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Poetry is Not a Luxury: A Four-Year Reflection on Spoken Word Pedagogies and Transformative Rigor in Chicanx Studies

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Abstract

Inspired by the words of Audre Lorde, this article examines the pedagogical use of creative writing and spoken word poetry as a core strategy to build communal kinship and strengthen engagement with assigned texts at a four-year public university during the COVID-19 pandemic. At California State University Channel Islands, 1st year participants in the Michele Serros Living Learning Community (MSLLC) were instructed using the practice of Spoken Wor(l)d Art Performance Activism (SWAPA), a pedagogical approach rooted in the theory and politics of US Third World feminisms. Developed by scholar Chela Sandoval, SWAPA is a method that challenges passive consumption of text and performance and calls upon artist and audience alike to draw upon a 'mestiza consciousness' and be willing to be an active witness to each other's creativity, resilience, and brilliance. In this practice, students engaged in a form of "transformative rigor" through their in-class performance of spoken word poetry and witness reaction/reflection circles. Through student testimonios, alumnus of the MSLLC share their reflection on how this pedagogical approach shaped their skills and perspectives in subsequent years leading to graduation.

Like at many institutions of higher education, life for the campus community of California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI) was up-ended by the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Ushering in unprecedented challenges to students, staff and faculty alike, COVID-19 laid bare and exacerbated pre-existing conditions plaguing the academic success of students from historically underrepresented communities. According to a report released by the UC Davis School of Education, 70% of California college and university student respondents missed class due to prevailing stressors brought on by the pandemic (Reed et al., 2021). Challenges to the effective recruitment and retention of BIPOC students, issues related to housing/food insecurity, and a

litany of other debilitating issues were amplified and compounded by this unprecedented global health crisis.[5]

Inspired by the words of Audre Lorde, this article examines the pedagogical use of creative writing and spoken word as a core strategy to build communal kinship and strengthen engagement with assigned texts in the Michele Serros Living Learning Community (MSLLC) at California State University Channel Islands.[6] Written collaboratively between students and educator, the experiences of participants in the Michele Serros Living Learning Community (LLC) of 2020 are explored as they persevered towards graduating from CSUCI with bachelor's degrees in Chicana/o Studies. This work focuses on the use of spoken word pedagogies introduced in MSLLC as a vital tool in what we term "transformative rigor," an empowering approach to student engagement, community building, and critical thinking. As such, this article will detail from a pedagogical perspective, our class's work in 2020 to craft, adapt, adjust, and evaluate the use of spoken word in the classroom in a way that was: (a) intended to be accessible to first generation college students, (b) effective in its efforts to encourage students to engage with course readings, and (c) rigorous in its expectation of a deep and textured level of understanding of the author's words. Offering reflection, three of our student participants share their own unique "testimonios" as Chicana/o Studies majors graduating in 2024.[7]

CSU Channel Islands and The Michele Serros Living Learning Community

Colloquially referred to as "CI," CSU Channel Islands is Ventura County's only public 4-year university. Located on the site of what once was the Camarillo State Mental Hospital, CI was originally a satellite campus of CSU Northridge. CSU Channel Islands was established as the 23rd campus in the CSU system in 2002 and grew steadily as it met the needs of often underserved student populations, many of whom were first generation college students, non-traditional students, transfer students, student parents, student veterans, and other historically underrepresented groups in higher education.[8] In 2008, the Chicana/o Studies Program was established at CSUCI with vocal support and pressure from the local community anchored in neighboring Oxnard, California, a city with a rich history of social justice and anti-racist activism.[9] By 2010, CSUCI had been designated as a Title V Hispanic Serving Institution by reaching the 25% threshold of students identifying as Hispanic or Latina/o/x. That percentage would later rise to

[5] Studies examining this phenomenon nationally include Kirk et al. (2023), Gillyard et al. (2023), and Francois et al. (2024).
[6] Lorde (1984) writes: "For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (p. 34).
[7] Our approach to testimonios is informed by Tara Yosso's work on critical race counterstories and Georgina Guzman's (2019) work on feminist pedagogies in praxis.
[8] These efforts were recognized in 2019 when CSUCI was awarded the "Seal of Excelencia" by the nationally-based non-profit organization Excelencia in Education for its efforts to close the education equity gap, especially for Latinx students (Lamb Gregory, 2019).
[9] For a sprawling look at Chicana/o community activism in Oxnard and other areas of Ventura County see Barajas (2021).

50% by the time Dr. Centino became a faculty member on campus in the Chicana/o Studies Program in 2017.[10]

The Michele Serros Living Learning Community (MSLLC) was established in 2016 to support the academic success and effective integration of incoming 1st-year students into university life at CSUCI. Named for Michele Serros, a trail-blazing and celebrated Chicana author/poet from Oxnard, the MSLLC was established to "engage students in critical dialogue on educational empowerment, creativity, community advocacy, multiculturalism, social justice and equity, and foster a sense of familia and support."[11] As learning communities tied to CSUCI's Mission Pillar of Multiculturalism, The MSLLC along with the Bedford and Dr. Irene Pinkard Living Learning Community were unique in their explicit focus on BIPOC student interests.[12]

Students in the same learning community or living-learning community took designated sections of two courses together in Fall, and most continue with at least one course together in Spring.[13] Of the courses taken in the Fall, MSLLC students enrolled in a 1st year seminar designed to provide skills necessary for the college experience (UNIV 150) and an introductory course in Chicana/o Studies (CHS 100). In Spring, students took an American History course (HIST 270) satisfying a general education requirement. Additionally, the student participants were assigned Embedded Peer Mentors, many of whom had been participants in previous First-Year Learning Communities. As a *Living* Learning Community, students were also supposed to share a hall in on-campus housing with a Resident Advisor. Faculty and staff working with CSUCI's learning communities were provided with support and training at the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education at Evergreen State College.

Consisting of about 29 students, the MSLLC participants of 2020 were overwhelmingly Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x with 8 male identifying students and 21 female identifying students. Furthermore, most of the student participants were first generation college/university students. These MSLLC participants in 2020 were a part of the first class of CSUCI students to begin their university experience fully under the conditions of the COVID-19 global pandemic. According to enrollment data, nearly 53% of CSUCI students that semester were Pell eligible with 65% of the total student population identifying as women and 56% identifying as Hispanic or Latina/o/x. Moreover, 61% of CSUCI students were the first of their families to attend a college or university and 80% came from Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Los Angeles County. Strikingly, of the 6,943 students enrolled at CSUCI that semester, only 143 students identified as African American or

[10] As a public university, enrollment and demographic data at CSUCI is readily available. *California State University Channel Islands Fall 2017 Total Enrollment*. California State University Channel Islands. https://www.csuci.edu/ir/campus-numbers/documents/enrollment/fall-2017-demographics-02oct17.pdf
[11] CSU Channel Islands (2024). *Living Learning Communities*. https://www.csuci.edu/housing/apply/living-learning-communities.htm#MicheleSerros
[12] There is a growing body of work on the successes of Learning Communities as high impact practices for BIPOC student retention, including Johnson et al. (2020), Chism Schmidt and Graziano (2016), Huerta and Bray (2013), and Lardner (2014).
[13] A special thank you to Raul Moreno Campos and Elizabeth Villa, the co-instructors in the MSLCC in 2020, and Marie Francois, our Learning Communities director.

Black, only 18 students identified as Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian, and only 10 students identified as Native American/Alaskan.[14]

In 2020, CSUCI offered primarily online courses in the best interest of public health and safety. For incoming 1st year students, the outbreak of the coronavirus that previous winter gravely impacted their senior year in high school. Many of these students faced canceled classes during the lockdown quarantine, only to have them quickly pivoted to online formats of questionable quality. Others lost their opportunity to walk in their high school commencement ceremonies as high-attendance public gatherings were largely eschewed. As many students expressed via social media, this was more than the loss of a ceremony, but rather the loss of a sense of closure to what many historically underrepresented students find as an arduous journey navigating the K-12 educational pipeline. As such, these student participants faced overwhelming odds and obstacles to their student success even before beginning the college and university experience.

The SWAPA Method in Remote Conditions: Building Virtual Bonds of Kinship and Communication — Testimonio by Nicholas F. Centino

For many years, Chicana/o Studies at CSUCI was the only Ethnic Students program at CSUCI consistently offering courses that analyzed and articulated concepts such as race and racism, white supremacy, self- determination, liberation, and decolonization. By the onset of the global pandemic, Chicana/o Studies had only just recently been granted independent departmental status on campus. As a program under the History Department, our ability to operate administratively was severely limited without an official chair nor an independent budget to serve with.[15] Furthermore, being under History reinforced false notions that Chicana/o Studies, and by extension all Ethnic Studies, was only a sub-field or niche interest of a traditional (read white) social science/humanities discipline.

Despite recent considerable growth in Ethnic Studies offerings on campus, including the establishment of a Black Studies minor and new hires in Asian American Studies and Native American/Indigenous studies, the Chicana/o Studies at CSUCI still consists of only three tenured/tenure track faculty members and 3-4 lecture faculty members any given semester.[16] As such, working with the Michele Serros Living Learning Community is a rotating responsibility usually consisting of two year terms for our tenured/tenure track professors. The 2020 class of the MSLLC was my second year working with this group and my second year using the pedagogical practice of Spoken Wor(l)d Art Performance Activism (SWAPA) in this introductory level course.

A performance, a method, an art, and an exchange, the practice of Spoken Wor(l)d Art Performance Activism, or SWAPA, is rooted in the theory and politics of US Third World/ feminisms. Developed

[14] Demographic and enrollment data for CSUCI are available through the university's enrollment dashboard. https://oneci.csuci.edu/t/IRPEGuest/views/FallEnrollmentpublic/EnrollmentDashboard?%3Aembed=y&%3Aiid=1&%3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y

[15] In lieu of a chair, our program had a "coordinator" position that performed all of the administrative tasks of a department chair but without equal compensation. Some may consider this cultural taxation.

[16] This growth can be attributed to activism on and off campus especially by Black faculty staff and students and the passage of AB1460 calling for all CSU students to complete 3 units in Ethnic Studies prior to graduation.

by scholar Chela Sandoval, SWAPA is a method that challenges passive consumption of text and performance and calls upon artist and audience alike to draw upon a 'mestiza consciousness' and be willing to be an active witness to each other's creativity, resilience, and brilliance.[17] In the SWAPA method, students are asked to examine their weekly assigned reading with a keen eye for passages from the text that move them. In turn, those passages serve as the inspiration for the student's own original creative expression, most often in the form of poetry intended for spoken word. Students composed their spoken word poems in reaction to the way that the author's words "moved" them, on a mental, visceral, and spiritual level.[18] The spoken word SWAPA's are then performed weekly in class. Fellow students, then offer their own reaction, that informs the performer of how their creative work subsequently moved the student listener, or witness. These reactions were termed "witness reactions" or just "witness" for short. In this way, the SWAPA method allows a critical engagement with core themes and concepts of an assigned text as those ideas are integrated into class engagement and discussion at every level of the exercise. From (a) the initial selection of the inspiring passage, to (b) the crafting of the creative work, to (c) the in-class performance and witness reaction/reflection circle, students are engaging the ideas presented by the authors as a multi-dimensional base by which their own engagements are able to reflect and interface with. At the end of the semester students compile their SWAPAs into a poetry book prefaced by a short 3- to 4-page reflection assessing their experience in the class.

For many of my students, the prospect of writing poetry in a university course initially seems like either a chore or busy work. Others came to the class with the notion that poetry was an ephemeral luxury reserved for the privileged. When brainstorming titles for this article, Audre Lorde's work, "Poetry is Not a Luxury" continuously echoed loudly to me. Far from a luxury for my students, poetry in the form of SWAPA pedagogically served as a vital outlet for the MSLCC students to engage with course text in a way that held them accountable not only to their reading assignments and their authors, but to each other as a learning community. In this way, SWAPA provided transformative rigor, a way that challenged the class to root their observations in the text of Ethnic Studies scholars whilst discovering their own voice through the course of that conversation. Furthermore, this disruption of normative classroom pedagogies, what Eddy Francisco Alvarez terms "Jotería Pedagogy," speaks to ethnic studies' roots in intersectional justice movements against racism, misogyny and homophobia.[19]

While the practice of SWAPA seemingly follows a rather simple process, it relies heavily on a great deal of care and consideration on the behalf of the instructor in often complex ways. In becoming familiarized with the practice, students have to be guided on what to independently look for in the readings. Students are asked to be self-aware of their own reactions to ideas, themes, and concepts in the readings in ways that other approaches to learning may not. Furthermore, the different ways

[17] In an interview with Osa Hidalgo de La Riva (2016), Sandoval describes SWAPA as "a way of communicating and creating connections between people that is based on older rituals where councils of people came together to experiment, to speak truths that they are then able to share, transform, and reshape as the collective changes and grows."
[18] Students are free to interpret what these terms mean for them.
[19] Alvarez (2014) writes "Jotería pedagogy is challenging but transformative, requiring innovative and brave efforts to facilitate nonhierarchical, vulnerable, and critical spaces of learning for both teacher and students. It is about enacting survival in the classroom, instilling a process of decolonization of the mind, body, and spirit. It is a way of teaching that addresses intersectionality, makes room for diverse perspectives, and validates the affective and emotional lives of students."

in which students react to course content through their SWAPA's leads to a constantly shifting terrain in the classroom. The practice of SWAPA relies on an instructor's hyper-vigilance for exciting opportunities to unpack course content from a multiplicity of angles brought forth by the students themselves. For many students, SWAPA is the first opportunity they have had to tie broader themes explored in the readings to their lived experiences; their truth. For these reasons, SWAPA, as a pedagogical practice, thrives on a level of rigorous engagement that goes beyond a simple skimming of the text. While considerable leeway is afforded students in terms of what they turn in—with an understanding that not every assigned text is going to speak to them every week—ultimately the MSLCC students were able to deliver work that was insightful, thoughtful, or more often than not, a clear reflection of the types of conversation that the authors are hoping to engage with their readership. Several examples have been woven into the student testimonios in this article.

In approaching crafting an online version of my Introduction to Chicana/o Studies Class, I debated whether to continue to use the SWAPA practice for the MSLLC. Because the practice relies on transforming the classroom environment into a shared space of poetry and art, I was unsure how that would translate to an online format. Nevertheless, after conversations with peers and mentors, I decided in favor of incorporating SWAPA into the class with a few modifications to accommodate the conditions of distance learning.

The overall course was largely built around user-friendly asynchronous modules using Canvas, the standard online learning platform at CSUCI. Students accessed readings, responded to threaded discussion forum prompts, and uploaded writing assignments to Canvas. I provided recorded lecture presentations, written feedback on assignments, and sometimes joined in on and provided perspective in their discussion forums. Students were also tasked with completing an original SWAPA each week based on the assigned readings which were then turned into me on Canvas. Additionally, students were asked to sign up for 2 to 3 weeks to perform their SWAPA's for the class in weekly synchronous class meetings solely dedicated to the practice of SWAPA. These synchronous sessions typically were scheduled for 20 to 30 minutes as student energy and focus typically waned after a half hour.

In designing the format for the synchronous class meetings, I tried my best to prioritize accessibility and user-friendliness. At the time, it was estimated that 62% of California college and university students dealt with unreliable internet connections and 65% lacked a quiet place to attend to coursework in their home (Friendman et al., 2021). As such, I chose to use an alternative format to Zoom, which was gaining a reputation for devouring internet bandwidth, especially in homes with multiple family members online at the same time. In searching for an alternative, I settled on Discord as the platform to use. At the time, Zoom was a relatively new and unfamiliar platform, while Discord, known mostly through its usage in and amongst gaming community members, was a little more familiar to students. Additionally, Discord, when used in an audio format, required significantly less bandwidth and was much more accessible for students whose only access to online apps and features was by using their cellular data.

Using the chat feature, students posted their witness reactions to student performers in real time, with a handful of volunteers sharing their reactions verbally. One downside of Discord was the failure of being able to capture witness reactions, as well as the learning curve of joining a Discord server and accessing our synchronous sections. With the improvements to the stabilization of

Zoom and its now hegemonic use across campus, I now use Zoom for the practice of online SWAPAs with students capturing their witness reactions through online applications like Jamboard and Padlet that can be saved and used by the students in crafting their end of semester reflection papers.

One challenge that I faced in employing this pedagogy online was in working with students to craft work that was an honest expression of their truth, but also did not retraumatize them nor serve as surrogate for actual care with a trained provider. To be sure, the act of writing can be *healing*, but SWAPA's intent is not to supplant mental healthcare, a resource all too often made inaccessible for historically marginalized community members. I am not a clinician, or a licensed therapist, nor would I claim to be or ever represent myself as such in class. However, with assigned course readings that explore topics such as historical trauma, racism and misogyny, as well as homophobia and transphobia, it would be irresponsible and impossible to ask students with resonant experiences to "turn off" that part of themselves and to engage in a solely academic reflection exercise. At the same time, any university classroom, let alone a virtual one, is not the best environment to unpack deep wells of trauma, personal, generational or otherwise exacerbated by the conditions of the pandemic. In this way, I tried to make the classroom environment one in which students could bring fuller senses of their total being and multiple subjectivities, but also deeply stressed and advised the students to always put their self-care first. The themes and content of assigned readings were always broadcast ahead of time and in certain cases are accompanied with trigger warnings. Students were regularly reminded to engage in self-care and were always afforded the choice to opt out of assignments that may be triggering or touch on topics too spiritually and emotionally taxing to engage with at that moment.

In their end of semester reflection papers, several students noted that SWAPA's provided them with a creative and refreshing way to engage with course content, especially given the often-chaotic nature of remote learning in this new era of COVID-19. For my efforts, I received the President's Award for Teaching and Innovation that same year. As COVID-19 restrictions relaxed, the university faced new challenges of precipitously declining enrollment and austerity measures proposed system wide.[20] Curious about how the practice of SWAPA may have impacted the MSLCC students, I reached out to past participants four years later as many were approaching their last year at CSUCI. As such, MSLCC alumni Jisell Camarena Ramires, Lariza Campos Flores, and Cristian Trujillo began working on this article over the course of academic school year 2023–2024. We revisited the end-of-semester reflection paper they wrote in MSLCC and engaged in a metatextual dialogue using these papers to revisit our collective experiences in 2020, as well as explored how lessons learned that semester continue to shape us all these years later. We decided to take a collaborative approach to describing the overall class experience with individual testimonios provided by each of us detailing ways in which SWAPA helped us weather a (post)pandemic education. In this way, we aspire to add to a growing body of literature giving voice to historically underrepresented students and faculty in higher education examining the lasting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resilient, creative, and collaborative ways we leverage our strengths to achieve our goals.

[20] From 2019 to 2022, CSUCI's enrollment dropped 20.4% with a projected loss of $8 million dollars of state funding (Murtaugh & Biasotti, 2023).

Where Do I Fit in Chicanx Studies? Testimonio by Lariza Campos Flores

To say freshman year of university was an "adjustment" is an understatement. August 2020 was one of the toughest times I had to overcome. COVID-19 was a world-altering pandemic that has, unfortunately, been a part of our lives since March 15, 2020. Being a first-generation high school graduate in June 2020 meant I did not get a high school graduation, already diminishing my hard work. That also meant that those of us who were transitioning to college did not get a new student orientation, dorming experience, or proper first-year support. Everybody was learning, and everybody was doing their best, and this was especially true for me.

During my freshman year of university at CSU Channel Islands, I did not feel prepared to go into my first semester. I applied to live in the MSLCC in on-campus housing in the Fall of 2019 when filling out college applications. I chose to opt in to live in the living learning community because, in my head, that would allow me to meet like-minded peers and help create a sense of community. However, due to COVID-19, we did not physically move onto campus, making it very hard to connect with those in the LLC. The students living in the Michele Serros LLC would only see each other in classes, but in all honesty, no one saw each other. I recognized two to three names in my classes in the first year, but we had no interactions outside of the classroom. It all felt so unreal and not in a good way.

It wasn't until my first class in Chicano Studies, "Intro to Chicano Studies," that I was able to feel a sense of community/support. It wasn't because it was a Chicano Studies class but because of the tools I gained by the end of the class. Coming straight out of high school, I was used to the straightforward banking model of education coined by Paulo Freire (1968). That banking model made the last couple of months of high school tough through a screen. I genuinely believed that college would be the same. To my surprise, that was not the case. Professor Centino had the class reflect on the assigned readings and lectures in a unique way. We were to reflect on the week's readings with a SWAPA, a creative piece created to reflect on what we learned. One of the main concepts in SWAPA is listening or reading, finding a line that speaks to the listener/reader the most, and engaging through that line. Engaging meant we were creating a poem or spoken word piece that shows the connection between the line and the listener. When it came to creating the pieces, I chose to focus on what was real to me: work.

Our Own Boss

> He always dreamed of owning his own business, becoming a self-employed man.
> His own boss.
> (Serros, 1998, p. 22)

Go to school they say,
We want you to do better.
Get a degree,
So you don't have to clean houses.
Focus on what matters most,
Distractions aren't good for the mind.
We dream for our Dreamers to make their own realities.
Our parents, tios and tias want to be their own boss,

Some reach their goal, others, not lucky enough.
My tia, reached her goal. A restaurant she opened.
It took some time.
She came from Mexico, dishwasher, then a cook, but finally, she bought the restaurant.
Twenty years later it is still standing,
a source of income for seven families.
One of those being mine.
Because of her hard work and her dream, I can help pay rent, bills and...my nails.
Many of us choose to follow the money because, in a way, we want something we never had.
So we listen.
We go to school, we get the degree, construction, paint, hard jobs, lots of money.
We go to school, we get the degree, teacher, lawyer, hard jobs, lots of patience.
We go to school, we get the degree, doctor, nurse, hard jobs, lots of passion.
We do all the right things, we get all the degrees, yet they make it so hard for us to reach our dreams.
Our own boss. That's all we want. We've put up with the disrespect, no benefits, and minimum wage,
We want to live a life we wish our parents and grandparents had.
A life full of dreams turned to goals, turned to achievements.
A life of being your own boss.
A life of being my own boss.
A life of being our own boss.

The above piece was inspired by a poem by Michele Serros herself. This SWAPA was one of the first times that I felt I was enjoying college. Being able to connect my personal life to my schoolwork created a space where I could reflect on my everyday life but continue to make connections to the struggles of Mexican immigrants and their experiences in the American system. I felt proud to share that my Tia, another brown woman, was able to thrive against the odds. It was also important for me to talk about my Tia's success in my education as she was a huge support to me, including financially.

At the beginning of the semester, August 2020, when I learned I would have to create poetry, I was frightened. I was afraid because I had never been in touch with my creative side before and did not consider myself a creative person. On top of the creative fear was the fact that we had to perform our work for the class. I learned a lot about myself as a creator. Ideas did not come easily to me when it came to creating something from nothing, whether it be a drawing, poem, or story. However, this course forced me to develop a skill that I have learned to appreciate. Looking back at my work from that course, I still believe that SWAPA is a well-grounded form of reflection. My favorite readings of the semester came from *Chicana Falsa* by Michele Serros. A lot of what I grew up feeling is characterized in Serros' work. I experienced my own form of identity crisis in my childhood in the sense that I felt I wasn't Chicana enough, as Serros expresses.

Era Pocha

> MEChA don't mean shit, and that sloppy Spanish of yours will never get you any discount at Bob's market. (Serros, 1998, p. 17)

"Eres bien pocha,

¿Cómo vas a hablar con tus primos cuando vayas a visitarlos?"
I understood it, but that wasn't enough.
I liked Spanish music, I sang it,
But that wasn't enough.

We went to Mexico and I was so happy to see my cousins,
Pero no hablaba.
They would ask me questions, I knew what they were asking me,
But I knew little Spanish.
"Esta nos salio bien Pocha" my tio would say.
I was embarrassed, I tried I really did,
But my primos didn't understand me.
I couldn't talk with them for a month, no me conocieron,
No los conoci, I was sad.
Back home, I noticed things.
In school, they spoke English,
In school, I spoke English
The homework was in English,
My mom didn't know English.
En la casa, they spoke Spanish, but they never taught me.
How was I supposed to learn?
I heard it so I understood it,
But no one ever took the time to help me learn it.
So I listened to more Spanish music, all kinds of music.
I read books in Spanish, all kinds of books.
I watched television in Spanish, all kinds of novelas.
I wrote in Spanish, all kinds of stories.

The next year I went to Mexico, I spoke.
I was excited I could communicate with my family.
My mom, surprised, "Desde cuando hablas?"
"Pues yo me enseñe."

In the SWAPAs I created, I touched on themes about identity within culture, our relationship with Mother Earth, and the uneasy relationship with the political climate of 2020, which still stands today. All those topics are themes I am still passionate about. Through this course and the SWAPAs I created, I unconsciously developed the topics that, as a student-researcher, appeal to me. Although we are reflecting on coursework, we are still humans, and the core of SWAPA is to connect with the human who wrote or spoke what we are reflecting on.

Chicano Studies at CI has work to do in expanding its horizon, however, Chicano Studies has taught me a lot about why I want to become an educator. Since there was no other Ethnic Studies program at CI, Chicano Studies does its best to educate us about our historically marginalized communities, yet that is not enough. This is why I believe we need more educators in the world who learn and teach all forms of Ethnic Studies. In our communities, the "minority" is the majority, and as I have learned in my Chicano Studies courses, the American system was not created to see us succeed, so we must become the new generation of leaders in order to see everyone succeed. This starts

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with transformative education tools used in the classroom. Here, I presented the SWAPAS from my "Intro to Chicano Studies," which I am very proud of. They touch on themes relevant to 2020 and today. As a future educator, I hope to implement SWAPA in order to engage students with assigned content as a form of expression and connection.

Land of the Free

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike? (Hughes, 1935)

Land of the free, do you think?
Land of the free, I don't see.
Land of the privileged, I see.
Land of the lucky, you think?

Freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly they say,
But is it freedom really?
He is a man, she is a woman.
He has a beard, she wears a hijab.
They both get stopped because all Muslins are bad, they say.

The anthem plays, he kneels.
A peaceful expression, of a brutal reality
He hates this country, so disrespectful, they say.
1954, 1992, 2020.
So close, yet so far.
Freedom Riders, Rodney King, George Floyd.
The pain, the blood, the beatings, the police.
Together we stand, together we fall. The cops, the people, against us all.
Land of the free? What do you think?
Land of the free, I don't see.
Not then, not now,
Not a day goes by, that we don't wonder why,
Why we are not free.

Straddling Borders: Poetry of a Chicana (Testimonio) by Jisell Camarena Ramires

You know what you are? / A Chicana Falsa.
(Serros, 1998, p. 1)

What Am I?
Depends on who's asking.
I am a pale Mexican-American,
A Chicana, if you will.
Whose roots originate from a little *pueblito*,
Just on the outskirts of the city of Morelia.

And yet I am so much more.
I am a perfect blend of both cultures.
Bailando to the rhythms of *Banda El Recodo*,
And singing alongside the voice of Billie Eilish.
Where Spanish was my first language,
And yet, I speak English best.
Even so, sometimes I am not good enough.
Struggling to fit in both cultures.
Where Mexico labels me a *Fresa*
Because I am not raw enough for the culture.
And where America does not want me
Because of my Mexican descent.

And yet, here I stand
In full armor
Ready to conquer every battle
Regardless of who the opponent is.
Because no matter what I am,
It is who I become that matters.

Being a Mexican-American young woman in America has never been quite easy. Ever since I was young, having the ability to express myself was never my strongest skill. Living in a traditional Mexican household, my father expressed himself very little and so I often looked to my mother for emotional guidance. However, writing has always been an emotional outlet with no restrictions or judgments. Having the ability to write poetry as a way of expression was not entirely new for me, but I have had the ability to further discover and analyze different aspects of my identity through it.

Through my poetry, I often express my identity and experiences as a Mexican-American young woman. However, I have not always embraced my culture as I do now. By using poetry as a means to express myself, I have further acknowledged my circumstances and how they have shaped who I have become. Living in America, there are constant beliefs and predisposed ideas of what the Mexican community is like, and when it comes to many aspects of my life, I do not necessarily fit into these notions. Yet, I am a walking representation of what the Mexican community is *capable* of. As I express through my poetry, I am much more than meets the eye. I am a pale Chicana who embraces every aspect of her culture, while also acknowledging my life in America.

Racism

> The belief among young whites that racist things happened in the distant past and that it is unfair to hold contemporary whites accountable for them illuminates broader currents in our culture. (Lipstitz, 1998, p. 21)

Racism is defined by injustices.
The injustices faced by people of color
And yet it fails to hold society accountable for those actions.

Racism goes beyond past actions,
It goes beyond prejudices.
Racism is not just the way in which a man of color is denied,
But it is also the reason for which a white man is accepted

Because it is not as visible to the eye as it once was,
They believe they can write it off as history.
And yet racism is still just as prevalent.
It is a system that works towards the downfall of minorities,
And the uprise of the superior few.
A system created by the white man for the benefit of the white man.

A system embedded in every aspect of society
From way up to way below.
And so will require the strength of many to take it down.
The strength of the minorities.
Because through all of the injustice minorities have faced,
One thing is clear,
We are strong and we are resilient.

Importantly, it has not been merely written poetry that has allowed me the opportunity to reflect on my experiences and be introspective but rather the ability to practice SWAPA in a space that welcomes inclusivity and diversity like the MSLLC. These two distinct and complementary spaces have created an atmosphere that has allowed me, a queer Latina student, the ability to critically analyze my surrounding world, as well as granted me the tools necessary to push for change. In a world dominated by ideals reflective of Donald Trump's presidency, meritocracy, and the American Dream that predominantly view America as a great country filled with great opportunities, the practice of SWAPAs and spaces like the MSLLC create opportunities to analyze and dismantle the reality of an unjust government and social system.

For instance, in his book *Think Big: Make it Happen in Business and Life*, Donald Trump boasted: "Hard work is my personal method for financial success. You can do it too" (Cillizza, 2019). At first glance, such a statement does not appear problematic, and yet it is. One can see that meritocratic sentiments are often shared within popular discourse by those who likely faced little struggles related to race, gender, social class, etc. (i.e., Donald Trump). Meritocracy often fails to acknowledge the very real struggles that people of color face on a day-to-day basis within the United States. Unlike Trump, people of color do not get the luxury of simply working hard and achieving financial success. Meritocratic American ideals establish a false sense of opportunity for people who are not at the top of the social hierarchy, and disregard very serious issues that many experience at the hands of discrimination and prejudice. Unfortunately, meritocratic sentiments are shared amongst the masses enough that they can be found within many aspects of American society, even within ideas like the American Dream.

Through different expressive means and welcoming spaces, like SWAPAs and the MSLLC, I have had the opportunity to truly gain an understanding of surrounding issues that not only relate to social and political issues but also ones that consider academic spaces and the importance of knowledge. Moreover, I must acknowledge that spaces created by the practice of SWAPAs and the

MSLLC have provided an even greater opportunity to flourish in programs like that of Chicana/o/x Studies. The ways in which all these distinct practices and spaces have complimented each other have created a space for me to appreciate the importance of creating and acquiring knowledge when pushing for true systematic changes.

The Shortcomings of Education

> Some teachers will teach what their predecessors taught me forty years ago….
> (Loewen, 1995, p. 18)

You are the bearer of all knowledge
You paint a picture of this beautiful America
And spend years teaching us your history
A history that is filled with lies and hidden truths
A history that is never questioned, just accepted
A history that neglects to represent the diversity of this beautiful America
A history that was created by the white man for the white people
You fail to reevaluate what you teach
You fail to question what you were taught
You fail to show the hideous America
You hide the hideous America
I will not merely accept your truth
I will question your history
I will search for the truth of others
And I will teach, not what you taught me
But the true history of the beautiful and hideous America

For instance, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire is a significant resource which has often been referenced in a variety of these spaces. Freire writes about a couple of significant concepts, including the contradiction between the oppressors and the oppressed, as well as how it may be overcome. Through understanding Freire's analysis of oppressors and the oppressed, I have come to better understand my role in holding those in power accountable, as well as the efforts needed to change the fabric of an exclusionary American society. Specifically, Freire (2017) states, "the oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves" (p. 26). Freire goes on to explain how the responsibility of bettering the circumstances of the people of color comes down on the people of color themselves. However, he also explains that "to surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of fuller humanity" (Freire, 2017, p. 29). Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides people, including myself, with a distinct perspective on social hierarchies and the efforts needed to change it.

Moreover, I have been given the tools to examine the circumstances of my family and the ways in which it has impacted me. As a child of two parents who immigrated to the United States from Mexico, I have often understood the disadvantages that my family often experiences to an extent. However, through spaces created by the practice of SWAPAs, the MSLLC, and the Chicana/o/x

Studies program, I have been able to reflect more deeply on the circumstances that surround us. For instance, before I began my higher education journey, I often believed in the American Dream and all the opportunities that could be at my disposal. However, that was not necessarily the case.

I originally understood that the American Dream meant that, through hard work, my parents had the ability to achieve a level of success that they could not in their home country, and therefore so could I. However, I have come to understand that the American Dream holds similar beliefs as meritocracy, and often lacks any understanding of the circumstances of those who seek it out. In my critical view, the American Dream, like meritocracy, promises a chance at opportunities for prosperity without acknowledging profoundly serious issues engraved within American society, such as racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, etc. Unfortunately, such beliefs and lack of understanding of social inequalities and injustices are some that I have seen even my own parents express.

Since I was a young girl, my father has always pushed for me to prioritize my education in the belief that that will be enough to ensure my livelihood, that that will be enough to avoid any struggles I may experience otherwise. However, I have come to understand that my journey will not be without its own struggles, many due to my identity, my gender, my social standing, and my sexuality. Although my parents' hopes are optimistic and motivational, these hopes at times lack an understanding of my circumstances within American society, and the way my identity affects it. Moreover, the American Dream also tends to promote the assimilation of those seeking to pursue such a dream into American society and culture. To be successful in the United States is to be white, or at the minimum as close to white as you can be. Therefore, pursuing the American Dream can mean that one gives up important cultural identities to be accepted within American society and subsequently given opportunities to succeed.

Reaching My Hand Out

> This must now reset and re-shine a light on this disparity related to social determinants of health that are experienced by the Latinx community…. (Gamboa, 2020)

We are strong, beautiful people,
We are built to overcome even the worst of obstacles,
We are made to endure the worst to make a living,
But we are belittled and oppressed.
And yet we strive.

We are given the leftovers,
We are given the scraps that nobody else wants,
We are given little resources,
And told to make do.
So, we do.

Nobody comes to our aid,
Nobody provides us with help.
And although we are strong,
We are mortal humans

Who will one day disappear.

We are no better than you,
And you are no better than me,
And so, I reach my hand out to you
In hopes that you will reach your hand out to me.

My journey as a Mexican-American young woman navigating the complexities of identity and systemic injustices has been one of profound growth and introspection. Through the lens of poetry, I have explored the complexity of my heritage, the pervasive nature of racism, and the false promises of the American Dream. My ability to reflect on these topics has been nurtured and deepened by the inclusive and supportive environments of the Michelle Serros Living Learning Community and the practice of SWAPA. Moreover, the exploration of my identity has revealed the beauty and challenges of being a Chicana in America. It has shown me that I am not defined by the labels others place upon me but by the strength and resilience I embody. Understanding the deeply ingrained systems of racism and the shortcomings of our educational institutions has empowered me to question, challenge, and strive for true and lasting change. No matter the obstacles that cross my path, as I have been taught, *si se puede*.

Opening Pathways of True History During Worldwide Shutdown, Testimonio by Cristian Trujillo
Music vs. Hate

How does one conquer hate?
How does one spread love and positivity when people keep bashing them with hate?
How can one be hateful when others are trying to spread that love?
Is there a simple solution to dissolve hate?
There is none
But there is a way to stop the spread of it
Music
Powerful music made by poets, political activists, and thinkers
When a song that starts playing, you forget everything
You forget the past, the present and are just in the moment
How the rhythm moves your body
How the lyrics make you think and wonder
Feeling every step of your foot
Bob Marley said it the best
“One good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain”

The title of this SWAPA is “Music vs. Hate” and I wrote it in reaction to an assigned reading in Chicana/o Studies 100 that explored how music can be used as a form of resistance and protest. While this was my first Chicana/o Studies class, it wasn’t my first experience with Ethnic Studies. I had already taken my first Ethnic Studies at Summit Public High School: Rainier back home in San Jose.

In all honesty, Chicano Studies was initially not something I was interested in. As a Bay Area youth, I was drawn to the history of African Americans in the United States, especially that community’s resistance to over-policing and state sponsored violence. In middle school I created an educational

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pamphlet on the impact of the vicious beating of Rodney King in 1991 as a class project. In researching the violence committed against King and the subsequent acquittal of the police officers that beat him, my eyes were opened to the persistence of police brutality and its impact on the Black community. In fact, when I was in elementary school, Oscar Grant was murdered at the Fruitvale BART station just 40 miles from where I lived.

From there I dove deeper into African American history, learning about the lasting effects of slavery and Jim Crow laws, as well as the efforts and activism of figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. As my SWAPA points to however, I was also drawn to the poetry of hip hop and the ideas expressed and shared by the artists. Despite being a Gen Z kid, my upbringing consisted of a plethora of '80s and '90s rap by artists such as Wu-Tang Clan, Nas, and A Tribe Called Quest. As a kid, these were only songs that my mother listened to when they would come on the radio. However, as I got older, I started to understand that it was much more than a song. Artists like Tupac and N.W.A. used their music not just to highlight issues of police brutality, racism, and discrimination, but also to spread messages of resistance and empowerment. Going with the themes in my poem, "Music vs. Hate", music has the power to conquer hate and spread positivity, and artists use music to channel their experiences and emotions to inspire change and hope. My mother played a huge role in my learning of African American history. I loved talking to my mom about anything. If I had a question about how the world works, she was the person I would talk to because she challenges my way of thinking and encourages me to ask the hard questions. I would ask her different questions, not just about African American Studies, but also about society, law, government, and politics, and how those institutions affect the African American community. We would even get into how people think, morality, and why things are the way they are. I appreciate her for that because she is a major reason why at such a young age, I had a lot of knowledge about these different topics that most others didn't at the time. It was also just fascinating to learn about because up until that point, I had only learned about American history which tended to leave out people of color like me.

Brown Boy

I am a brown boy
A brown boy with dreams of being something better than his parents
A brown boy who wants to live in that "American Dream" he sees in the movies and not that gangster he sees in them
A brown boy who just wants to live his life worry-free someday
But how can that happen when there are people against him
People who destroy his confidence
People who say he won't make it far in life
People who say he should go back to where he came from even though he came from the same place they came from
People who tell him that he should go back to the field
People that say "He's just a little brown boy"
Yeah, he's a brown boy
But nobody knows how far this little brown boy can go

Once I graduated from high school, I wanted to become an Ethnic Studies major. However, since CSU Channel Islands did not have a Comparative Ethnic Studies program at the time, I decided to

stick with a similar major and become a Chicano Studies major. However, the conditions of my first year at a college campus were far from ideal for a first-generation college student. COVID-19 changed the lives of many people in the world, my experience was no different. My high school senior year was cut short, I was struggling with my mental health, stuck in a house for a year plus with no indication of the pandemic slowing down, and week after week there was another part of the world on fire. It even got to a point where I avoided the news all together because it seemed as if it was just getting worse day after day, week after week, month after month. As a first-generation college student, my first year was already nerve wracking, terrifying, and as hectic as you can imagine, especially with the pandemic and everything else that was happening in the world. My thoughts were running a million miles a minute through my head, thoughts that I wanted to express but didn't know how to. That was until I took my intro to Chicano Studies class where we learned about SWAPAs.

My SWAPAs were heavily inspired by the pandemic and other issues in the world at that time. From the news, police, government, racism, etc. One topic that was my inspiration came from at that time was police brutality, specifically about the cases of George Floyd and Breoanna Taylor. Much like everybody else, I was angry, frustrated, and disappointed at our government, police, and our justice system. I joined numerous protests in support of Black Lives Matter, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, expressing my disappointment in our society. However, emotions were still high even after the protests, so much so that I tried to find different ways to express my thoughts and emotions. That is when SWAPA was introduced to me. It was a way for me to express my thoughts and emotions, good and bad. Although I am not a poet nor do I think I created the greatest poems that exist, the SWAPAs I created were used as a powerful way to express my goals, disappointments, happiness, and sadness. Whether I was facing mental health challenges, the pandemic, police brutality, or the government, it was all written down into poems that showed my emotions.

Looking back at the poems I wrote in my freshman year, many of the topics I wrote about are still relevant today. It seems nothing has changed since I first wrote these poems. There still continues to be challenges of racism, discrimination, injustice, and inequality in the world. We have not made any progress, and in some cases, have even gone backwards. However, that doesn't mean we should lose hope or give up. If anything, it means we need to take more action. We should not be sitting and watching the world burn in front of our eyes, we must continue to make change in whatever ways we can. In my case, I am hoping to change the world by pursuing education so I can educate others and future generations. In order for us to create change, we must educate ourselves because if we do not learn our history, we are doomed to repeat that history.

Educational Politics

They say students are the future of this country
Why is that?
Because we go to school to learn things?
Yeah, we go to school to learn what y=mx+b is
But what about the important things?
What about slavery?
What about the Holocaust?
What about racism and Jim Crow laws?

What about the real side of Christopher Columbus?
What about the history that made America what it is today
Why can't we learn that history about the oppression and racism that people of color are still fighting to this day?
To prevent those same issues that happened centuries ago
Time and time again, those same problems are still happening today
But because not all of us are educated in the subject, there is still oppression, racism, and bigotry
We must learn our history, so history won't repeat itself

When I first entered college, I did not know what I wanted to pursue after graduation. However, throughout my 4 years at CSU Channel Islands, I learned new concepts, ideas, and theories from the diverse people I encountered both on and off campus. Hearing about their experiences and perspectives provoked new thoughts and questions that I hadn't ever considered before. These questions weren't just about things that happened in the past, but about how our society functions in this very moment. Originally, I hoped that when I finished the "student" chapter of my life I would start a new one as an educator. I envisioned a path that allowed me to inspire future generations to develop even newer concepts, ideas, and theories that challenge our society's inequities. Those future generations could use those lessons to change the world and create a better one. However, certain realizations have made me question whether being an educator is the right path for me.

During my sophomore year, my dad asked me, "would you be able to live and provide for yourself and for your future family on a teacher's salary?" At the time, my old high school government teacher moved into a small and humble studio apartment in my parents' backyard. He only said he would be there for a year until he can find his own place he can rent out. He's still there 6 years later. Was this what the future had in store for me as well? My dad's question was one that I couldn't answer truthfully at the time. It led me to question whether a career as an educator was worth it, or if I also needed a backup plan - a safe job to fall back on. As graduation neared, I worried about my future after college.

One day, in expressing my concerns to my mom, she told me, "You're gonna graduate and get a college degree. After that - it doesn't matter what you do. As long as you have that piece of paper that says you have a college education, anyone will hire you." Those words have stuck with me ever since. My mom helped me realize that with my degree, I am not narrowly limited to any particular career path. I have the agency to chart my own way. This was an important lesson because it taught me that I am not confined to the types of jobs that Chicana/o Studies or Ethnic Studies graduates are assumed to be suited for. Instead, my BA offers me a greater sense of freedom to explore my career options or change directions if need be.

Although I have stayed true to my plan to become an educator after I graduate, I learned that the knowledge and wisdom I've gained go far beyond what I gained or can offer in a classroom. In many ways, the everyday people I encounter in my community have inspired and provoked my intellect just as much as my teachers and professors. These people have included my parents, friends, co-workers, as well as random people on the street. They didn't need a classroom to inspire me, so who's to say I need a classroom to do the same for someone else? As someone who is an inspiration of mine, Tupac says, "I'm not saying I'm gonna rule the world or I'm gonna change the world, but I guarantee that I will spark the brain that will change the world."

Conclusion

In crafting this article, our team went through a lengthy collaborative process of writing and revision aiming towards a balance of consistency and shared tone on one hand, and individual voices and unique perspectives on the other. Despite the added pressures of assignments and other responsibilities related to their looming graduation from CSUCI, our student team members remained remarkably focused and dedicated to completing this project, including presenting this a preliminary draft of this article at the annual meeting of the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies to the plenary ballroom.

It was at that conference that we realized that despite the isolating nature of online learning, the kinship and community building initiated by the practice of SWAPA in their first year provided an avenue for students to develop trust and familiarity not just with Chicana/o Studies faculty, but with each other as survivors of the COVID-19 university experience. While our team of authors consists of only four individuals, the topic and content of this article was also developed through the conversations and discussion our teammates had broadly with other peers, classmates, faculty and staff at CSU Channel Islands and beyond. Despite the challenges presented by COVID-19, we are eternally thankful for the connections and community we forged in a time of challenges and uncertainty.

Looking toward the future, our team discussed how they imagined incorporating aspects of SWAPA into their work as educators, writers or cultural producers. As most of our student team members envision themselves working in the K-12 system, Nicholas asked whether they considered using SWAPA with pre-college students. We discussed some of the challenges that may be faced in facilitating SWAPA with youth still developing their emotional intelligence. However, we also acknowledged that those same challenges are also present with college and university students as well, especially first-year students like those in MSLLC. Ultimately, we coalesced on the importance of how SWAPA calls on students to view themselves not solely as reluctant and passive consumers of dominant narratives, but rather to see themselves as scholars and artists in their own right, a valuable reminder for students of any age.

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