, I use *testimonio* when reading Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* in class. We close-read the story “Alicia Who Sees Mice”—which is about a young girl who is the first to attend college despite her patriarchal father's gendered expectations that she live a life of domesticity. In the story, Alicia's father exclaims that “a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star” and we are told that “Alicia, who inherited her mother's rolling pin and sleepiness” takes “two trains and a bus because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin” (1984, 31-32). I share with my students that as the eldest daughter in a deeply patriarchal Mexican household, although my parents always encouraged my education, my father above all expected me to learn to perfect the art of cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. My mother was very smart, but she never had the opportunity to attend college. She always did all the housework so that I could focus on my studies.

I had never met anyone who had ever gone to college, much less a Latina woman who had done so, so when I went to college I saw myself as living out the dream that my mother never had the access to fulfill. Thus, I pair Cisneros's story with *my* story as a way to discuss the gendered roles that Latinas may grow up with at home and how we can use our education and oftentimes, our mother-daughter relationships, to surpass these limiting and debilitating expectations. After hearing my *testimonio* and reading the story together, many students open up about the patriarchal challenges they face at home. This is precisely why I chose to teach this book in the reading circles as well; the many feminist vignettes found within *The House on Mango Street* enable us to air out our families' "dirty laundry" in regards to fathers, husbands, and boyfriends. And the shared airing out of dirty laundry develops trust and kinship between women.

## READING CIRCLES

CSUCI's Center for Community Engagement provided me with grants to purchase the books for the community reading circles. They also put me in contact with a community partner that had expressed a desire for community programming and would therefore be a great fit for our service learning: Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation (CEDC), which constructs and manages low-income and farmworker housing in Ventura County. Our students met with farmworkers who lived in CEDC's farmworker housing tracts.<sup>2</sup>

The key to developing and establishing reciprocity in service learning is to develop and establish a respectful relationship with the community partner. A lot of scaffolding is required in the first weeks to meet with the community members; I met several times over coffee with the apartment manager and the housing residents. It was crucial to listen to their needs and concerns—we needed to address the visions of the host community and then, from there, plan and structure our service learning program. Like other service learning facilitators, I believe that "host communities should control the

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2 CEDC was incorporated in 1981 in order to revitalize former farm labor camps in Ventura County; to this day, it has built (and continues to manage) 32 major housing developments for low-income families in the county. Some of the housing tracts require that residents work in the fields in order to qualify for this low-income housing. For more background information, see <http://www.cabrilloedc.org/history>

services provided and have significant control over what is expected to be learned” (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999, 3). After several meetings with farmworker families who lived in these housing tracts, together we identified their needs and concerns that could be addressed and enriched through student service and interaction: the need to promote 1) literacy amongst adults and children; 2) critical dialogue about pressing personal, familial, and social concerns; 3) English language skills amongst adults; and 4) afterschool mentorship, tutoring, and support for the children. Together, we planned and established weekly bilingual reading circles where students from my class would come to the farmworker family housing, split up, and read books with groups of adults or children. The readings would then segue into discussions of the community’s experiences and concerns.

As part of the service learning project for the course, students pay weekly visits to two sites: Villa Cesar Chavez in Oxnard and Casas de Sueños in Camarillo. My Chicana/o-Latina/o literature class has about 30 students; 15 students attend service learning in the first site and 15 go to the second site, parceled out into three groups of five. Over the semester, each one of the three groups attend the service learning site four consecutive times, once a week. In regards to class assignments, every week each group develops their lesson plans in class before going to meet with the farmworker families, and students formally report on their service learning experiences in the next class meeting. More informally, and perhaps more excitingly, they also integrate what they learned in the field into class discussion.

The course readings I assign are critical in helping students “engage in the critical reflection necessary to understand their service learning experience in the larger context of issues of social justice and social policy—rather than in the context of charity” (Stanton, Giles, and Cruz 1999, 3). As stated earlier, in the first few weeks of class, we read Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in order to help students become self-reflexive about their role as students and educators. But the works of literature we read are just as important in helping students value and understand the community and be better prepared to form respectful, socially responsible relationships. I carefully assign novels, short stories, and memoirs that will enable students to gain an understanding of the most pressing issues facing Latino/a

communities in the United States—both historically, systemically, and presently. I introduce my students to works of Chicana/o-Latina/o literature written from the Farmworker Rights Movement and Chicana Feminist Movement in the 1960s to the present, with an emphasis on literature that examines Latina/o labor conditions, immigration experiences, gender dynamics, cultural and language identity, and race discrimination. We then use our dialogue about literature in class as a springboard for developing lesson plans that help facilitate discussions with the community about these topics, which are some of the most salient topics facing Latina/os in the United States today.

Together, students and farmworkers read one book per semester in the reading circles; to date, they have read the following works of fiction and non-fiction: 1) Tomás Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him/y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1972), short stories about migrant farmworkers, systemic violence in the fields, and discrimination in the schools; 2) Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984), short stories about a feminist Latina girl growing up in an underprivileged community racked by poverty, domestic violence, shame, and the stresses of growing up bicultural; 3) *21st-Century Latino Leaders: Latinas and Latinos Who Are Transforming Society* (2013), which is a collection of biographies of important Latina/o figures such as Sonia Sotomayor, Sandra Cisneros, and other politicians, writers, filmmakers, and artists; 4) Alejandro Morales's *Little Nation and Other Stories* (2014), a collection of short stories about Latina/o Los Angeles, urban development, and police brutality; and 5) Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (2012), a Mexican immigrant's memoir about challenges on both sides of the border, which includes discussions of domestic violence, transnational family dynamics, and being undocumented in the United States. The majority of the books we read are written by women, per the specific request of the female farmworkers. Such is their desire to feel represented in the literature.

Along with providing relevant topics of dialogue between students and farmworkers, the other major reason I selected the books we read together is because they are available in both English and Spanish, making them accessible to both English and Spanish speakers. We read these books in class together and analyze them for many weeks

before students create their own lesson plans to lead discussion about the books within the community reading circles, which typically consist of four-to-six women. Because the students have to read the books in English during class time and read and teach the books in Spanish in the community, they also develop greater bilingual literacy.

Appropriate assessment of the service learning experience for both students and community partners is also a crucial part of the project—it is how we came to learn about the outcomes of reciprocity and the mutual benefits that both parties have gained. In the last reading circle of the semester, we held an assessment meeting where all the students, community member participants, the CSUCI Center for Community Engagement Director, and I partook in a capstone celebration and a “*conviviencia*” (collective, social gathering) where we shared food and heard about everyone’s experience in the service learning for the semester. The farmworker women’s narratives discussed in this essay stem from the reflections they shared in that final meeting. Finally, as the final assignment of the semester, students were required to write a four-to-five page final reflection paper that connected what they learned in service learning with what they learned in the class. Most of the student reflections I include in this paper stem from that final assignment.

## **OUTCOMES: RECIPROCITY AND MUTUAL BENEFITS THROUGH UNLEARNING THE CULTURAL DEFICIT MODEL**

As students shared in their reflection papers, participating in the reading circles with farmworker families enabled them to experience a series of paradigm shifts in the way that they perceive farmworkers, the Spanish language, Latina/o parents and Latina/o culture, the society in which they live, the value of literature, and their education. Likewise, in the final assessment meetings, farmworker participants also shared that they experienced the very same paradigm shifts, especially regarding their culture and their relationship to students and educational institutions. The reciprocity and mutual benefits brought forth by these reading circles, as Torrez notes, is precisely what distinguishes critical service learning: “the consistent cycle of ‘server’ and ‘served’ moving throughout the project” (2015, 4)—the equitable, non-hierarchical exchange of knowledge between students and community members. Together, students and farmworkers

were able to counter what Yosso terms a “cultural deficit” model of thinking about themselves and were able to own their culture as a site of productive learning (2005, 72).

Indeed, this is what my students immediately learned upon meeting with the farmworker women. They were above all surprised by how much *they* unexpectedly learned from the farmworkers. One student wrote, “Before starting service learning I was really excited about going out into my community and being able to share some of the knowledge that we learned in class. What I did not anticipate, however, was how much these women were going to teach me” (Alejandra, CSUCI student). The usual paradigm that students had bought into was that university students are more learned, that they are imparters of knowledge in relation to the common, uneducated folk. In the case of reading with Mexican farmworkers, these feelings of superiority might be heightened because of the community’s marginalized race, class, gender, occupation, and legal status.

Part of the reason that students like Alejandra are so amazed “to be taught something” by farmworkers is that, typically, students’ education up to that point has taught them to regard these Mexican farmworker communities through a “cultural deficit” model of thinking. They have learned that people like them have nothing to teach anyone, not even their own children. According to Yosso (2005), “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in U.S. schools is this deficit mode of thinking” (70):

In attempting to explain the widespread underachievement among students of color and students from lower socioeconomic strata in schools, many teachers, and administrators locate the problem within the students, their families, and communities. This “cultural deficit” model attributes students’ lack of educational success to characteristics often rooted in their cultures and communities (ie. that families, communities don’t value education and don’t help their children succeed). Research grounded in a deficit perspective blames the victims of institutional oppression for their own victimization by referring to negative stereotypes and assumptions regarding certain groups or communities. This perspective overlooks the root causes of oppression by localizing

the issue within individuals and/or their communities...Under the cultural deficit model, schools are absolved from their responsibilities to educate all students appropriately, and the blame is shifted almost entirely to students and their families. (2005, 72)

Under this cultural deficit logic, the dominant view holds that Mexican farmworkers in Ventura County find themselves at the bottom of the U.S. socioeconomic ladder because of their lack of determination to invest in and value education in their countries of origin and in the United States. Indeed, that is the dominant view that most students (even Latina/o students) have acquired throughout their education. Negative stereotypes abound in class when I ask, “what prevents Latina/os from succeeding in school?” It’s usually the same litany of stereotypes: the parents don’t care about education—they value work, the students are apathetic, they never learn English correctly, etc. As part of their education, Latina/o students have come to believe that their people do not have any useful skills or knowledge that they can pass on to their children to enable them to succeed in school; their culture, their language, and values represent deficits in terms of what is required to succeed in the United States. My students admitted to having bought into this cultural deficit model in regards to their preconceptions about farmworker Latino families and Latino families in general. In the words of one student: “I learned that although I am Chicana, I too am susceptible to biases and stereotypes about my own community that are not true such as these women being illiterate because they do not have a formal education” (Jenny, CSUCI student).

While listening to farmworkers’ *testimonios*, however, students realized that the stereotype that Latina/os do not value education is untrue; they learned that these women longed for the education that had eluded them because of their disadvantaged means. One student wrote:

As for the ladies, I was surprised they actually read the book, not in the sense that I thought they were dumb or anything but surprised in the way that they were eager to learn. I hear a lot of negative stereotypes that field workers are people that are there because they don’t want to learn, who didn’t want to go

to school. These ladies shared their stories as well as relatives of theirs that really would have loved to continue school but because of life they were not able to. But they do not give up on learning and they showed that by being there despite their age and the negative stereotypes. One of them said that some people would tell her why would she want to go read a book for an hour that it was just a waste of time, despite that she was still there. (Maria, CSUCI student)

Students' participation in these reading circles helped them self-reflect and break the cycle of (self-) prejudice against Latino communities: "meeting these women made me grow as a person because it made me realize that I was following the trend people with power often fall in, oppressing communities that are denied the resources to obtain a better education or in most occasions are offered the resources but are forced to prioritize employment to support themselves financially" (Cinthia, CSUCI student). The women's tenacity to keep on reading books and attending the reading circles served as an inspiration for the students to reflect on their educational privileges and keep on going forward with their own education: "These women inspired me to *"echarle ganas"* [work hard, put lots of effort] in my education. They all would reiterate about how they wish they could have continued with their own education" (Bridget, CSUCI student).

In many cases, by learning to value Latina/o farmworkers' stories, students came to value their own parents and their culture—a culture of which they had oftentimes been taught to be ashamed. My first-generation/minority/working-class students learned to value and embrace what Yosso (2005) terms their "community cultural wealth"—the "rich cultural wealth and the assets they bring to the university and society as a whole" (Yosso 2005, 72). Students no longer saw their culture as putting them at a disadvantage, but instead, as bestowing them with assets—language skills, cultural values, feminist ideals, and ethics of hard work (*"echarle ganas"*) that would help ensure their success in higher education and in life. And they became ever-grateful and appreciative of their parents' hard work. Said one student, "my experiences in service learning gave me the opportunity to reflect on the sacrifices my parents have made for me to gain an education" (Sandra, CSUCI student). One of the

things that students kept highlighting about their service learning experience was that farmworkers “reminded them of their parents,” referring to “a feeling of family again,” “a second family,” and “a second home.” Some students might have felt like they were getting a second chance to start over with their parents—and in learning to value the service learning residents’ stories and sacrifices, students came to value their own.

Students also learned the moment they stepped into the community that their Spanish-language proficiency, despite its usual perception of being a deficit, is actually an asset that helps them engage with the world around them. Students in the class had varying degrees of Spanish proficiency; some are fully fluent speakers and readers and some understand the language but cannot speak it. In some cases, students admitted to not being taught Spanish by their parents and/or not wanting to learn Spanish while growing up in order to become “more American.” Therefore, having to use (and in some cases, revive) their heritage language created a paradigm shift in the way they perceived and carried out their education. As one student noted, “my Spanish turned out to be a desirable skill. This service learning experience made me proud to put my Spanish to use” (Sandra, CSUCI student). Fluent Spanish-speakers were able to take on leadership roles, lead discussions, ask complex questions, and better engage with the farmworkers. It even let them in on jokes and personal stories (non-Spanish speakers remarked that they sometimes heard the group laugh but didn’t understand why and felt left out). Bilingual speakers, for once, got to feel validated for their assets—they could finally use their bilingual skills to bridge the university and community.

The farmworker women also learned to value their “community cultural wealth” by overcoming feelings of low self-worth as uneducated immigrant women. Like the students, these women had also inherited these negative beliefs about themselves—they too had subscribed to the cultural deficit model. Because they were poor and undereducated in Mexico (a very class-conscious, socially stratified society) and were agricultural workers in the United States, the women had normalized being treated condescendingly by the educated class in both countries (treated as “*gente sin importancia*”—people who lack importance). They therefore expressed surprise that

the students and I, as Latina academics, “were so smart and educated and yet very humble.” One farmworker said “it was really nice to see educated women like yourselves be so kind and inviting. You never made us feel that you were different from us.” The women’s equitable interaction with the students helped them overturn social hierarchies they had previously learned to internalize. In regards to their culture, the farmworker women had once tended to believe that they had nothing to offer their children—they were grateful to educational institutions, which they then regarded as filling up their children, who they perceived as empty vessels in need of enlightenment. They initially had a passive view of their role in their children’s education; however, the reading circles changed that.

In the final assessment meetings, the women shared with us that the literacy building skills they acquired through the reading circles enabled them to become better-equipped to advocate for themselves and their children in school. Many farmworker women told us that the books they got to own and read in these reading circles were the only books they had ever owned in their lives; they had no prior experience reading a text and discussing it. They shared with us that the practice of dialogic reading with CSUCI students enabled them to better help their children with their homework. The students modeled how to ask critical questions and have critical discussions about written materials.

The students served as role models that enabled the women to gain agency in their children’s educations. The fact that most of the students were Latinas too made the women feel that their culture or gender were not hindrances in being able to engage with or participate in educational institutions. For example, one mother—Maricela—was able to overcome the embarrassment that had prevented her from attending her children’s school meetings. She stated, “meeting all these young Latinas attending the university really inspired me and gave me confidence in myself. *Aprendí a desenvolverme con gente de la escuela*” (“I learned how to engage with and participate with people from school.”) The translation of this phrase is very symbolic, though, in relation to the process of feminist empowerment. For, “*aprendí a desenvolverme*” literally translates as: “I learned how to ‘unfold’ myself, ‘unpack’ myself with people at school”—it describes

the metaphorical blooming of a flower or the unwrapping of a gift. As spending time with Latina students gently eased her into overcoming her feelings of shame and learning to step into her role as her child's advocate, Marisela was able to bloom with the confidence she gained by opening that gift of agency within her. Befriending empowered students from her culture enabled her to use her culture as a source of strength.

A grandmother—Lourdes—also shared that participating in the reading circles encouraged her to become better educated and learn English so that she could also “*desenvolverse*” and set an example for her grandchildren. But in this nation of immigrants, she became a cultural ambassador as well. Lourdes stated:

Here I was, encouraging my grandkids to ‘*superarse*’ (to better oneself) and I wasn’t doing anything to improve myself. I hadn’t learned English despite all my years here in the U.S. So I made it my goal to attend ESL classes at the public library. I met lots of immigrants from all over the world—from the Middle East, Ethiopia, India. I made lots of friends from different cultures. We were all there learning how to speak English. I learned a lot from them, too. And I taught them about my Mexican culture, too. Every Friday we bring food from our countries, even though we are learning to be American (laughs).

Even at her old age, Lourdes is learning English to be able to engage and participate in the public sphere. But she also draws from her Mexican culture and proudly shares it with students and immigrants from other countries in order to show them that “the Mexican culture is rich and beautiful, no matter what ‘El Trump’ says.”

In a true circle of reciprocity, just as the women’s living culture had helped decolonize students’ minds, once students were able to decolonize themselves, they in turn were able to help the farmworkers’ children begin to do the same. For example, one of the stories that my students read and discussed with the farmworkers’ children is “My Name” from *The House on Mango Street*. In that story, narrator Esperanza bemoans the fact that her name sounds too ethnic:

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name—Magdalena—which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza. I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. (Cisneros 1984, 13)

As part of their lesson, students had the children write about their name and reflect on it. They asked: “Where does your name come from? Do you like it? Why or why not?” Students were surprised to see that many kids whose names were more Latino-sounding, like Esperanza, felt more ashamed of their name and wanted to choose a different one. A seven-year-old girl named Guadalupe said that she didn’t like her name. She couldn’t articulate the reason for her dissatisfaction, but just kept saying, “I don’t know why. I just don’t like it. It’s just different.” In class, students remarked that they were surprised to see how, from a very young age, Latina/o children learn to be ashamed of their culture and aspire to better fit into American society. In little Guadalupe, students saw reflections of their past selves, of the long since forgotten injuries that had led them to learn to devalorize their culture. In the reading circle, students were able to tell little Guadalupe that her name was beautiful, that it was the name of a famous religious figure, and that she should be proud of her name. By helping Guadalupe heal from shame and see her culture as an asset, the students reified these lessons within themselves.

## **MUTUAL TRUST: FEMINIST PEDAGOGY IN PRAXIS**

At first, we were disappointed that only a few men from the community attended the first session and that after they saw that the attendees were mostly women, they never came back. This provided us with an opportunity to create an organically feminist circle. For, above all, the farmworker women remarked that they liked having a weekly hour where they could leave behind (“*el marido*” [the husband]) and their domestic drudgery to do something that was just for them. They liked reading and sharing viewpoints with the female students during what they called their “feminist hour.” Guided

with feminist pedagogies of *testimonio* (testimony) and *comadrazgo* (women's kinship), this women's space helped create a site for mutual trust and empowerment through reciprocal storytelling. Just as I had modeled *testimonio* by sharing my personal stories while teaching literature in the classroom, students used these strategies to become exemplary facilitators of mutual trust in these community reading circles. My student Vanessa shared how, after reading stories about domestic violence in *The House on Mango Street* in the reading circle, she was inspired to share her and her mother's poignant story with the women. She shared that at the age of 15, she helped her mother kick out her emotionally and physically abusive, adulterer father out of their apartment. After being fed up with his violence, they packed up his things in boxes and threw them out the window. She and her mother got several jobs to support the family without the father's help. Vanessa was courageous, both in what she did and in sharing that story. Her ability to find her voice and rile up her courage—to stand up against patriarchal violence—inspired other women to share.

With this trust-building honesty, many farmworker women overcame their initial fears of public storytelling; students stated that they learned to see women like these farmworkers and their mothers as valiant warriors in the face of “immigration and women's battles against machismo” (Vanessa, CSUCI student). After Vanessa shared her story, Maria—a woman from the community—shared how one day she was fed up with her husband's demands and she had to teach him the hard way that she was not his maid. She grabbed a newspaper, pointed to the wanted ads, and asked him, “Do you want a servant? Because if you do, you can find one here in the job ads. I am not your maid!” My student Alejandra noted: “the women's ability to share their experiences, which I'm sure were not easy to relive, was very inspiring. These women who are often looked down upon for their cultural and language differences earned my admiration in ways that I did not expect. Coming from a patriarchal society, these women have proven to be pioneers, defying gender roles and paving the way for all women to say not to oppression.” There was certainly no deficit of feminist beliefs among the community women—the safe space we created simply enabled them to articulate and voice them. Inspired by “Freire's practice of *concientización*, in which communities construct self-reflective political consciousness, [these] Latinas contributed to

empowerment efforts through literacy and giving voice, documenting silent histories” (TLFG 2001, 3). In the developing of *comadrazgo* (women’s kinship), both the farmworkers and students learned to appreciate the value of female friendships and relationships, which tend to be undervalued in the face of a heteronormative world that teaches women to value above all their relationships to men.

## **STUDENTS’ AND FARMWORKERS’ *CONCIENTIZACIÓN*: POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND ACTIVISM**

The more students discussed literature and exchanged stories with the farmworkers, the more they reached a *conciентización*—a political consciousness—that enabled them to voice critiques about social inequality, self-reflect on their educational privilege, and envision their role in combating systems of oppression. The reading circles truly demonstrate that “literary texts and community service can work reciprocally to heighten (and in some cases introduce) awareness of the complexities of race, gender, and class as they intersect in people’s lives—in literature and in the real world” (Grobman 2005, 133). Literature and community engagement served as the conduits between theory and praxis.

For example, reading literature about undocumented people’s lack of access to education, combined with speaking to undocumented women, enabled students to acquire a sense of social responsibility—a desire to use their education to work on behalf those who are less privileged. Students and farmworkers reflected on their shared reading of Reyna Grande’s *The Distance Between Us* (2012). In regard to a quote about the importance of Latinos pursuing education in the United States, Grande says, “Me and my siblings had been given the opportunity of a lifetime. How could we let it go to waste? ...We owed it to them, our cousins, our friends, to do something with our lives. If not for us, then for them, because they would never be able to” (280, 282). Students shared that reading these heartbreaking passages alongside undocumented farmworker women and hearing these women’s poignant testimonies of glass ceilings and shattered dreams in the United States, of low-paying jobs and no way out, made them “reflect on [their] responsibility to take full advantage of the opportunities and resources available to [them]” (Alejandra, CSUCI student). One woman shared that “she had left the fields but now had

two other jobs: she worked as a janitor at a gym and at a restaurant.” She said that her work was exhausting and not valued, “but no matter what, she always took pride in her work and did her very best job no matter the nature of it.” She would have liked to get a job in another line of work, “but given her status, that’s all she can work in for now.” As Alejandra stated, “Before the semester began, I was unaware of how much legal status matters in this country and what it means to not have status.” Reflecting on their privileges (citizenship, access to college) motivated students to use that privilege to work towards social justice for undocumented families.

While reading a short story from Alejandro Morales’s book *Little Nation* (2014), entitled “Los Jardines de Versailles” (“The Gardens of Versailles”), the women and students critiqued issues of urban development, displacement of the disenfranchised, disregard for Mexican communities, and gentrification. “Los Jardines de Versailles” is a story set in 1920s Los Angeles that tells the tale of a couple whose beautiful adobe home is destroyed by the city due to oncoming modernization and the building of an electrical grid and infrastructure. When students read the story with the farmworker women, they were able to learn more about how even today, in their own city, poor communities of color are displaced to build freeways that serve the more privileged:

Service learning taught me a lot about the history of the city of Camarillo. After we finished reading the story “Los Jardines de Versailles,” the group told us that a similar story had happened to several Latino families about 10-15 years ago when the Lewis exit off the 101 was constructed in order to create an off-ramp to access the university. I found it surprising to discover how the city similarly tore down a little community in Camarillo essentially to expand the freeway. Now that I live in Camarillo, I didn’t realize the history or the events that have happened in this city. Apparently, just like the mayor who wanted to take the property of the couple in the story we read, that is what they did to the Latinos here in this city. (Maria, CSUCI student)

Through speaking to the farmworkers who live in their community, students were able to unearth hidden histories of inequality and

educated their classmates when they shared those stories in class. They learned that transportation and access to the university came at the cost of displacing the poor farmworker community who already lacked access to affordable housing. These discoveries led students to ask a series of social justice-oriented questions: How does the city of Camarillo treat its farmworkers today? What else had they done to them? Are farmworkers given access to affordable housing today? What other barrios were destroyed? How is the university implicated in all of this? Students realized that, just like in the story that we had read, these farmworker women were the very people who did not have political representation or a voice in the town hall meetings where city developers laid out their plans for expansion. Thus, the students sought to advocate for these women and their children. One student stated: “I found the dates of town hall meetings and I hope to attend and create a voice for this community that shouldn’t be left in the shadows” (Lizbett, CSUCI student).

Faced with the realities of injustice, many students committed to becoming activist-scholars. They began to research and apply to graduate school programs that would enable them to further work on behalf of these communities. My student Jacinta was so moved by what she learned in service learning that she applied and was accepted into an M.A. program in public service and social justice. Jenny is currently getting her Master’s in social welfare and Maria is entering a Ph.D. program in clinical psychology; they both plan to work with undocumented families as therapists. Erika began an M.A. program in migration studies. Liliana just received her M.A. in Mexican American studies and is applying to jobs to become a university professor. Students truly acquired a social consciousness about how race, class, citizenship, and gender structure and impact one’s social location, experiences, and access to justice in the world. Many are currently seeking to further dismantle these social inequities.

The farmworker women told us that these Latina activist-scholars truly made an impact on them as rising activist-mothers and on their children, who now had college-student mentors to look up to. As my student Karla recalled:

Marisela said that she brings her children to these reading circles because she wants them to see Latino students that go to college. To have them be inspired by role models and know that it is possible to get a higher education. They aspire to go to college because they see someone of their culture, of their family being able to do it. (Karla, CSUCI student)

One farmworker woman said that “it was really helpful and eye-opening to have discussions of education with Latina/o university students,” who themselves have navigated and are navigating the educational pipeline. Above all, the farmworkers truly valued having Latina/o university students as mentors for their children. The children looked up to the students and felt proud to know that they had a friend who attended the university. None of the children had ever met anyone who attended the university, so they looked up to the students who visited their homes on a weekly basis.

After gaining agency through their interactions with these Latina role models, some of the farmworker women have sought to further their education and have become activists in various ways in order to better advocate for themselves and their families. One *señora* is now part of a mother activist group called “*Madres Promotoras*” (Mother Liaisons/ Outreach Workers) that advocates for bilingual instruction in her son’s school district. I recently invited her to speak at our university’s Center for Community Engagement’s “Celebration of Service” event. She said she’d be happy to attend but asked if it was okay to come a bit later since she had a speaking engagement on the local radio station earlier that day. Another woman is part of the non-profit organization House Farm Workers and attends city council meetings to advocate for low-income housing for farmworkers because she says that though she may be fortunate to have low-income housing, most workers like her do not. Lourdes—the grandmother I mentioned earlier—is attending ESL classes and becoming a nascent Latina activist, while two other mothers are now attending community college with the goal of transferring to CSUCI. Thus, from the fields to community college and beyond, we are effectively creating an activist-scholar educational pipeline in the community. In this way, our service learning program carries out values of mutuality and

collaborative vision, with “social justice being the logical extension of this mutuality” (Baker-Boosamra, Guevara, Balfour 2006, 481).

The women have effectively learned to see their life stories as sites of valuable knowledge-production. As we plan future collaborations with them, the women have stated that “although they really enjoyed reading stories, they’d now like to start writing their own.” Just as interacting with the women helped students feel empowered to seek out social change via graduate school, talking to the students and hearing their stories has helped farmworker women fuel a desire and discover an agency to tell their once-marginalized stories and bring their and their children’s lives from out of the shadows. Our next steps are to continue this community partnership with faculty and students in the Spanish department who can enable the women to write and perhaps publish their own *testimonios* about surviving and thriving as farmworker women.

## **UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: FOSTERING COLLABORATIONS FOR LASTING RECIPROCITY**

Our greatest achievement is that over the course of two years of service learning, we have created a lasting, reciprocal, and sustainable community partnership and a diverse educational pipeline that has placed the university within reach for the community. The Chicana/o-Latina/o literature reading circles have effectively bridged the university-community divide: since the program’s inception, farmworker adults and their children, who had never stepped foot on campus (even though it is five minutes away), now feel welcome and regularly attend and participate in campus events. I share our experiences and lessons in order to help other teachers develop similar town-gown collaborations and reciprocity through service learning.

The greatest lesson I have learned is that the formula to developing collaboration is creating a respectful and equitable relationship with the community: demonstrating care and appreciation for what they have to say—attentively listening to their stories, letting them know that they have important things to contribute to the university, and encouraging them to share their wealth of

knowledge and lived experience within that institution. That recognition and acknowledgment, though it may seem simple and thus easily overlooked, is the true basis for mutual trust and kinship. All of these personal gestures help make community members feel invited, empowered, and acknowledged, and once they feel that the appreciation is genuine, they may feel more comfortable coming to the university because they see it as a place that might in fact value them. That is how we open the doors and create a true university-community partnership.

As a result of the interaction between community and university students that we facilitated through this service learning project, farmworker adults and their children have attended author readings (Luis Alberto Urrea, author of *The Devil's Highway*, a non-fiction book about the U.S.-Mexico border), film screenings (the documentary *Harvest of Empire*), family festivals (CSUCI Science Fair), and forums (on topics such as U.S. policy in Puerto Rico and the aftermath of Hurricane Maria). I have found that the key to having community members attend campus events is extending them a personal, cordial, and sincere invitation that reiterates to them that their stories matter and that their voices, perspectives, and participation are not only important but absolutely necessary to help better educate university students and staff. If they feel valued, they will indeed come. For example, when the parents of forty-three missing students from Ayotzinapa, Mexico visited the CSUCI campus to raise awareness about state-sanctioned violence against poor students in Mexico, I personally called community members and told them that as former residents of Mexico, their perspectives were sorely needed at this event in order to create a more informed dialogue with the Ayotzinapa parents. The *señoras* and some of their husbands came to campus and met with these parents—they conversed with their compatriots within the walls of our university and later shared the insights of their conversations with our students in service learning. Ultimately, through the partnership we established through service learning, we are fulfilling the mission of the university as a site for critical dialogue and social justice within both the local and the larger, international educational community.

Perhaps the least expected way that we were able to establish lasting connections and reciprocal affection was through food. The last lesson I learned in the final assessment meetings was that sharing a meal between farmworker families and students helped cement a lasting friendship that has endured over the years. In our last meeting, we organized a potluck with the women: students brought pizza, cake, and cookies for the kids. But *las señoras* surprised us by cooking and bringing traditional Mexican dishes: *ollas de pozole* (beef and hominy soup) and *tamales*. Many of the students, particularly those who lived in student housing, were very emotional because it had been so long since they had had a home-cooked Mexican meal that reminded them of home and “fed their soul.” In addition, CSU students regularly experience food insecurity, so they were extremely thankful to be fed and taken care of by the women. The women’s generosity and the hard work despite having little financial means really made the students appreciate the community members and all they had done for them. It was a truly reciprocal moment, for the *señoras’* gesture of hospitality was their way of thanking the students for the humility, mentorship, and educational empowerment they brought to their community. As we shared a delicious meal and laughed and cried at the sometimes poignant, sometimes funny stories we shared, we created lasting, reciprocal, loving memories together. And those connections have never faded.

Technology has also really helped in this regard: through various social media platforms, the students, the farmworker women, their children, and I are able to stay connected and continue our partnerships to this day. Several farmworker women also regularly text me for advice such as what to ask their child’s high school counselor or what classes to take at the community college.

Ultimately, the service learning that we are carrying out in these community reading circles provides a real-world opportunity to address the realities of demographic change in the United States and improve educational access. Given that Latina/os are the fastest-growing population in the United States and Latino/a students account for the largest growth of college students today, there is a growing need for educational institutions to address the expanding population’s educational needs (Fry and Lopez 2012). Moreover, as

educators, “we need to equip students with bilingual and bicultural skills to foment stronger relationships within and among these communities” (Torrez 2015, 9). This service learning experience has renewed my belief in the emancipatory, educational, and community-building power of literature, for our experience showed us that reading and discussing stories written by Latina/o authors enabled students and community members to share their own stories and participate in transformative dialogues about gender, race, class, language, and immigrant experiences in the United States. Literature was the catalyst that sparked students’ and community members’ liberatory education; coupled with dialogue, it enabled them to strive to improve and achieve educational access and social justice for all. At a time when the humanities are seen as expendable and funding for them has decreased, our reading circles prove those ill-informed policies wrong. Even as anti-immigrant sentiments are growing and gaining steam, our reading circles provide a bold contestation against such racism and prejudice. We are developing activist-scholars, community activists, and culturally proud young generations that will serve as future leaders and role models in their own right. In the face of an ever-increasing, hegemonic, state-sponsored hate, we have effectively developed a resistance that is transforming the academy and the nation—one student, one farmworker, one mind at a time.

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