Toward a Pedagogy of Acompañamiento: Mexican Migrant Youth Writing from the Underside of Modernity

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In this article, Enrique Sepúlveda draws on an array of theological, anthropological, and cultural studies, and critical literacy frameworks, as well as on the voices of transmigrant youth through their poetic and autobiographical writing, to present an innovative pedagogy of acompañamiento. Sepúlveda shares narratives from his research and teaching at a northern California high school, working with a group of mostly undocumented Mexican students. Together with these students, Sepúlveda merged critical literacy, poetry, and storytelling into a relational "pedagogy of the borderlands" through which the students could speak back to society and the educational institutions around them. Sepúlveda calls on educators of transmigrant students to find their own ways to acompañar students through the liminal spaces of schooling.

Sueños Perdidos
He perdido muchos sueños,
muchas ilusiones en el deserto.
Tantos años he perdido sin mi familia
por buscar una vida mejor para ellos.

(I have lost many dreams,
many illusions in the desert.
Many years I have lost without my family
in search of a better life for them.)

—Jesús, undocumented migrant student at Bosque High
Jesús’ poem lays bare the paradoxical predicament of many modern-day migrants divided by political borders. He unmasks the bitter truth that to love and provide for his family in this globalized age means to be without them—the paradox of full stomachs and empty hearts. Jesús was thirteen and living in rural Michoacán, México, when he felt the pull to head north and contribute to his family’s well-being and, in the process, reunite with his father and older brother. He was nine years old when they left Mexico to work in the farm fields in northern California, and he missed them terribly. In his poem, which distills Mexican transnational migration, uprooting, and social dislocation, Jesús illustrates the heavy emotional and psychological toll of the ruptured lives of migrants, a rupture that comes from the “radical dislocation of things, images, even sensations” (Alexander, 2009, p. 6). Jesús’ dreams and illusions of the future are intimately wrapped in the fibers of his relationships and his people—yet, these relations and this community suffered first in his journey north to California.

Stories and writings like Jesús’ profoundly turned my research project on its head. They were the calls from the other side, the place that is in between, the clamor of what Anzaldúa (1987) describes as life on this “thin edge of barbwire” fence (p. 3). In those first months of my ethnographic research project at Bosque High School in the northern California town of Woodland, I kept hearing stories in the hallways and on the soccer fields of transmigrant youth sleeping on cold desert floors in the middle of winter, crossing international borders with coyotes (guides) or on their own, getting caught in the volley of shots, and living in the interstices of nation-states.

Yet, these experiences were rarely found in official school curricula or classroom discussions. Most teachers failed to ask, What do these transnational subjects know? What knowledge do they possess? What are their critiques of this new global order? What are their needs and concerns? Sanchez (2007) writes, “As educators, we often completely overlook the fact that many of our nations’ students are already steeped in processes connected to a global world where they are making their own interpretations and experiencing the learning of this phenomenon outside of school” (p. 490). In fact, much of the concerns of policy makers, reformers, and educational leaders today are about how to produce a more globally competitive, technologically savvy, and literate student (Sanchez, 2007).

But for certain educators at Bosque High School, and for me, stories and challenges like the ones Jesús experienced and eventually wrote about prompted us to engage youth in a different way, to deploy different methods of instruction, learning, and relating to one another. These methods built on the students’ own everyday social experiences to dialogue, reflect, and write. Building positive relationships with them and creating alternative spaces on school grounds where identities were validated, but also examined, were critical pillars. This process of accompanying youth in a more holistic manner—combining the arts, the cognitive, and the affective—transformed aspects of Bosque High into cul-
tural spaces that supported both personal and intellectual growth as well as community development (Freire, 1970). In short, what emerged from the conditions on the ground and in the liminal spaces of the school was an alternative pedagogy—what I call a pedagogy of *acompañamiento*.

This article brings together poetry, writings, and testimonies from a group of mostly undocumented Mexican students at Bosque High to illuminate an innovative pedagogy of *acompañamiento* from the borderlands. It describes how I became their teacher and how we used critical literacy, poetry, and storytelling together to analyze border-crossing realities and to talk back to the larger society and educational establishment. Throughout I interweave and analyze transmigrant youth voices via their poetic and autobiographical written work. And I conclude by making a special call to educators to find their own way to *acompañar* their transmigrant students in their journeys through school.

Social Locations and Subjectivities in the Borderlands

My family and my own border-crossing experiences as a child have both informed my pedagogy and shaped my research lens. My mother, Romelia, crossed the Rio Grande dividing northern Mexico and southern Texas to give birth to me on U.S. soil. As she crossed the U.S.-Mexico border, I was crossing her birth canal into this world. My father, Enrique II, was a migrant farm worker picking produce in Wisconsin at the time. He would later lead us to California in an attempt to find gainful and stable employment for his young and growing family. The pull in opposite directions between family, culture, and job security were great, and we spent my first five years going back and forth between California and *la frontera* in the Rio Grande area. My siblings’ birthplaces reflect this movement—my younger brother, Javier, was born in Los Angeles and my little sister, Lupita, in Eagle Pass, Texas.

It was not until I reached age six that my family finally settled in the northern California central valley town of Stockton. There I embarked on an arduous educational journey marked by marginalization, low-ability grouping, identity struggles, and low expectations—I had to learn a foreign cultural system and English as a second language at the expense of my native language and cultural ways. Throughout my schooling career, I was tracked into remedial and vocational classes; I was not deemed to be college material, and I internalized it. Not a single adult in any of my schools understood basic theories of second-language acquisition, much less what it meant to be a child of migration experiencing the multiple dimensions of psychosocial and cultural dislocation.

On graduating from high school by the skin of my teeth, my father convinced me to try out the local community college. While my buddies ended up in the military, I found refuge, knowledge, and the power of transformative learning in my Chicano studies courses. Richard Rios, an English and Chicano literature professor, used stories, literature, and theater to have us examine our histories and our communities. It was there that I became a learner
and a critical reader and there that I developed the intellectual tools to come to terms with and embrace my border-crossing realities and identities. All of these experiences converged in a powerful way, compelling me to teach in public schools and later to pursue a career in academia. My research focuses on mining the cultural insights and identity formation of youth and adults on the move and in liminal spaces within transnational contexts and on ameliorating the conditions of those classified as low ability who are on the margins in our school communities.

Methodology

I came to Bosque High after having been a bilingual elementary school teacher and secondary school administrator in the same town from 1989 to 1999. I arrived with a reputation of having successfully mentored and worked with Latino male youth. However, this time I was coming in the role of a researcher examining the relationships between Mexican immigrant students and their Mexican American counterparts and how these relationships affected school achievement. However, the multiple border-crossing experiences of my students and how they framed their schooling experiences within a transnational context (both “here and there”) at Bosque High pointed toward a larger and more profound reality that my education researcher’s limited achievement lens failed to see initially. I was primarily concerned early on with the achievement gap. But the discourse of achievement is framed largely around the technical acquisition and mastery of academic and linguistic skills while ignoring the fundamental needs of students in the learning process: the need to belong, the importance of durable and supportive relationships, and the development of a healthy sense of self.

I spent September 2004 through January 2005 observing, interacting, and interviewing transmigrant students and their teachers in multiple locales on the Bosque High School campus and in the community. The school had a total of 2,001 students. The two major ethnic groups were Latino at 48.3 percent (966 students) and white at 45.3 percent (906 students). There were 414 English language learners, and 94.9 percent of those were Spanish speakers (393 students). Out of 77 teachers, 12 were classified as Latino (11 males and 1 female) (California Department of Education, 2005). I made contact with students through faculty, staff, and sometimes chance opportune encounters with curious students wanting to know about me. These encounters developed into deeper bonds as I hung out and ate lunch with students in the cafeteria or played soccer with them during their lunch recess. Over several months, I became a fixture in their lives, and they in mine. These relationships—formed in downtime moments—afforded me valuable insight into their social worlds, migration stories, and border-crossing challenges related to being outsiders. These stories would later serve as the basis for future pedagogical reflections and discussions.
From January to the end of the school year in June 2005, at the request of faculty members, I began facilitating a dialogue and writing group, known as El Grupo. I collected data in the form of poetic and narrative writings of students, structured and unstructured interviews, field observations of normal classroom and school activities, as well as afterschool activities involving students. I employed ethnographic research methods along with discourse analysis throughout the whole school year in order to capture and thickly describe the negotiation and formation processes that took place as participants self- reflected on their identities and experiences as border-crossers in a public school (Watson-Gegeo, 1992).

My exposure to the lives, dreams, concerns, and voices of transmigrant youth in liminal campus spaces and those who accompany them dramatically changed my initial role. I had been a somewhat distant researcher and observer of their school lives, focusing on narrow technical achievement constructions dictated from above. Over time, I went from a peripheral participant observer to an ethnographer, educator, and fellow poet. I became completely and totally immersed in their educational and social worlds as I developed lesson plans, gave advice, listened to their stories, played soccer, organized field trips to the local university, and wrote poetry with them.

I learned firsthand from this fluid research project that advocacy and commitment to one’s community should not have to be sacrificed in the name of neutral, objective research. In fact, commitment to a social justice framework compels one to question “the false dichotomy between neutrality and commitment . . . To be uncommitted is not to be neutral, but to be committed—consciously or not—to the status quo” (Hernández Castillo, 2006). In short, the concerns of the teachers, the struggles and voices of undocumented youth, and my own inclination to engage in socially responsive research created the conditions for me to take on the role of an ethnographer-educator-activist-poet to engage in a modest way in my community’s call to acompañar.

Mexican Transnational Migration to Northern California

One influence on large-scale Mexican migration to the United States can be traced back to the early 1900s, when U.S.-financed railroads infiltrated deep into Mexico and connected with existing railway systems in the United States (Cardoso, 1980). U.S. labor recruiters looking to gain workers for the markets up north used these railways to go deep into Mexico and found considerable numbers of candidates in the west-central region states of Jalisco, Michoacán, and Guanajuato (Durand, Massey, & Zenteno, 2001, p. 109). Most of my students and their families at Bosque High came from these same states.

A deeper analysis of the migratory patterns and trends over the last one hundred years illuminates the convergence of a complex constellation of actors and factors, including the Mexican government, demographic trends, and rural-urban migration. Economic and cultural processes within families
and villages in Mexico also played vital roles in determining northern migration to the United States (Overmyer-Velazquez, 2011). These, combined with push factors such as the Mexican revolutionary war and harsh economic conditions, created social paths and linkages that proved to be sustainable over time and up to the present. This sustained migratory trend has undergirded the establishment of transnational ties between sending communities in central and western Mexico and established Mexican migrant communities in the United States.

Woodland, the setting for this study, is a rural town located in the Sacramento Valley. According to Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, and Cintrón (1993), Mexican presence in the region predated the Mexican-American War of the 1840s; however, at the time, few of them settled in the area. With the development of an agriculturally based economy in the early 1900s, this northern California region began to attract large numbers of Mexican workers and their families. This migration flow gained strength between 1910 and 1930.

Enter the Activist Educator: The Call to Acompañar

As I conducted my research, I became convinced that the focus of learning at Bosque High had to change. I saw many migrant students disengaged from the learning process in the classroom and many teachers who knew very little of the lives of their students, concerned mainly with curricular content, objectives, and classroom management issues. I felt the school lacked a strong sense of community and belonging. Recently arrived undocumented Mexican migrant students were undergoing severe social dislocation at their new high school and in the community. Most of their teachers were not certified to teach English language learners, and most knew very little of the ruptured lives of migrants and their experiences of transgressions. As I got to know these students, they shared with me the many dramas and traumas of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border without proper documentation—sin papeles. They shared their feelings of being uprooted and separated from their loved ones, of loneliness and hope, of culture clash and conflict. Most were afflicted and felt under siege from the constant verbal and physical attacks coming from some Mexican American youth, in and out of school, in what is known as the norterio-sureño youth gang conflict in many California communities.

School authorities systematically separated them—spatially, socially, and academically—from mainstream students. They were housed in temporary portables on the outskirts of campus near dumpsters and warehouses. In some cases, monolingual English-speaking teachers who taught math, physical education, and English as a second language (ESL) classes had difficulty with these non-English-speaking students and classroom management. Skipping classes had become a norm for many, and academic failure was common. When discussing his Mexican migrant students, the math teacher shared how “many are absent on a regular basis. They probably skip class to go to sec-
ond period lunch and play soccer. I don’t know. They don’t have any drive. Nobody shows them at home.” The main ESL teacher pinpointed the problem of underachievement of her Mexican migrant students:

The problem with these students is that their whole world is in Spanish. They’re not immersed in English. There’s a lot of absenteeism, and they come from a macho culture that treats females with disrespect—especially me, a gringa. Part of the problem is culture, 95 percent of it is. It’s all about assimilation time. Some kids need more time to assimilate. They need to speed up the process of assimilation. They need to be integrated more.

In one instance, as I sat in the back of a classroom observing an ESL lesson, the teacher asked me to take two students to the office for classroom misconduct. On our way to the office, I asked them, among other things, if they were learning English in that class. One student, Leo, responded, “¡Es curioso porque aquí tienes todo—libros, lápices, salones, edificios y maestros—todo menos aprendizaje!” (It’s interesting, because here you have everything—books, pencils, classrooms, buildings, and teachers—everything but learning!)

I became aware that for many recent arrivals, socialization into U.S. society vis-à-vis schools with demoralized, unqualified teachers and scripted textbook curriculum meant socialization into marginality (Gitlin, Buendia, Crosland, & Doumbia, 2003). There were negative effects on their whole being. This was confirmed in my conversations with Mayela, a member of the campus security team supervising the cafeteria. She said, “Many students are unmotivated by school and life in general. They’re feeling disconnected and isolated. I don’t know . . . they just don’t seem to have the passion for the things we adults are telling them to do or work on.” She went on to say, “Como que están super desganados o deprimidos o algo” (It’s as if they’re super listless or depressed or something). Something in her tone and the look on her face indexed a deep worry, as if she knew the causes were beyond the oft-quoted narrative of “unmotivated students.”

Valdés (2004) writes, “In coming to this country and adjusting to American schools, immigrant students and their families travel very long distances. These distances are physical, emotional and psychological” (p. 112). Because of her own migrant experience, Mayela understood this. I came to trust her perspective, for she was someone who was attuned to the cultural crevices and silent spaces of institutional life that often go unnoticed, that are usually beyond the grasp of credentialized authorities and hierarchy. When the promises of education are “insufficient to meet the expectations, and to quiet the fears, confusion, pain, and agonies of people on the margins of power” (León, 2004, p. 5), subjects move in to fill the gaps with creative practices that rearrange relationships, spaces, and cultural meanings.

These innovative practices began at Bosque High in multiple areas on campus. Some time after speaking with me, Mayela organized Latinas Unidas, an afterschool group of female students who engaged in dialogue about matters
important to them. The school principal also supported similar unconventional, dialogical activity with youth. Mr. Rosales, a Chicano with migrant experience himself, initiated an ongoing conversation with a group of Latino male students who were affiliated or semi-affiliated with youth gangs. They called themselves Hombres Nobles, and they met regularly for dialogue sessions or extracurricular activities, such as weight lifting in the school gym and field trips. Mr. Rosales wanted to give them a different, more positive connection to the school. In each of these cases, educators were responding to some sort of malaise, melancholy, and disconnect on the part of students, the reasons for which were not crystal clear to the average mainstream teacher. But what was clear to these particular educators was that something different had to be done, something cultural, related to identity, where relationships could be forged.

Just before winter break in 2005, two Latina staff members—a teacher in the English language development (ELD) program and a coordinator of the on-campus learning center—approached me with a concern regarding their transmigrant students. I had informed them earlier in the year of my willingness to help in any way beyond my research agenda, and they knew about my previous work as an educator and my interest in supporting Latino male youth. They had a potential plan of action that involved a role for me. They called me into their classroom and said, “Mira Enrique, tenemos un plan y queremos que participes” (Look Enrique, we have a plan and would like you to participate in it).

Mrs. Orales and Mrs. Villa asked me to take the twenty-four boys in Mrs. Orales’ sixth-period ELD class twice a week so they could work with their female students. Their intent was to create a safe space for their transmigrant Latina students to discuss personal issues that were specific to the eight young women. Knowing that I had worked with male Latino youth before, Mrs. Orales felt I could provide some mentoring, guidance, and dialogue with her “boys.” I was struck by their boldness. Their words echoed Mayela’s concerns, and they were prepared to take a bold step and throw out their scripted curriculum and texts. Their students were not responding, and the teachers felt something different had to be done to reach them. In essence, their students’ worries had become their worries (Kozol, 2001, p. 152), and they were determined to chart out on their own. I began to feel a sense that the place Mrs. Orales, Mrs. Villa, and others created within the school was splitting open, shredding, “tearing to reveal another place” (Alexander, 2009, p. 9) where border brokers and crossers could forge a new culture of belonging.

Theoretical Crossings: Toward a Pedagogy of Acompañamiento

To be abandoned is to be nobody; to be accompanied is to be honored, a person. The people’s accompaniment symbolizes a new honored status as a full human being.

—R. S. Goizueta
Throughout my research, I heard or observed numerous accounts of people acompañando (accompanying) transmigrants on their journey as they struggled with the fractious and debilitating effects of being outsiders brought on by globalization—whether it was at the moment of crossing the physical U.S.-Mexican political border or the various daily social, linguistic, and institutional borders of schools and communities. In my attempts to understand and further develop the concept of acompañamiento as it emerged from the ground up at Bosque High School, I have borrowed from multiple frameworks in my own theoretical border-crossings, ideas that tap into theological, anthropological, cultural studies, and critical literacy frameworks to illuminate what transpired.

For Latino theologian Goizueta (2001), human action in the service of others is the basis of life in community, an understanding of the self that is first and foremost a relational, intrinsically social understanding rooted in our interactions with others (p. 77). He argues that to be in relationship with one another is to be among family, and to be among family is to be accompanied (p. 205). For Goizueta, accompaniment “symbolizes a new honored status as a full human being” (p. 75). He further elaborates that as an action, or praxis, the act of “accompaniment includes not only ‘being’ with another, or feeling with another, but also ‘doing’ with another” (p. 206). In other words, “To accompany another person is to walk with him or her. It is above all, by walking with others that we relate to them and love them” (p. 206).

These ideas about the quality of the relationships we build as we stand or walk with others—in this case, transmigrant adolescents—are key to understanding the multiple ways that educators at Bosque High, including myself, were called to be in a teaching and learning relationship that was radically different from the norm. To acompañar undocumented youth, who are among the most marginalized students on campus, was, in essence, to be in a different kind of relationship, one that engages in walking with the Other in ways that promote a deeper bonding and critical dialogue between equal subjects. Goizueta (2001) writes that “the act of acompañamiento necessarily implies equality, the possibility of accompanying the poor does not exist unless and until the poor themselves are equal participants in dialogue and interaction” (p. 206).

In Goizueta’s view, social justice work in the name of those on the margins is not something that can to be done to them. It is a process that begins with authentic relationships and spaces for community formation, where life experiences, perspectives, and analysis of those on the margins are critical starting points to individual and social transformation. This kind of unity and solidarity implies a deep sense of empathy, where one’s full humanity, dignity, and common personhood are affirmed. He describes this type of union as empathetic fusion: “To relate to another as a person, I must ‘fuse’ with him or her . . . as whole human beings. Thus, the only way we can ‘fuse’ with each other is affectively, through empathetic love” (pp. 91–92).
Goizueta's theorizing is rooted in liberation theology and is in dialogue with other liberation education scholarship emerging from Latin America. Freire (1970) writes, "At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves... engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human" (p. 52). Further, "Only through comradeship with the oppressed can the converts understand their characteristic ways of living and behaving, which in diverse moments reflect the structure of domination" (p. 46). Those whom Friere deems "converts" parallels my own notion of privileged allies. W. Dyrness (2011) adds that "the practices that best promote human community and health... are those activities which promote and extend the loving relationships that are fundamental to that community" and follows Goizueta's work by proposing the following axiom: "Activities that encourage and facilitate the empathetic connections within the community will do more in the long run to promote the health of that community than work done for the alleviation of poverty alone" (p. 269). Thus, in the process of liberation, the voices of those on the margins must be recentered. Strong communities are sustained by authentic and supportive relationships that cut across all spheres, often including allies from more privileged backgrounds.

It was this deep sense of empathy, or empathetic fusion, with transmigrant youth that compelled the aforementioned educators and me to act and engage the students by creating alternative spaces for a different kind of learning and engagement. As A. Dyrness (2011) writes about her work with immigrant mothers engaged in school reform:

My role was to simply be with the mothers in struggle—to hear them out, back them up, and share in some of the pain... Activist research is, finally, an exercise in solidarity... You do it because you have no other choice. And then, your faith and your relationships with your compañeras see you through. (p. 221)

These theological and theoretical concepts of relationships, community, and engagement with those on the margins of equal footing are critical concepts that have implications for educators in secular institutions, regardless of our faith traditions or lack thereof.

Acompañamiento acts are the cultural, improvisational practices of relationship and community building performed by borderland subjects at the interstices, or in-between spaces (Bhabha, 1994), of cultural and institutional life. These practices aim to create a sense of belonging, a cultural citizenry. Following de Certeau (1988), they are the microcultural strategies, or "tactics," facilitating "the mobile and opportunistic maneuverings of those without recourse to conventional power" (León, 2004, p. 272). Rosaldo (1997) describes this process as a struggle for equity and resources as well as a matter of claiming space to build community and identity (pp. 29–31). Social agents deploy acompañamiento tactics to survive and adapt, to bridge cultural worlds, and to love and live with dignity.
Critical Literacy and Pedagogy

In the four months leading up to my poetic work with the twenty-four male students, certain themes emerged naturally from our conversations, my interviews with them, and my observations in classrooms, cafeteria, and various locales on campus and in the community. I used these themes as points of departure to critically analyze their social worlds marked by radical dislocation, transgression, and loss. Morrell (2002) writes of how "social context and cultural diversity have significant implications for the process of becoming literate" (p. 72). Following Morrell, I felt it was important to begin the teaching and learning process by dealing head on with our social context—namely, with our sense of being cast out of place for the purpose of creating a more secure place in a time of movement. As Freire (2001) asks,

Why not take advantage of the students' experience of life in those parts of the city neglected by the authorities . . . ? Why not discuss with the students the concrete reality of their lives and establish an "intimate" connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum, and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals? (p. 36)

Using critical literacy in educational and community settings added another layer of reflection, analysis, and action for members of a transmigrant community who were already actively engaged in creating new experiences and were in the process of transforming their sociocultural worlds. When individuals are allowed to reflect, think, and write about their most intimate realities, transformation happens on multiple levels—personal, relational, and communal. Teachers learn about the worlds of their students, students learn about each other; but, most importantly, students learn about themselves. Freire (1998) declares, "A humanizing education is the path through which men and women can become conscious about their presence in the world" (p. xiii).

At Bosque High, critical literacy and pedagogy came to represent one dimension, albeit an important one situated in an educational setting, of the more fundamental vocation of acompañamiento in one's community (Goizueta, 2001). Whereas critical literacy and pedagogy are important educational projects aimed at liberating the subject from historical forms of domination vis-à-vis schooling, the concept of accompanying individuals on their journeys is based on the more fundamental human need to be in relationship and in community. Acompañamiento is fellowship and engagement with one another without goals and objectives. It can serve as a foundation for an educational or liberatory project; however, its raison d'etre is not to accomplish something in the instrumentalist sense.

Learning, achievement, skill development, and acquisition were the by-products of people coming together in a different way at Bosque High, but they were not the purpose of acompañamiento. To quote Goizueta (2001), "What makes human life human is precisely that it is an absolute value in itself—regardless of its productivity, usefulness, or practicality" (p. 84). Whereas
critical literacy and pedagogy are susceptible to being framed as a technique, or as a means to some external end—for example, liberation or conscientización (Freire, 1970, pp. 19–20; Freire, 2001, p. 79)—acompañamiento is about the affirmation of relationships, particularly in a place far away from family and ancestral lands.

In Search of the Poet

In our weekly class sessions, the twenty-four transmigrant “boys” and I began to discuss and examine, through poetry, storytelling, and dialogue, the multiple realities, identities, and meanings of being border-crossers and outsiders to this land and school. Together, the students and I developed a process and refined a method of working collaboratively and individually. I selected poems or narrative excerpts, mainly by Chicano migrant authors, that spoke to the reality of their lives as border-crossers. They were instructed to visit stations where poems or excerpts written on large easel paper were to be read individually and quietly; they then were to write down their thoughts or reactions. After a few minutes, we gathered to have group discussions on our respective reactions. Following a thirty- to forty-minute classwide discussion, they each wrote their own poetic or narrative responses to our readings and discussions.

One of the first poets we examined together in the first several weeks was Jorge Aigla (1995), a Mexican migrant himself. The first poem was titled “Una Carta” (A Letter):

Mamá,
las cosas por acá son diferentes.
La gente ya no hace lo que hacía antes
y ni dice lo que siente
ya no se dan los buenos días
ni lloran cuando miran el presente.

(Mamá,
things here are different.
People do no longer what was done before
nor speak of what they feel
already they don’t greet each other at daybreak
nor do they weep when beholding the present.)

The second poem had no title, but the students called it “El Problema”:

es que
a ratos
me atrevo
y contemplo lo nuevo
y siembro sombras
y termino
por enterrar amuletos
(The problem
is that
at times
I dare
and behold the new
and I plant shadows
and end up
by burying amulets)

After I provided instructions, the students went to the different stations in the classroom. There was some initial rustling of chairs and desks, along with joking and laughter. They took pencils and notebooks with them and quickly settled in to silently read the poems. I was intrigued by their earnest intentions, contrary to commonly heard opinions of disengaged, apathetic, and unmotivated Mexican youth. I walked around the classroom and stood next to them, shoulder to shoulder, looking at the poems over their heads, rereading the texts, and absorbing the moment with them. It was a moment of thinking, remembering, making connections, and trying to make sense of what was in front of them. Slowly, one by one, they returned to their desks to write their thoughts down on paper. I remember how one student scratched the side of his head while looking up; another had the eraser part of the pencil resting on his lips as he closed his eyes in deep thought. One student, Jesús, called me over to ask me about the Problema poem. He said he was a little confused about the word atrevo (to dare). I asked him, “What does it mean for you?” He replied, “Quizá, significa iniciar una nueva vida o una nueva etapa en tu vida en otras tierras” (Perhaps, it means to initiate a new life or a new stage in your life in other lands). I then asked him, “What else does it make you think of?” And he said, “De mi pasado. De mi vida en mi tierra” (Of my past. Of my life in my land). I replied excitedly while pointing to his paper, “Entonces, escribe sobre eso” (Then, write about that). During this exchange, I noticed other students through the corners of my eyes in different parts of the classroom looking and listening intently to what Jesús and I had to say, genuinely interested in the conversation about our past and present lives. This led to other, quieter exchanges in smaller groups.

During the large-group discussion, a student named Jaime said that while he was not separated from his parents, he had many friends who were here in the United States working or going to school away from their mothers, fathers, and grandparents. He said many were living with uncles, aunts, godparents, or friends of the family. Others shared that sometimes they lived with their fathers because their mothers stayed back in Mexico or were in another U.S. state. Jaime said, “Tengo muchos compañeros que necesitan de ese apoyo, de ese amor” (I have many friends who need that support, that love).

Another student named Ari, from the central Mexican state of Guanajuato, spoke up. Ari was fifteen years old and had only been in the United States for nine months. Ari was a jovial person, always smiling, but this time he was seri-
ous. He told the group that he had been separated from his mother for four years when she left him and his brothers with his grandparents to come up north and work in papeles. Throughout those years, he said, he missed her, and when he came of age he decided to come up north to reunite with her. When Ari saw her for the first time, he cried demasiado (a lot) on her shoulders. He said they both cried out of "no se, de alegría y tristeza al mismo tiempo" (I don’t know, out of joy and sadness at the same time). He added that it was a great reunion but that he missed his grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends in his old neighborhood. He shared that he could write multiple letters home expressing la falta de muchos abrazos (the absences of many hugs). There was a brief and heavy silence in the classroom. Ari looked the other way.

Then Jesús, in his typical quiet and resolute manner, asked for permission to speak. He came from the state of Michoacán, from a small town near the capital of Morelia. He had been in the United States for a year when I met him. He said, "Mi poema se llama 'Me Acuerdo'" (My poem is called "I Remember"). He began to read slowly from his already crumpled piece of paper:

Me acuerdo de mi tierra,  
contemplo la tierra donde estoy,  
me acuerdo mi vida en mi tierra,  
y creo que termino olvidando quien soy.
(I recall my homeland,  
I contemplate the land where I am,  
I remember my life in my homeland,  
and I think I end up forgetting who I am.)

Crossing the Border Together

Crucamos la línea en Tijuana en carro. Pensé que la vida iba ser fácil aquí.  
Pero en realidad uno sufre mucho trabajando para ganar dinero.
(We crossed the line in Tijuana by car. I thought life here was going to be easy. But in reality one suffers a lot working to earn money.)

—Pedro, migrant student at Bosque High School

My students had responded to the poems and discussions that day in powerful ways. There was something significant and healing about the public sharing of intimate experiences and feelings associated with displacement, migrations, and border-crossings. The expression and exposure of vulnerability as young men created an emotional release, an opening of some kind that deepened our relationship with one another and furthered our fledgling sense of community. A third space for reinterpreting our lives was forming through direct confrontation and radical acceptance of our illegality and our transgressions as border-crossers, in poetic collective terms.

After several weeks, we began to develop a stronger bond. We sought each other out for conversation or advice on any number of things. Sometimes
they helped me understand youth and school culture—for example, the significance and differences of baggy clothing between them and their Mexican American counterparts. I helped them with their homework or with navigating institutional channels. Yet, at other times more serious discussions emerged during lunchtime, after school, and even on the sidelines of soccer matches on topics such as loneliness, missing their mother or grandparents back home, or the difficulty of crossing the U.S.-Mexican border illegally.

Initially the students called me maestro or profe. The literal translation is teacher; however, the English word does not convey the same sense of respect and distinction that it has in Spanish in the Mexican or other U.S. Latino communities. This sense of respect and legitimacy engendered a preliminary sense of trust that helped me begin the process of facilitating conversation and examination in the classroom. However, equally powerful were the non-teacher/student dimensions of our relationships gained outside of the classroom. For example, on the soccer field I was another player and opponent vying for control of the ball. After the initial excitement of a teacher playing soccer with students wore off, the other players attacked me with the same fierce determination they attacked the rest, and I was substituted in and out like my teammates. At other times, students would invite me to watch soccer matches of the Mexican national soccer team at various homes. On numerous occasions, I found myself sitting on couches in front of big TVs, sipping sodas and eating chips, enthralled by the soccer match drama and the youthful antics and verbal gymnastics of my young interlocutors.

These dimensions both enriched and complicated the neat categories of teacher/researcher/authority figure and student/youth. In the classroom, I was not a teacher in the traditional sense. While I was an authority figure worthy of respect—because I facilitated conversations centered on themes relevant to them rather than lectures and allowed certain amounts of youthful banter, slang, and even curse words—I was seen and treated in a different way. By facilitating the learning process versus teaching through traditional means, my students contributed to it, coconstructed it, and owned it. After some time, the students began to more readily refer to me as Enrique.

Some students initially tested this new and ambiguous relationship. One student in particular was reluctant to do any work and did his best to lobby and rally his classmates on a regular basis to go outside and play soccer. After repeated attempts and with varying degrees of success, I informed the group that we could just play soccer but that would mean the end of the class and the areas of study we had chosen. The class responded overwhelmingly and loudly that they wanted to keep the class as it was.

Acompañamiento meant losing some of my power and letting go of hierarchical aspects inherent in teacher/student relationships. Attempting to develop relationships beyond the classroom to understand their multiple worlds was a humbling experience: I was no longer the teacher in charge of policing and classroom management and the rules of the school as much as I
was engaging and interacting with them as a guide and mediator on their journey through high school.

Recovering Meaning

We continued to meet and discuss the idea of remembering our past lives, our reasons for coming to the United States, and the moment of crossing the border. During our time together, they seemed more confident, as if they had a new or renewed sense of purpose. On seeing me in the hallways, or from the other side of the quad, they would yell out in public, "Oye profe cuándo se junta el grupo?" (Hey prof, when is the group meeting?). Perhaps their confidence and pride came from the power of narrating and "remembering oneself within a community of the past" and of claiming "that small stubbornness of voice that insists on its own story and that reconstructs the past in a register that claims ownership of the past, especially when ownership of the present is endangered" (Padilla, 1993, p. 29).

In one of our sessions, Solomon recalled the night before leaving Mexico City with his mother and little sister. He said that it was both exciting and scary: he was excited to finally see his father and be in a united family again, but he was also fearful of leaving the old neighborhood and of the unknown future awaiting him. His father had been working the United States for several years while sending money home on a regular basis. However, his mom feared that Solomon, having turned thirteen, was growing up too fast en la ciudad (in the city) and needed his father in his life. So they decided to take a bus north together to the border and cross it with the help of a coyote to reunite and confront life's challenges together as a family. In the following vignette, Solomon captures that moment of departure and the act of remembering:

_Esa noche mi cabeza daba vuelta. El siguiente día era el día en que dejaba una hermosa etapa en mi vida e ir en busca de nuevas metas y nuevos triunfos. La hora ha llegado. Mi familia refleja alegría y ánimo pero en el fondo una gran tristeza en sus corazones. Después de todas las despedidas es hora de marchar y en mi madre veo un gran temor. Durante el viaje, mi cabeza vuelve a girar. Pienso en salud, trabajo, felicidad, y ser mejor. Algo me dice que no será fácil pero creo que valdrá la pena sufrir y esforzarme. Mis herramientas serán mi familia, el espíritu de superación, y unas ganas de poner en alto mi identidad y mi familia._

(That night my head was spinning. The following day was the day I would leave a beautiful chapter in my life in search of new goals and triumphs. The hour has arrived. My family reflects a cheerfulness and enthusiasm, but deep down a sadness is in their hearts. After all of the goodbyes, it's time to depart, and in my mother I see great fear. During the long journey my head begins to spin again. I think of health, work, happiness, and becoming someone better. Something tells me that it won't be easy, but I think it will be worth my efforts and suffering. My tools/strengths will be my family, a spirit of achievement, and an enthusiasm for displaying my identity and family.)
Despite the very real effects of a fragmented and socially dislocated reality, meaning is (re)discovered, (re)interpreted, and (re)articulated within that fragmentation. In fact, I see in my students' writings an elegant coherence in the very act of searching and questioning—in their back-and-forth dynamic they artfully display the ability to be doubly present. If movement and circulation are the modes of being in this day and age, then the question isn't about "how to arrive"; rather, the existential question centers on "how to move" and construct meaning out of life's challenges and beauties while in motion, in a rapidly changing social landscape (Carter, 1992, p. 101). My students' poetic work illustrates how critical pedagogy and literacy are uniquely suited for illuminating life in motion and circulation for transnational migrant youth who are at the forefront of cocreating new emerging social arrangements, identities, and forms of life.

Sometime in late spring, El Grupo began discussing their lives in the United States. I brought in a poem by a local poet Francisco X. Alarcón to trigger our thinking and discussion. The poem, titled "Working Hands," captured some of the sentiments and realities my students had been sharing for the past eight months on life as an immigrant in the United States. Alarcón (2002) writes,

we clean your room
we do your dishes
a footnote for you
but hands like these
one day will write
the main text of this land

The students were eager to jump into the conversation and share their perspectives in a routine that was, by then, well established. They had become supportive, articulate, critical, and passionate interlocutors on matters important to them. Pedro, a sixteen-year-old from the state of Jalisco, began the conversation with specific examples of how he has been treated at his work. A dishwasher at a local restaurant, he worked from four in the afternoon to late at night on most weekends. He shared that sometimes he did not get paid on time and that any of his complaints were countered with threats of being fired and statements about how lucky he was to have a job. Because he was undocumented, he feared that he had to put up with this kind of exploitation. Other students echoed Pedro's sentiments. One student, César, from the state of Michoacán, shared that tough sacrifices involved in coming to this country were expected. But he added that there needed to be fairness and freedom in order to allow them to work and provide for their families, which meant getting paid for what they worked.

Salvador latched on to the word "freedom" in the U.S. context. He said that he could not really go anywhere outside of his home because gang members controlled his neighborhood. He said police officers were also policing
the area and were stopping youth for questioning for no reason. He feared being picked up by the border patrol and deported back to Mexico. He told the group that here he had material things such as a television, video games, running water, and air conditioning, but he is not a free person. When it was time to write, Salvador decided to pen an imaginary letter to a friend back in Mexico to express his sentiments about life here in the United States. In "Jaula de Oro" (Golden Cage), he captures the tension between the acquisition of material things and the lack of freedom in his metaphor of the golden cage. For him, life in the United States is full of obligations and limited rights.

Hola amigo, he decidido escribirte estas pocas lineas cuando supe que soñabas venir a este país de lujos, de oportunidades, comodidades, y de mejor posición económica. Pero lo que no sabes es que también hay mucho sufrimiento. Sufrir una soledad que te puede llegar a afectarte. Donde las tentaciones están a la vuelta y donde tendrás más obligaciones que derechos. En este país uno se siente como un delincuente que tiene que cuidar lo que hace. Si quieres que te diga como veo a este país te diría que es como una jaula de oro, donde tienes todo pero encerrado al mismo tiempo.

(Hello friend, I’ve decided to write you these few lines upon learning that you dreamed of coming to this country of luxuries, of opportunities, comforts, and of better economic positioning. But what you don’t know is that there’s also much suffering. You suffer a loneliness that can come to affect you. Where temptations are around the corner and where you will have more obligations than rights. In this country one feels like a delinquent who has to watch his every move. If you want me to tell you how I see this country I would say that it is like a golden cage, where you have everything but imprisoned at the same time.)

Finally, Leo chimed in to share a different perspective on his life here in the United States. At seventeen, Leo was older than the rest, yet he was the newest member to the group, having only arrived several months earlier. He did not speak often, but when he did, others listened. Leo was also considered to be the best soccer player in the entire school, and that carried weight among his peers. He said that while he agreed with everything that had been said, he felt his life in the United States was a blessing. He started off by sharing that life here was hard. He saw how his father and older brother toiled in farm fields all day long in the heat. In a short amount of time he had witnessed how Mexicans were discriminated against and mistreated by some gringos as well as by some Mexican Americans in school and even in the local churches by some parishioners. He also shared the challenges of migrating here without papers. He had been caught twice by the border patrol and sent back. But the third time, he made it through and up to northern California to reunite with his father and brother, who were living in a decrepit trailer in the middle of agricultural fields. But despite all of that, he said he was enjoying life here in the United States more than he expected.

He began to describe the beautiful California country roads he traveled to get to his father’s trailer every day from school—los caminos de campo de Califor-
nia. He related how he had to pass numerous dark-green, lush cornfields, cool and shaded almond orchards, and freshly irrigated dark-brown earth shaped into hundreds of rows with small green seedlings emerging from the ground. He told me later that for him the earth was rich, alive, and a companion of sorts, como un compañero. When I drove him home one day to his ramshackle trailer, I, too, was taken by country roads lined and shaded by beautiful, grandfatherly oak trees with wide, welcoming branches. He contrasted this with his life in a big city in the state of Guanajuato, where gangs, concrete, and crystal drugs were omnipresent. He told us that his solitude out in the campo—among tomato and wheat fields, where you could see far off into the horizon, literally in the middle of nowhere—was exactly what he needed to cleanse his spirit and body, cuerpo y espíritu. For Leo, displacement and migration was a sort of rebirth. His was not a sentimental story of missing the ancestral lands; rather, it poignantly illustrated the struggles of transnational youth in their efforts to tap into two nation-states to find support, a new vision of success, and reunification with long-absent family.

Conclusion

The Borderlands: not only a physical place but also a poetic device.
—L. D. León

My students’ cultural poetics bring into sharp relief the experiences of the subaltern in the borderlands, essentially those who have been left out of official, national narratives of citizenship and belonging (R. Saldívar, 2006). Their ways of being in the world force us to rethink and reimagine what types of pedagogy and training are required for a twenty-first century marked by movement, displacement, and global inequality.

Acompañamiento was an organic, hybrid cultural form and educational practice of adaptation and assistance borne out of a deep sense of empathy, a place where people came together to dialogue on their most pressing concerns and to support each other as they made their way in their new school and country. It emerged because fellow human beings were in need of community and deeper relationships. Far from being the passive receptor of global modernity, acompañamiento represents the creative acts of a people making space, creating place, and building community in an increasingly fragmented global world. At Bosque High School, acompañamiento went beyond the narrow achievement concerns of educators (or perhaps occurred because of them).

Goizueta’s (2001) insights on the quality and depth of our relationships based on solidarity and empathetic fusion challenge public school educators to ask what types of relationships and community promote the emotional, cultural, and intellectual health of our students and how they might enhance the learning context. Heller (1997) writes, “We are only beginning to understand
the powerful role that community building has in effective learning and literacy settings" (p. 161). The critical literacy component of acompañamiento was also instrumental in our community-in-the-making process. Writing was not treated as separate from real life; rather, our poetic work helped bring together what was previously disjointed: life experiences with school experiences; transmigrant literacies with institutional/academic literacies (Morrell, 2002); the affect with the intellect (Heller, 1997); and our past and present.

Moya (2006) writes that teachers and students alike “bring their identities and experiences with them into the classroom” (p. 96). She argues that classrooms should “mobilize” the identities of youth by treating them as “epistemic resources,” which, in turn, allows for “knowledge generating potential” to emerge (p. 96). This process of cultural production of new knowledge in what J. D. Saldivar (2006) calls “border epistemology” (p. 152) was evident in the poetic workings and production of the students of El Grupo.

My students’ writings and conversations represent the instability of the postmodern subject. These poetic and autobiographical narratives and discussions explore and expose a transmigrant experience that is defined by the “continual play between loss and gain” (Bammer, 2005, p. 152). At the core of these experiences is the seeming loss of one’s identity as he experiences it in a contained self, so eloquently written by Jesús in his poem “Me Acuerdo.” As Jesús sees it, he is caught between a past that is still very present and a present that has not revealed itself. Bhabha (1994) explains “that culture only emerges as a problem, or a problematic, at the point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life” (p. 34). I would add that identity also becomes a problem in those in-between spaces where “meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37).

With the crossing of legal and cultural borders, my students entered a world marked by multiple discontinuities. It is a world that Mayela, Mrs. Orales, and Mrs. Villa understood intimately, prompting them to act with deep empathy and recruit me to work with their male students. They were, in effect, attuned to those spaces in between and to the very human feelings of being cast as outsiders. These are paradoxical spaces that exist within educational institutions yet beyond their authority and understanding, to be understood only by those whose lives are also in between, such as border-crossing subjects who carry “the burden of the meaning of culture” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38).

Perhaps that is where we must look to find our own pedagogy of acompañamiento, where students on the margins can engage and speak with passion and authority. Heller (1997) emphasizes that “those who have been excluded by the mainstream ... may be the very people to help us find particularly effective ways to learn in community—ways less skewed by conformity, less dominated by institutional aspirations” (p. 160). She advocates for the powerful role of community building to be incorporated into the learning process and argues that educators must bridge the psychological and social distances that exist between teachers and their students in order to foster “classroom inti-
macy" where the "emotions and the intellect, the spirit and mind, the person and the community" are fused (p. 160).

By writing back to society from what Dussel (1996) calls the "underside of modernity," my students transformed the borderlands from a place to be traversed and in which to hide to a poetic device aimed at fusing relationships and narrating coherence out of a life of movement and fragmentation. Through poetry, dialogue, and intimate relationships, the students and I cocreated a third space where we reflected on our lives marked by the paradoxical state of the "poles of no-longer and not-yet" (Bammer, 2005, pp.151–152). From these poetic renderings, we switch our locations from looking at the migrant to seeing life at the interstices from their perspectives. In the process, we catch powerful glimpses of how transmigrant youth at Bosque High appear not "doubly absent" but "doubly present, both from elsewhere and now here" (Bammer, 2005, p. 153). Their poetic work was, in essence, another layer in the cultural production of acompañamiento in the borderlands.

Notes
1. All student and school names are pseudonyms.
2. In her study of a Tenderloin women writer's workshop, Heller (1997) witnessed the power of critical literacy and the multiple layers of learning "when a premium is placed on telling and examining the truth of one's personal, social, and political experience rather than on credentialing, certifying, and standardizing learning" (p. 14). Sanchez (2007) writes, "We often presume that what we need to teach about globalization must come from a textbook outlining a new set of social skills or a new paradigm, when in fact our best resources and examples may not be abstract theories nor principles but tangible, warm-bodied students in our classrooms, full of experiences and understandings heretofore untapped and unexamined" (p. 490). Through the writing and telling of their stories, people make sense of their worlds, "weave meaning and identity out of their memories and experiences" (Heller, 1997, p. 19).
3. Illegality was an issue for the majority of the students, as most had come into the United States without proper documentation. It became everyone's concern, even for those who were here legally, including myself; and because of our deep empathy for each other, it became a collective reality.
4. R. Saldívar (2006) defines border knowledge, experiences, and discourses as "subaltern" because they have been excluded from history. They have been rendered subaltern by a long history of Western global hegemony. They emerge from "the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system as a response to the encounter between them" (p. 54).
5. The phrase "underside of modernity" comes from the work of Enrique Dussel (1996). It is directly borrowed from his collection of philosophical writings on the experiences of the Other and their interactions with European/North American political, economic, and cultural hegemony, in which those individuals/communities have been locked (since 1492) and continue to be so, be they women, children/youth, indigenous peoples around the globe, people of color in developed nations, transmigrants, etc. Dussel identifies them as the immense majority of people around the globe and argues that the experiences of this majority are not premodern, postmodern, or antimodern; rather, they are simply the true face of the other side of modernity, the underside.
References


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