



## **Los Pulmones Tienen Una Capacidad Inherente Para Sanarse y Regenerar: Reflections from Almost Drowning in the Whitestream**

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Abstract: Storytelling is a healing act. It is how we teach others to resist and see the invisible to envision new possible worlds. My goal is to reflect through my testimonio on navigating the US education system, how my experiences have been about being submerged, floating along, and eventually, learning to swim both against and with the currents of the whitestream curricula of our educational institutions. I use the stages of drowning to help organize my testimonio as an anthology of counterstories where each story is complete and distinguishable from each other but works together towards exploring larger themes. It is important to look back at how whiteness and the whitestream maintain dominant systems. Knowing better how the currents of the whitestream ebb and flow provides opportunities to understand the morphology of the whitestream. This adds to our understanding of how to swim freely.

Keywords: *Testimonio; Counterstory; Assimilation; Whitestream*

Citation:

Gómez Marchant, C. N. (2026). Los pulmones tienen una capacidad inherente para sanarse y regenerar: Reflections from almost drowning in the whitestream. *Current Issues in Education*, 27(1). <https://doi.org/10.14507/cie.vol27iss1.2335>

Accepted: 11/11/2025

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Breathe.	<i>Respira.</i>
Breathe in deeply.	<i>Respira profundamente.</i>
Hold.	<i>Aguanta.</i>
Release slowly.	<i>Espira lentamente.</i>
Repeat.	<i>Repite.</i>
Feel your lungs as they fill with air.	<i>Siente cómo tus pulmones se llenan de aire.</i>
Think about them.	<i>Piensa en ellos.</i>
Air flows through.	<i>El aire fluye a través de ellos.</i>
Adding oxygen to blood	<i>Añadiendo oxígeno a la sangre.</i>
Pushing out carbon dioxide to the air	<i>Expulsando dióxido de carbono al aire.</i>
When you exhale.	<i>Cuando tu expiras.</i>
You exhale a waste gas.	<i>Exhalas un gas residual.</i>
Breathe.	<i>Respira.</i>
Your lungs are healing.	<i>Tus pulmones se están sanando.</i>

I use the concept of whitestream curriculum and the metaphor of drowning to help me process, tend to, and heal from the assimilation and erasure I have experienced navigating the whiteness of US schools. Preparation and (re)narrating of my *testimonio* in this document also provides a space for others to learn about how whiteness is experienced and internalized through the assimilative project that is part of the US schooling system (san Miguel, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999). My *testimonio* is a fragile gift (Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024) I bestow to the reader inspired by the work of others who have felt a similar sense of urgency to publicly share their stories to console, show solidarity, and demonstrate what oppression looks and feels like (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Pérez Huber, 2009).

This process of writing my *testimonio* to (un)learn began when I found an article about how lungs have a natural tendency to heal and regenerate (Lucas et al., 2020; Kotton & Morrisey, 2014). I was fascinated when I learned this. As someone who has asthma, this was a contradictory idea. They heal and regenerate, but never enough. This metaphorically resonated with me because of my previous reflections and writing on my navigation of education institutions (Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant, 2023; Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2022; Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024). I feel I am tending to wounds that will never heal (Anzaldúa, 2015). I think a lot about my lungs now. I think about all they have been through; all they have healed. Regeneration is a necessary trait for our survival because of the damage caused by breathing in airborne toxins, irritants, and infections. There are limitations of course. The underlying tissue needs to stay intact (Lucas et al., 2020). Breathing damages, regenerates, and keeps us alive.

In my work with Latina/o/x youth (Gómez Marchant et al., 2020; Gómez Marchant, Aguilar, et al., 2024), I have been pushed to reflect on my own experiences in how I was advised and influenced, but ultimately decided on how to navigate the assimilative education system in the United States (Gutiérrez, 1979/2001; san Miguel, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999). Schools are a public good (Keynes et al., 2024), intentionally constructed for promoting the economic success of the US through the exploitation of those in poverty, (dis)abled, and Communities of Color

(Gutiérrez, 1979/2001; Saltman, 2018; san Miguel, 1987; Tyack, 1975). Researchers have emphasized how the history of school governance is guided by the economic global prosperity of the United States (Saltman, 2018; Tyack, 1975). The content learned in schools is meant to help in the creation of a labor force for the elite. Continued research in the experiences of Latina/o/x learners has helped me in recognizing how the schooling system coaxed my complicity in whiteness. Research has also helped in how I am attempting to continue healing—with every slow breath. I hope my testimonio can do the same for others.

My goal is to reflect on my own experience in navigating the education system. Specifically, how my experiences have been about being submerged, floating along, and eventually, learning to swim both against and with the currents of the whitestream of our educational institutions—“a coercive force that imposes white history, mores, morals, language, customs, individualism, cultural normativity, and other forces as the standard in U.S. society” (Hatt & Urrieta, 2020, p. 207). There is a long history of communities resisting the whitestream of the American education system (see Esparza, 2023; san Miguel, 1987). I am learning what it means to continue this legacy. Like my lungs, I am still in the process of regeneration. I use this piece to explore the damage in the underlying tissue. I recognize the damage done will never heal and that I must learn to continuously tend to those wounds (Anzaldúa, 2015).

Drowning “is the process of experiencing respiratory impairment from submersion/immersion in liquid” (World Health Organization, 2024, para. 1). Researchers have explored what the body goes through as it is on the trajectory to drown. Understanding the physiology helps in better preparation for health professionals to resuscitate those undergoing the trauma of drowning. Analogously, our field's better understanding of the whitestream curriculum and its consequences on youth and adults through testimonio may help in developing spaces of resistance and refutation. Tipton and Montgomery (2022) provide a sequence of events: “(i) struggle to keep the airway clear of the water, (ii) initial submersion and breath-holding, (iii) aspiration of water, (iv) unconsciousness, (v) cardio-respiratory arrest and (vi) death—inability to revive.” (p. 17). I use these stages to help organize my testimonio as an anthology. I refer to this organization and practice as anthological counterstorytelling, where each short story is complete and distinguishable from each other but works together towards exploring a larger theme or premise (see e.g., Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant, 2023; Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024). I take this inspiration from anthology filmmaking as seen in films like *Monty Python's the Meaning of Life* (Jones, 1983) and *Sin City* (Rodriguez & Miller, 2005).

Before I traverse my past experiences, I start by sharing about the importance of counterstorytelling and its relation to testimonio. My own work with exploring the whiteness of the academy (see Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant, 2023; Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2022; Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024) has been guided by the counterstorytelling of Bell (1987, 1992), Delgado (1989), Yosso (2006), Martinez (2020), and Gonzalez (2024). Each of these scholars has created a fertile soil for me to thrive and tend to chronic wounds (Anzaldúa, 2015). In this piece, I explore my own history in US schools to expand on and explore how whiteness was and is internalized. I hope my testimonio as a type of counterstory helps to show the processes and consequences of the whitestream (Hatt & Urrieta, 2020). Through the stages of drowning, an understanding of these processes can be further developed. When any testimonio is shared, it can help others resist and refute as a form of counterstorytelling against dominant narratives and bring a new perspective to oppression: and maybe help someone heal and breathe a little calmer.

### **The Importance of Counterstorytelling**

Storytelling is a healing act (Anzaldúa, 2007; Flores, 2018). It is how elders pass on lessons about resistance, and for those who have not had the opportunity, to see the invisible and to construct new possible worlds. Counterstories “invite the listener to suspend judgment, listen for the story’s point, and test it against his or her own version of reality” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440). *Testimonios* are a form of counterstorytelling: “*testimonio* challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance” (Delgado Bernal, 2012, p. 363). Through storytelling, *testimonios* work as counterstories to challenge dominant narratives. Like Williams’ (1987; 1991) autobiographical counterstories, *testimonios* are critical reflections of navigating sociopolitical realities (Delgado Bernal, 2012). The goal is to share, analyze, and work in solidarity to transform societal structures—like schools—to be constructed less on a foundation of assimilation, erasure, and exploitation (San Miguel, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999). *Testimonios* as a form of counterstorytelling can create a counterspace where an expanded reality is constructed by legitimizing the experiences of others navigating white institutional spaces (Embrick & Moore, 2020). *Testimonios* as counterstories can use elements of fiction to (re)story a possible futurity, challenging the boundary around what are seen as methods for and what counts as legitimate knowledge production (see Cook, 2013; Cook & Dixon, 2013; Martinez, 2014a, 2014b, 2020).

Additionally, *testimonios* as a form of counterstorytelling are a political tool to show how “marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream, whose voice and perspective—whose consciousness—has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412). Consequently, counterstories are part of a “genre of action” (Lomas, 2003 as cited by Yosso, 2006). They are a form of action towards resisting, challenging, and transforming dominant storylines. My *testimonio* is a counterstory, as such, my goal is to emphasize the endemic nature of racism, to challenge majoritarian or dominant storylines, to demonstrate the value of the experiential knowledge of those historically and contemporaneously excluded, and to work towards a commitment to social justice (Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Language and race are entangled in my navigation of the whitestream.

### **Where I Stand: Positionality and Methodology**

I was born in Santiago, Chile, and moved to the US when I was four years old. I went to schools where I was read/seen as white due to my light complexion. Presenting as white provided me with white privileges until I spoke Spanish, my full name was spoken, or my identity was made public. All research is autobiographical. Hence, my work has evolved to center the experiences of Latina/o/x children as they navigate the whiteness of their own schooling experiences. I also pay attention to the politics of education. This work has helped me make sense of my own experiences that I put into this *testimonio*.

This *testimonio* was carefully planned. I started by laying out my own timeline with rough notes about important events in my life. I have previously reflected on my graduate school work as both a student and as a mentor (see Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant, 2023; Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2022; Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024). I wanted this paper to expand on these moments. To some degree, I created my own journey map (see Annamma, 2017) of other significant moments. In particular, I wanted to focus on my own

identity crisis I experienced, as I see that as my moment of awakening. From my list of experiences and possible story pieces, I selected the ones I thought best demonstrated the larger theme of assimilative education (san Miguel, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999) and the consequences it has on the individual. There was movement thereafter of selecting and writing. Some stories made it here, some did not, some are left incomplete, and some were too painful to write. The ones left were then written to emphasize the greater theme of navigating the whitestream curriculum. Members of the research team<sup>1</sup> read over the collection and provided feedback. Revisions to each of the narratives were made based on our group's conversation. Further edits were made from reviewers' notes.

### **Drowning in the Whitestream**

This testimonio is an anthology of counterstories highlighting my experiences succumbing to and learning to resist the whitestream. I use the sequence of drowning as described by Tipton and Montgomery (2022) to share my testimonio as an anthological counterstory about navigating the American school system by flashing into specific moments in my memory and re-finding myself. The first two stories presented here are written in third person because I am (re)telling stories my parents shared with me. I do not have direct memories of these moments, but I have small flashes of things that might have been, or maybe I am imagining them. Regardless, they feel real and inform how I think of my early childhood experiences. The stories thereafter are first-person narratives as they are constructed from my own fragmented memories. Each stage of drowning has a footnote that is the director's note. As the author and decision-maker of how the stories are told, I provide a brief note before each story to emphasize the time, place, and, occasionally, the theme of the story. This will help in contextualizing and orientating the reader to that piece of the testimonio. The reader/viewer, however, has the agency to decide when to read the footnote. I leave it up to the reader to make the decision to delve in first or to explore the big ideas first.

### **The Struggle to Keep the Airways Clear of the Whitestream<sup>2</sup>**

*Ruega por nosotros, Madre amorosa,  
y obtén para nuestra nación, nuestro mundo,  
y para todas nuestras familias y seres queridos,  
la protección de tus santos ángeles,  
para que podamos salvarnos de lo peor de esta enfermedad.  
Para aquellos que ya están afectados,  
te pedimos que les concedas la gracia de la sanación y la liberación.*

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<sup>1</sup> I have led the Mi Lengua, Mi Raza, y Mis Matemáticas (Mi3) collective since 2021. The group is made up of myself and various graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin.

<sup>2</sup> **Director's note:** (Interior: Commercial plane and Dallas Airport; Dec. 1989; Nico age 4) It all begins with arriving in the United States and reuniting as a family. A new beginning together. As mentioned previously, this story is told in third person due to it being told repeatedly to me, but I have no memory of this. The whitestream curriculum awaits the children. Both are school age and will attend school in the coming weeks. Neither child has been exposed to English and were raised speaking only Spanish. Their father, Carlos, taught English as a second language. The Virgen de Guadalupe's protection and safety is asked for the journey to El Paso, but metaphorically, the prayer is also for the safe passage of the family as they begin swimming through the whitestream. The whitestream has already begun to sneak in as represented by the GI Joes.

*Escucha los gritos de aquellos que son vulnerables y temerosos,  
seca sus lágrimas y ayúdalos a confiar.*

Oración a Santa Virgen de Guadalupe

Viviana awoke to a creak in her neck. Her two kids, Nico and Cris, were sleeping slumped over each other. It was still dark. The plane was eerily silent. Although the last six months had been filled with anxiety, she was calm and surprisingly relaxed. She sat, breathed in deeply, enjoying a small moment to herself. Exhaling, she sank into her seat and closed her eyes. She recalled her dream. In it, the Virgin de Guadalupe was cupping her hands around the plane as it flew through a lightning storm. The plane maneuvered unbothered by the wind, rain, and torrents around it. The Virgin de Guadalupe's head bowed praying. As Viviana fell back to sleep, she whispered, "*gracias, Virgencita.*"

Finally reunited, tears had been shed as Carlos and Viviana embraced. The Dallas airport overflowed with hope. A frightening but joyful future lay ahead of them. Nico and Cris followed, mesmerized by the lights of the airport. As they got to the car, Viviana took out a small bottle of holy water she was given by the priest at their local church in San Bernardo. She baptized the car and asked the family to pray to the Virgin de Guadalupe for continued safe travels to El Paso. In the car, still wiping tears, Carlos turned to the kids in the back and shared with them he had a small gift. He handed Nico and Cris two small action figures each for them to unpack and play with for the next 10 hours. Cris read for Nico the toys were "ge i ho es?" Carlos corrected Cris, "GI Joes." Cris and Nico repeated. "G...I...Joes." Their mouths moved slowly to wrap their lips around new sounds. "*No se preocupen,*" Carlos said, "*Te ayudaré a aprender inglés.*" He was worried about what this transition might mean but took a deep breath before turning the key.

### Initial Submersion and Breath-Holding in the Whitestream<sup>3</sup>

*Knock knock.  
Who's there?*

Carlos brought the car to a stop at the light. The click of the signal was the only music that played in the car. He looked in the rearview mirror at Nico. He looked like a little adult with his legs crossed, hands gently resting on his knees, and looking longingly out the window. Carlos couldn't help but smile. He needed to find joy in these rides. He dreaded the drive to the elementary school. For three weeks, each morning a silent ride to the school where he had just left Nico at the doors of the building. Not knowing what was happening inside. He thought to himself each time: "How does one gain access to what's inside? Nico seems fine, but he doesn't say a lot. Is he struggling with English? Is he making friends?"

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<sup>3</sup> **Director's Note:** (Interior Car; Mar. 1990; Nico age 5): Whenever my father shares this story, he gets emotional. I wanted to capture that in the narrative—the intensity of how assimilation is recognized as necessary for the child to be successful in the US schooling system. There is a tension of wanting to preserve the family's culture but also a need to assimilate (see Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2022). What is the balance between the two? Linguistic assimilation, re-naming the child to fit in, and parental fear all play into being complicit to the erasure and assimilation of the US schooling project. Schools as institutional white spaces (Embrick & Moore, 2020) maintain and perpetuate whiteness. My testimonio highlights the beginning success of the (white) institution. The child insists on being named Nick instead of the family name Nico, there is an acceptance of linguistic assimilation, and joy from entering the new white institutional space. Finally, Carlos' gasps show his own drowning in the whitestream. He is also drowning alongside his son, but there is a comfort coming from this new knowledge.

Nico turned his head to meet his father's eyes in the rearview mirror. "¿*Quieres escuchar un chiste?*" Nico said without losing eye contact. Carlos was a little taken aback. "Um, okay. Nico." Nico rolled his eyes, "*Es Nick. Los maestros me llaman Nick.*" Having passed that, Nick sat up on his chair. He tapped his finger on his lips, trying to remember the words of the joke. Carlos took the left turn, half paying attention to the road; he wanted to be present to Nick as much as possible, given the break in routine.

"Knock knock."

"*Que?*" Carlos blinked in disbelief.

"No. No. No. *Tienes que decir* "who's there." Nick explained. "*Ahora.* Knock. Knock." Carlos' mind went blank. He held his breath. The world froze. The next thing he knew, Nick was joyfully running to the front door of the school. Carlos parked the car around the corner and cried. He let out all he had been holding. It was painful. He gasped for air between sobs. There was a weight lifted from his shoulders that he unknowingly carried. The joke was evidence that Nick was socializing and learning English; Nick was going to be okay. He will persevere.

#### Aspiration of the Whitestream<sup>4</sup>

*Ana Maria is now 10 years old.*

*She's learned enough English to translate for her parents, but says that her thick accent is still a problem she tries to fix by leaving it in her locker.*

*When the teacher calls on her to read she tries to speak proper, like "proper" has a sound.*

*She pushes her tongue down so she doesn't roll her R's but she trips on the syllables that bounce with too much salsa.*

*She tries to rattle out the kinks in her speech, but her tongue is a stubborn dancer.*

From *Borders* by Denice Frohman (Frohman, 2013)

I waved to my mother goodbye through the window of the school bus. I breathed in the smell of the vinyl seats and sat quietly in the cacophony of the bus's diesel engine and the kids inside. I watched the elementary school I attended since kindergarten disappear in the background. I was nervous about starting my 5th-grade year at a different school, but my parents and I were told that if I wanted to be part of the Talented and Gifted (TAG) Program, I had to go

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<sup>4</sup> **Director's Note:** (Interior School Bus; Aug. 1995; Nico age 10) The testimonio changes from third person to first person because these remaining stories are constructed from my memories. I do not remember much prior to 5th grade, but that was a big year for me. I was accepted to the gifted program which required I go to another nearby school. The first day of 5th grade is engraved in my memory. By then, I floated along the whitestream without questioning the authorities of school nor what I was learning. The US schooling project was working to assimilate me and devalue aspects of my Chilean culture. I was positioned as a good student, never spoke Spanish, and did not pay attention to the politics of school. I created a strong boundary between my school-self and my home-self. Being part of the gifted program was the first time I remember questioning the opportunities I had versus others, but the program also put me in a bubble that allowed me to continue floating along the whitestream curriculum. There is a whiteness to how gifted programs operate as forms of segregation (see Mansfield, 2015; Staiger, 2004).

The school bus is the technology used to metaphorically and literally create distance from my family. My acceptance into the gifted program was a catalyst for continued submersion into the whitestream. The new school was a space of us-and-them. The teachers were aware of it and did not fight it but instead fed into the privilege of being selected for the gifted program. The stark differences between classrooms emphasizes the temptation and allure of whiteness. I got very comfortable being in the advanced classes that many of my classmates could not attend. I highlight this with the uncomfortableness I describe with the furniture in the non-gifted classroom.

to another school. There was no TAG program at MacArthur. The counselor assured my parents that transportation would be provided for this unique set of kids, even though the school was less than a mile away. Yet, when the bus stopped in front of the new school, its red bricks seemed to shine in the sun in comparison to the faded matte white exterior of MacArthur. I hadn't even noticed I was taking shorter breaths. The bus doors opened. My short breathing reminded me of how nervous I was walking off the bus.

I followed the group of kids. They all seemed to know perfectly where to go. Each step felt heavy—I had to remind myself to breathe. We walked straight through the school and back outside. I walked inside to the euphony of teachers welcoming students and guiding them to their destinations. An older woman stopped me, “What’s your name? Do you know where you are going?”

“My name is Nick. I’m new and in 5<sup>th</sup> grade,” I said.

“Wonderful. Well, let’s look you up on this list.” Her blue eyes carefully followed her finger sliding down the column of names. “I don’t see you.”

“Oh, it's Carlos Gomez. Nick is my middle name.”

“Here you are!” she said. She had a large smile and a sigh of relief. “You are with Ms. Dominguez AND Ms. Caballero. Two teachers for our gifted students. Go to the end of the hall and to the right.”

I walked past Ms. Caballero’s room, which was brightly lit and seemed twice as large as the other rooms I had walked past. TAG was embroidered on a small flag hanging from the room number. The room had a couch and a variety of different chairs. I felt a little joy in what was going to be possible in that room. Ms. Dominguez’ room seemed small with all the desks and furniture inside. I sat at the first desk I could find. It was wobbly, and I learned to level the writing space. I started to wonder when I’d go to Ms. Caballero’s room.

### Unconsciousness in the Whitestream<sup>5</sup>

*My head all full of stuffin',  
My heart all full of pain;  
And perhaps I'd deserve you and be  
Even worthy even you  
If I only had a brain.*

If I Only Had a Brain from *The Wizard of Oz* (Arlen & Harburg, 1939)

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<sup>5</sup> **Director’s Note:** (Interior classroom; May 2012; Nico age 27) There is a time lapse of 17 years from the previous story to this one. In reflection, I feel I was asleep/unconscious throughout that period. I continued being successful in school. My white privileges protected me from recognizing and questioning the assimilative project of schooling. There was no intervention that shook me awake. I continued to float along. I was rudderless and was good at doing what I was told. I majored in mathematics because my original decision to major in theater and music were seen as not economically viable. Being a teacher was originally not part of my plan either, but I was told teachers have job security, especially mathematics teachers. When I became a teacher, I continued to perpetuate much of the harm that was done to me. I continued to do what I was told. It is painful to look back at my five years of teaching at a public high school. I could have done so much more for the students. Regardless, this story is an ode to Jenn. She continuously pushed me to think about the politics of teaching and eventually, woke me up—only right as I was leaving. She questioned me about leaving teaching high school to pursue a Ph.D. She was not afraid to ask questions or challenge ideas. Luis’ “what if you don’t?” captures the continued uncertainty of my decision. I knew it was important to leave and to learn how to ask questions and maybe find myself. Only to find that graduate school was just as much a part of the assimilative project as k-12 education (see Cordero-Siy & Gómez Marchant, 2023; Gómez Marchant & Cordero-Siy, 2022; Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024).

“So, why are you leaving us?” Jenn’s intense blue eyes and angry tone echoed in my head. I fell into my car and sat quietly breathing, allowing the words and imagery from my last day teaching to bounce in my head. I wanted to shake them all out but decided to let them play until the students’ voices lay to rest on their own. Although I had made the decision to quit and go full-time for my Ph.D. months prior, I hadn’t told my students until the last day of school. I had cycled with them from freshmen to juniors and was going to follow them up to their senior year, if I had stayed. My mind replayed the moment.

So, why are you leaving us?” Jenn repeated.

I capped the dry-erase marker. “Well...” I paused, realizing I didn’t really have a good answer. My immediate response of “It’s what I’ve always been told to do by teachers and my parents,” didn’t seem right. Why was I leaving to get a Ph.D.? There was an inkling I was only doing it because I’m good at doing what I’m told. There had to be a reason.

“Well... what?” Jenn was getting impatient. The rest of the class went eerily quiet.

“I don’t know. It just seems like what I should do,” I said.

Silence hung. A few students looked disappointed.

“The fuck is that!?!” Jess scoffed.

“It’s not a good answer,” I confessed, laughing. “Here is what I thought about.” Jenn slunk into her seat, but I knew she was still listening. “I’ve been in a graduate program for the last five years. I’ve taken a lot of classes, and I do well in school. But I don’t know anything about how all this works or what I’m doing. I am just floating through it in hopes that I find some kind of feeling. I’ve felt stuck in the in-between most of my life. I want something real to hold on to. I think I’m getting there. But I have to take a leap of faith at this point. I moved across the country for no reason other than I was told to go to graduate school. I don’t know if I lost something or if I never had it. Maybe by fully going in, I’ll find something there.”

“But, mister,” Luis said. “What if you don’t?”

I let out an exasperated breath punctuated by the sound of the bell. Like all the other days, students got up and transitioned to their next class.

I opened my eyes to the hum of the motor. I was the last one in the teachers’ lot at the church across the street from the high school. “Thanks, Jenn,” I thought. “I hope to have a better answer.”

### Cardio-Respiratory Arrest<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> **Director’s Note:** (Interior Car and Dean’s Office; April 2018; Nico age 33). This is the start of my major identity crisis. I had no vision of who I was nor if I had a future in the academy. I was moving along as I was told. I changed my research focus to argumentation because it was fundable work (or so I was told). And then the project I was leading fell apart, and I was free. But with freedom came uncertainty. My own well-being and identity were clashing with the whiteness of the institution. I no longer felt the comfort of whiteness; of doing what I was told by the institution. I was lost without it. I struggled for months trying to figure out what to do next. I knew I was swimming against a powerful current, but I was willing to fight now. I did not want to float along anymore. I had been asleep/unconscious for too long. The whitestream no longer had the power to disconnect me from my family. After much reflection and speaking to my family, the boundary I had built between my home-self and school-self collapsed. I went back to going by Nico. I started incorporating Spanish into my research and teaching practices. I started seeing the false boundaries I had constructed and seeing the dominant narratives I had internalized. This was a point of transformation. There were no easy answers, and time was needed to (un)learn and (re)learn.

*Cut into the gut of distorted, rotten lies you find  
Pull them inside out, drowning them with haste in mind  
Arm yourself with retrospect*

Instrumental by Hot Water Music (Ragan, 2001)

I sat in my car, elated. I was so happy I couldn't even start the car. I wanted to celebrate. The research project fell apart! I felt so free. I could hear Ms. Brock's words ringing in my head. "I'm sorry I can't participate in the project next year. I'm leaving this middle school." I let out a long sigh of relief. I pushed all the air out. I could feel my chest tighten. I wanted that constriction. I wanted to be the one to decide when to let it go. I wanted my body to feel the pressure I hadn't realized I was feeling. I wanted to be in control of when the relief came. But then it dawned on me. Am I in control? I should be devastated by the utter failure of this project. Is this what I really want? I sat back and finally took in a deep breath. I held it. Closed my eyes. The slow tension in my stomach started. My body wants to exhale, but I don't let it. I want control. Then I remembered John...

"You seem to have a lot going on for you," The dean for research of the college of education, John, said, leaning back into his reclined seat. Lifting his leg up to rest his foot on his knee, hand over his chin, his eyes carefully scanned my CV.

"I try." What a dumb knee-jerk response.

"Hmmm," John remained stone-faced. I read it as saying, *I guess he'll do*. I could feel him reading my CV, dreaming of all the other candidates that could have sat in front of him. "I like this line of research on argumentation. Are you going to keep doing that? It doesn't seem like your dissertation was about that."

"Yes," I said. "I found argumentation to be quite helpful in thinking about identity and how we argue who we are to others in looking for recognition."

"Yeah..." John's voice trailed off, dreaming of someone else. "Your dissertation doesn't seem fundable. Argumentation in the classroom. That's fundable. You could get so many grants for that." He punctuated the end of the sentence by looking up at me. Checking to see that I got the message.

"I will definitely keep thinking about argumentation. In the classroom. Maybe with middle-grade teachers." I need to work on my improv skills.

John set down my CV, nodding to himself, as he had just accomplished something magnificent. "Okay."

I started to feel dizzy. I exhaled and gasped for air. I threw up a little in my mouth. The vile taste lingered. I can't continue to lose myself like this. Where did all this start? How have I lost so much of myself? What is meaningful to me?

### **The Death of Nick and The Afterlife of Nico<sup>7</sup>**

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<sup>7</sup> Director's Note: (Exterior to Interior School; Nov. 2018; Nico Age 33) This was my first semester as Nico after having time to put myself back together. In August 2018, I started working with local elementary schools to conduct a larger scale project about Latina/o/x children and their mathematics experiences. I partnered with three elementary schools and interviewed 46 upper elementary students about their experiences. The children shared stories that reflected my own story. It was a healing experience to learn from them and to be able to start thinking about how to challenge the assimilative schooling project. I felt a new more certain path in front of me. One where I could bring back my authentic self to a space it was never welcomed. Even though I was still working within and through a white institution, there was hope and possibility for change. I still feel that hope. I feel more grounded. I feel more possibilities in my future.

*I got me a shovel  
And I'm digging a ditch  
And I'm going to fight for this four square feet of land like a mean old son of a bitch  
I got me a future  
I'm not stuck on the past  
I got no new tricks, yeah I'm up on bricks but me  
I'm a machine and I was built to last  
I'm trying to get better because I haven't been my best  
She took a plain black marker, started writing on my chest  
She drew a line across the middle of my broken heart  
And said, come on now, let's fix this mess  
We could get better  
Because we're not dead yet*

*Get Better* by Frank Turner (Turner, 2015)

I closed the door to the car and took a deep breath of the fresh fall air. It was cold and tingling all through my chest. It was a welcoming feeling walking to the front doors of Kemp Elementary. I rang the buzzer and heard the click of the door opening. I was excited to talk with a group of Latina/o/x children about their experiences in math class. The new project was just starting, and I was excited to learn more directly from the children. This was going to be my first set of interviews, and I could not be more nervous, worried, and hopeful.

“Hi, Nico. Are you ready for me to call the first set of students?” The assistant principal, Ms. Terri, asked.

“Yeah. I think so,” I replied, letting out a sigh in preparation.

“Okay.” Turning to the secretary, “Ms. Ceci, could you call Delia, Celeste, and Josephina? We’re very excited for this new project and look forward to seeing what you learn.”

Before I knew it, three children walked in.

“*Hola! Como están.* My name is Dr. Nico.”

Delia’s eyes grew wide. “You’re just like me!”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I am? ¿*Yo?*” I mimed clutching pearls jokingly.

“*Si. Hablas español.*” She giggled.

“I do. Would y’all prefer for me to speak Spanish or English during our chat?” I asked.

Delia, Celeste, and Josephina shrugged their shoulders.

“We can do both. *No se preocupen,*” I said.

### **Swimming Against and With The (white) Current**

As the author of the testimonio in the form of an anthological counterstory, I have the creative freedom to emphasize imagery and text to help demonstrate the internalization of whiteness through an assimilative education system (Gutiérrez, 1979/2001; Valenzuela, 1999). I used the stages of drowning to exhibit my acceptance, compliance, and eventual resistance through finding myself and beginning a never-ending journey of (un)learning. There is damage in the underlying tissue of my (metaphorical) lungs. My testimonio is an anthology of counterstories that shows what it means to live with the damage and not tend to the wounds. I am still learning to breathe. Counterstorytelling as part of the tenets of critical race theory

(Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006) has helped to explore how regulations, laws, and policies in our education system maintain the whitestream curriculum (Hatt & Urrieta, 2020) and learners', parents', educators', and researchers' roles within white institutional spaces (Embrick & Moore, 2020; Gómez Marchant, Sánchez Gutiérrez, et al., 2024). Counterstories provide an avenue to focus “on the lived experience of the law rather than on either legal texts or precedents” (Miller et al., 2020, p. 272). Our educational system is part of the greater body politic. Hence, my testimonio demonstrates how whiteness ran through my family's immigration and my schooling experiences. My testimonio as a counterstory becomes a lens to see the manifestations of greater oppressive structures within the larger body politic of the US. My precious knowledge is both a lens to understand the whitestream curriculum—and its consequences—of our educational system in place, but also an opportunity for a future accepting and supporting learners to resist and persevere.

Threads across the stories are chosen intentionally, and aspects of each story are left uncertain. Some of these threads emerged naturally as I worked through my memories, emotions, and stories; others were added in and dispersed like wildflowers in a field. I hope certain themes and ideas are there for the reader to reflect on and imagine powerful counterspaces to challenge the whitestream, not just in our K-12 institutions, but also in our academic endeavors. Due to the composite nature of the counterstories (Martinez, 2020), there is a trajectory set for the readers' emotions. For example, I intentionally chose not to highlight my experiences with overt forms of racism, linguisticism, and xenophobia. Subtle moments not questioned by the individual at the moment, but are more prominent in reflection, show how racism, sexism, linguisticism, and other overlapping forms of oppression are questioned yet still internalized. There is a choice to highlight uncertainty and the protagonist's inability to see and respond to the system's *modus operandi*. For example, there is movement through some form of transportation in each of the stories. This is meant to point to the trajectory of the character as controlled by others because they are moving towards a place but not arriving in the story. This is except for the last counterstory, where I show my arrival and legitimization of my identity through working for and learning with children. The choices I made help in finding how the whitestream has harmed the underlying tissue of my lungs. Yet, there is a hopefulness in me being present in schools as an advocate for the experiences of Latina/o/x children. Altogether, my testimonio is mine, but it is also a fragile gift to the reader. It is there for them to reflect on their own navigation of the U.S. assimilative schooling project. I hope that from this reflection comes action.

As I reflect on my experiences being submerged, floating along, and learning to swim against and with the whitestream, I begin a process of grief for the damage done to the underlying tissue. Recognizing the wounds and damage we will not fully heal from can help in tending to them (Anzaldúa, 2015). The stories shared highlight the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of assimilation and whitewashing. In other words, the successes of the whitestream. I lay lifeless in the whitestream for too long, not recognizing the wounds I was causing to myself; nor the ripple effects on others. My counterstory is an anthology of what was, and yet, is still creating a futurity of possible counterspaces that could help others regenerate anew. Like analyzing a chess game, looking through each move is valuable in recognizing vulnerabilities, blunders, and opportunities available to those navigating white spaces. In our current time of turmoil, it is important to look back at how whiteness and the whitestream maintain dominant systems. Knowing better how the currents of the whitestream ebb and flow provides opportunities to understand the morphology of the whitestream. This adds to our understanding of how to swim freely.

Breathe in *Respira*  
Celebrate *Celebra*  
Your lungs are healing *Tus pulmones están curándose*  
You are more today than yesterday *Eres más hoy que ayer*  
Breathe out *Espira*  
Carbon dioxide that will help seeds *Dióxido de carbono que ayudará a las semillas*  
Grow *Crece*  
Let new air in *Deja entrar aire nuevo*  
Hold *Contén*  
You're healing *Te estás curando*  
It's slow *Es despacio*  
But every breath *Pero cada respiro*  
Regenerates *Regenera*

### Dedication & Gratitude

This piece is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, Raul Marchant. He passed away on July 20, 2025. He gave our family one last gift of bringing us all together to mourn and share stories. His love of storytelling and loud, unapologetic laughter are carried carefully in each story I tell.

I am grateful for the Mi Lengua, Mi Raza, y Mis Matemáticas collective for the feedback, support, and continued advocacy for children's right to live in peace. They have helped me breathe new purpose into my work.

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## GÓMEZ MARCHANT: LOS PULMONES TIENEN UNA CAPACIDAD

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