Narrative as a Centerpiece of the Latina/o Experience

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*Dreaming Forward: Latino Voices Enhance the Mosaic* provides abbreviated educational life histories of Latina/os, primarily Mexican American, who lived or worked in two Mexican American communities on the south side of an urban center in the Midwest. Nearly forty interviews were conducted over a four-year period with men and women who ranged in age from seventeen to seventy years old. Nineteen stories of twenty individuals are included in *Dreaming Forward*.

In *Dreaming Forward*, Casazza allows her “storytellers” to speak for themselves by providing their full narratives. Each chapter contains a story from one of the Latina/o interviewees (with the exception of chapter 18, which tells the story of Carmen and Angela, close friends and colleagues). Their narratives coalesce around five themes, including history, family and community, safety, English language, and education and encouragement, which Casazza previews in the preface.

The storytellers share their origin story, where they were born and raised and if they migrated to the US, as well as what brought them to this urban center. They recount their schooling experiences and the hardships they endured, as well as their moments of academic success. The storytellers talk about their family as a source of challenge and support. They highlight that despite the high levels of crime they report in their community they have a deep commitment to staying in their community and working to address the challenges it faces by leveraging its strengths and demanding resources.

In chapter eight, Martha tells her story by sharing a bit about her mother’s migration from Mexico, her father’s birth in Texas and what that meant for her experience growing up and going to school in Houston and then in this Midwestern city. Through Martha and her children’s experiences, as well as her work in the local public schools, we hear her critique the lack of resources and services that often work to push Latina/o students out of school. She recounts how she was just one credit short of graduation, encountered numerous barriers to completing the credit and ultimately left school without her diploma. Similarly, her own son had to negotiate school with an undiagnosed learning disability that left him
less than prepared to pursue post-secondary education. Through Marta’s story we glimpse the complicated ways in which public schools inadequately served this community.

Francisco, a Latino of Columbian descent, tells his story of growing up in LA and moving to this Midwestern city at the age of 13. He talks about the central role education played in his family and how his parents made sacrifices so that he could pursue education. As an educator himself, Francisco is sensitive to the barriers that Latina/o families face and works collectively with administrators, teachers and families to support academic achievement and to enhance the community.

These are just two of the compelling narratives that Casazza shares. The reader is immediately drawn in to the daily-lived experiences of these twenty Latina/os. This is the highlight of Casazza’s work. We hear about these storytellers’ histories, families and communities, safety concerns, English language negotiations, and their education experiences through their own voice. Casazza likens this collection of stories to a Mexican mosaic image that tells stories and advocates for political causes through each storyteller’s perspective.

That being said, *Dreaming Forward* would benefit from more specificity in the methodology. For example, we don’t know the gender distribution of the forty interviewees, nor do we have a systematic account of generational differences in terms of migration to the US, citizenship status or ethnicity. We can glean these details from the narratives, but these are meaningful differences that certainly shape the storyteller’s lived experiences and would provide another lens through which we can understand their experiences and the larger structural patterns within which they are embedded. For example, the research literature indicates that the immigration experience and integration in to US society differs for the various Latina/o ethnic groups encompassed within the larger pan-Latino/a label (Portes and Rumbaut, 2014). Furthermore, the author does not provide a clear definition of Latina/o, but indicates that, “the voices are Latino, primarily Mexican American”. An analysis at the intersections of ethnicity, gender, generation, citizenship status, etc. would elucidate nuanced differences in the narratives and provide intriguing comparisons within the pan-Latina/o group. For example, how do the experiences of Latinas differ from Latinos? How do the experiences of recent Mexican immigrants differ from third generation Mexican Americans? How go the experiences of Mexican-origin, first generation men differ from second-generation Colombian women?

In addition, after the preface, we don’t hear Casazza’s voice again until she returns to these five themes in the epilogue. While this approach centers the voices of the twenty Latino/as, the value of their experience to the larger understanding of Latina/os in US society may get lost without at least some minimal analysis by the author within the narratives, as well as an articulation of how these experiences can be understood within the extant literature on Latina/o integration (National Research Council, 2006). Moreover, there are missed opportunities to fully contextualize the experiences of Latina/o within the broader social structure.

For example, in chapter five, Zulema indicates, “Honestly, all my friends at the high school—all the girls were always together. All of them are pregnant or have kids already; only two of them are going to college right now. It was really hard for them because they already have a baby. I was the only one who didn’t get pregnant, and I was the only one
who continued my education without getting in trouble anymore” (56). In this instance, it is important to understand how barriers to meaningful sex education and contraception might contribute to teen pregnancy? Moreover, given the gendered and racialized stereotype of Latinas as teen mothers (Cammarota, 2004), how might this singular experience be contextualized with the broader literature on Latina sexuality?

Lastly, we learn in the preface that Casazza interviewed forty Latinos, but we do not know how the twenty stories she chooses to share were selected. Are these twenty represented of the full forty? Are we missing any key findings from the absence of the other twenty?

Nonetheless, there is much to learn from Casazza's narrative based discussion of Latina/os in this Midwestern city and how they are “dreaming forward to communities that have rigorous schools, less crime, and resources equal to those in other communities” (237). The epilogue provides a summary of “solutions to the problems [the storytellers] have experienced” through an analysis of best practices, programs and policy implications for meaningful school reform, immigration reform and the development of sustainable partnerships that come directly from the members of this community. *Dreaming Forward: Latino Voices Enhance the Mosaic* is another important contribution to the broader literature on the Latina/o lived experience.