

Sage and Tissue Boxes

Critical Race Feminista Perspectives on Office Hours

JOSÉ M. AGUILAR-HERNÁNDEZ AND ALMA ITZÉ FLORES

This chapter attempts to expand office hours beyond a contractual agreement and to consider the possibility of office hours as a transformative and social justice space. Traditionally, office hours are a teaching requirement in higher education; faculty sit in their office during a set day and time each week so that students can walk in and ask questions related to the course. In this fashion, office hours are what Paulo Freire (1970) describes as a “banking model” exchange, where the professor deposits the “missing” or “unclear” information to students and they successfully regurgitate the information in the course assignments. Further, office hours are often not valued as an important pedagogical practice, and few students and faculty attend them regularly (Newton & Gutman, 1979). Attempting to respond to this challenge, scholars have suggested pedagogical interventions to improve the quality of office hours (Atamian & DeMerville, 1998; Chung & Hsu, 2006). However, there is a gap in scholarship that looks at office hours as pedagogical sites, specifically in relationship to first-generation faculty of color.

We argue that office hours can become a counterspace (Yosso & López, 2010) if we redefine the contractual agreement to a transformative pedagogical practice. Redefined, office hours are sites of resistance, affirmation, and growth, what Delgado Bernal and Aleman (2017) call transformative ruptures, “interactions, experiences, and moments where a disruption of pervasive coloniality, institutional racism, and systemic inequity occurs” (p. 29). Further, we argue that the very presence of first-generation faculty of color in office hours disrupts the historically white male professoriate, thus their presence in academia (and office hours) is significant to students of all backgrounds, including those who are also first generation and of color. One way faculty of color can enact a pedagogy of transformation in office hours is to engage in what Jain and Solórzano (2014) describe as critical race mentoring, an approach where

faculty “interact with [their] own students in a way that considers their familial background, how their career intersects with their education, and their raced and gendered experiences in the classroom” (p. 133). In this chapter we ask: How do our experiences as first-generation faculty of color and critical race feminista (CRF) scholars shape how we engage our students during office hours? Further, how can our experiences inform university pedagogical practices and institutional initiatives?

A Critical Race Feminista Praxis

The practices and strategies we apply in our office hours are guided by a CRF praxis (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017), a process of reflection and action that is informed by critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano, 1998) and Chicana feminisms (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011). Through a CRF praxis we seek out opportunities for transformative ruptures within and beyond academia. A CRF praxis combines the strengths of CRT and Chicana feminisms. For example, we draw heavily on the CRT tenet that recognizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color as “legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 122). We use Anzaldúa’s concept of *nepantla*, the Nahuatl word for “in-between space,” to acknowledge the power and privilege that we experience as first-generation faculty of color (Anzaldúa, 1987; Keating, 2006). We hold power and privilege as university professors while we are marginalized in the academy by our other identities, such as being a woman of color and a queer man of color. Individuals who experience *nepantla* frequently become *nepantleras*, or “in-betweeners”—people who facilitate passages between worlds. They are able to live within and among multiple worlds and act as intermediaries, or “serve as agents of awakening, inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater *conocimiento*” (Keating, 2006, p. 9).

The questions guiding this chapter are answered through our own CRF *testimonios*. As a method, *testimonio* emerged in Latin American human rights struggles and has been used to document the experiences of oppressed groups, specifically Women of Color, to denounce injustices (Menchú, 2010). Women of Color have used *testimonio* in their research to document and/or theorize their own experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance, as well as others (Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Pérez Huber, 2009; Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). In this chapter, we position *testimonio* as a tool of a CRF praxis. Alma writes from the perspective of a first-generation Chicana in a nontenure-track visiting professor position at a private Jesuit university with a majority-white student population; José writes from the perspective of a queer Chicano in a tenure-track faculty position at a public teaching and Hispanic Serving Institution. Yet, despite these very different institutional contexts, we argue that office hours afford a unique

pedagogical opportunity to enact a CRF praxis and more holistically engage with students beyond the classroom.

Alma's Testimonio

My Relationship with Office Hours

As a first-generation college student, I started my undergraduate career at UCLA with no understanding of what office hours were. My first exposure to office hours was during UCLA's Freshman Summer Program (FSP), a summer bridge program dedicated to preparing first-generation, low-income, and/or historically underrepresented students to successfully transition to UCLA. I remember professors encouraging us to go to their office hours if we needed extra help or support. Unfortunately, it was not until my professor returned my midterm exam back to me with a C+ on it that I decided to attend office hours for the first time. During office hours the professor and I went over my exam, and while I was still disappointed in the grade, I learned from my mistakes. As the final exam approached, I went to office hours more regularly to confirm that I was grasping the material. The effort paid off when I got an A on my final exam. My experience in office hours during FSP became the blueprint for how I used office hours for the rest of my undergraduate career. In other words, I would seek out office hours only when I needed help or support with course material, or when I had questions about graded work.

It was not until I started graduate school and met Dr. Daniel Solórzano—or Danny—that my perspective of office hours shifted. The first time I met with Danny, I walked into his office and was taken aback by all the photographs of students he has proudly on display. Whether in books, art, or photographs, I had never seen so many People of Color represented in one office. Per my undergraduate training, I walked into his office with a list of questions I had prepared ahead of time. When I was ready to get started, I was surprised by Danny's first request: "Tell me about yourself?" No professor had ever asked me this during office hours. This would be one of many meetings with Danny that would inform how I set up my own office hours specifically, but my pedagogy more broadly.

A Nepantlera Professor

Danny pushed me to think about office hours beyond the banking model and instead to create a space of resistance, affirmation, and growth. Now as a first-generation faculty of color, I think a lot about the possibilities of office hours. Soon after I graduated with my doctorate in 2016, I started working as a visiting assistant professor at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in the Department of Chicana/o Studies. I was very excited to begin my career as a professor in an

ethnic studies department and envisioned my classes full of students of color. To my surprise, though, the majority of my students at LMU were white and came from fairly affluent backgrounds.

Being a young Chicana, immigrant, English as a second language learner, and first-generation college student positioned me in direct contrast to my students and the majority of my colleagues. Yet I learned to embrace the in-betweenness, my nepantla identity. As a nepantlera professor, I am committed to helping my students understand systemic oppression. As such, I require all my students to author a racial autobiography, which asks them to reflect, explore, and write about their own racial identification and racialized experiences. After they submit the assignment, they are required to come to my office hours to discuss it. This is one of the practices I use to change my office hours into a site of resistance, affirmation, and growth, and to more deeply engage with my students.

Transformative Ruptures in Office Hours

The racial autobiography appointments begin by asking students to describe the community they grew up in, their families, and their friendship groups. I believe in the power of vulnerability; thus, I model it in my office hours. I discuss my upbringing, my moments of *conocimiento*: I want students to understand that I did not arrive to antiracist work overnight, that it has been a challenging, tedious, and ongoing process. We unpack a lot and I often have to push students in ways that make them feel uncomfortable. I see a range of emotions expressed by students, from anger to sadness to joy. One of the most challenging office hour appointments I had was with John.¹ John was a tall, white cisgender man and transfer student who began class by introducing himself as a “gay Republican.” As I read his racial autobiography, it was clear to me that he was carrying a lot of unresolved feelings due to the tension he felt between his gay and Republican identities. He had grown up in a white, upper-middle-class community and had limited interactions with People of Color. His closest relationship with a Person of Color was with his Latina immigrant nanny, who had helped raise him. Before John came to see me, I had noticed a pattern in class where he felt the need to respond to every comment made by my only Black student in class, Malcolm. I was prepared to discuss this with him.

John walked into my office and took a seat. My office is filled with photographs of my family and friends. I have political artwork up with messages like “Brown and Proud,” “Que Viva La Mujer,” and “Black Lives Matter.” I could see his eyes scanning the room as I pulled out his racial autobiography. The session was going well, and he seemed receptive when I explained the ways that systems

1. Student names have been changed to protect their identities.

of oppression are intersectional. I described what it meant to be an ally and used myself as an example. I need to use my privilege as a light-skinned, cisgender woman to disrupt cisheteropatriarchy. John agreed and provided examples of how he had used his white privilege to help communities of color.

When I brought up the pattern I had noticed between him and Malcolm, he immediately grew tense. I asked him why he felt the need to always comment after Malcolm spoke. “I just like to play devil’s advocate,” he responded. I pushed him more, “OK, but I feel like you always do it specifically when Malcolm speaks.” He gave me a blank stare until he finally blurted out, “I just don’t understand why he has the authority to speak on all things regarding oppression.” I explained that as a Black man, Malcolm has experiences that John and I will never experience because we are not members of that community. I described how I do not know what it is like to be queer, just like he does not know what it is like to be Black. He grew angry, defensive, and emotional. “That is unfair for you to say that I do not know what Black people experience. I volunteered for years at an urban school where I tutored mostly Black kids,” he said as his voice cracked. I pushed, “John, I can spend my entire life working with queer people, but I will never be able to speak for them.” Silence. We both took a deep breath and I decided it was best for us to reflect on what we had shared. I reminded him what we had covered, his upbringing, the idea of intersectionality, white privilege, and how we can be allies. After he left, I lit some sage to clear the air and proceeded to meditate. I was exhausted.

Sage Knowledge

I continuously reflect on ways to create meaningful, affirming, and anticolonial practices in my office hours. I think about the physical space: whose faces and voices are represented? The ways I engage students: how do I center what they already know and avoid the traditional authoritative and banking model of learning/mentoring? I think about my students holistically: who are they beyond being my student? And lastly, how can I use this space to continue to work for justice? You will always find sage in my office, not only because it brings me a sense of relief and peace, but because I often face challenging student appointments such as John’s. While I noticed a change in John’s behavior after various office hour visits, I am not sure how he feels today. My hope is that this moment of resistance helped him to grow and see the world a little bit differently as a white man. What I have found from doing this work is that transformative ruptures often occur in my office hours where students and I can be vulnerable, disarmed from performing for others in class, and instead focus on building with each other. I share this sage knowledge based on my experiences of navigating academia as a first-generation faculty of color. My hope is that institutions recognize the value and often “invisible” labor that we do.

José's Testimonio

My Relationship with Office Hours

My relationship with office hours began at Moorpark Community College. Being a first-generation student, I didn't immediately understand the value of office hours. I met Professor Tomás Sánchez, who taught my first ever Chicana/o studies course. Learning for the first time in a classroom that people of Mexican descent have a history led me to his office hours many times. In those discussions, he radically reframed the way I thought about history. I learned that my ancestors were historical actors, and that the omission of their contributions was a manifestation of power that privileged European history. When I arrived to UCLA as a transfer student I was initially nervous, but I already knew the importance of office hours. Faculty in the Chicana/o studies department (many who were first generation themselves) were supportive of my academic trajectory, and their office hours were critical in developing my thinking, writing, and commitment to social change. In graduate school I was mentored by Professor Daniel Solórzano, who served on my master's committee and was my dissertation advisor. Danny's office hours were transformative. I usually arrived to his office feeling defeated and experiencing imposter syndrome and somehow would always leave feeling like an expert. The many models of office hours I experienced not only formed part of my educational trajectory but also informed my pedagogical approach to office hours with my students.

Physical Space

I knew that as a faculty member, I had to be prepared for office hours with my students, including ensuring that my office space was welcoming. At Cal Poly Pomona, where Latina/o/x students make up 47 percent of the student body, I have been intentional with the way I've decorated my office, specifically because our student body has a large first-generation population. As a first-generation student, I understood the importance of my Chicana/o studies professors' offices, specifically the books on their shelves. Never had I been around so many publications that focused on my history. In a way, those books affirmed my presence in academia, silencing my feelings of culture shock and imposter syndrome that made it difficult to navigate college. So as a first-generation faculty, I display my books to visually show my students that People of Color, women, and queer people have a history too. I also display art, gifts that my students give me, and the tissue box.

I've had conversations with colleagues who teach ethnic studies, and I've found that many of us are purposeful in how we arrange and decorate our office space, specifically where we position the tissue box. Strategically placed at an arm's distance from where students sit, the tissue box is essential because it

welcomes vulnerability; it lets them know it's OK to cry. This is something that my students say is unique, in comparison to other professors' office hours. Sometimes we cry because of the pain we feel in learning the historical traumas of genocide of our ancestors; other times we cry because we are inspired to change the world, and it brings forth emotions of passion and love for our communities that re-energize and inspire us. The tissue box, like the other items in my office, creates a counterspace within the university, giving me and my students permission to open up, cry, and return to the academy and the world *desahogados*, or relieved.

Ethnic Studies and Transformative Ruptures

Aside from preparing the space, I see my role in office hours as an active listener: one who asks questions, learns from students, and shares skills they might need to succeed at a four-year institution. I also find that sharing my stories and educational trajectory allows students to engage in transformative actions. For example, during my first year as a tenure-track faculty, Jennifer, a student from El Monte, California, stopped by my office hours to introduce herself and confess that she had never taken a course in Chicana/o studies. I shared my experience taking my first Chicana/o studies course, and we discussed the need for curriculum on People of Color to be introduced to students at a younger age. I asked her if she knew about the El Monte Berry Strike of 1933. After I opened Vicki Ruiz's (2008) text *From Out of the Shadows* and pointed to the pages where it was discussed, Jennifer's eyes grew big. It was the first time she saw her community in a historical text. A few weeks later she returned to my office with another confession: "Profe, I think I'm a Chicana." Jennifer shared how, in taking the course, she began talking with her mother about what she was learning in the class. Jennifer's grandmother had been a part of the strike: "I come from a family of activists, Profe. And I didn't even know it." She reached for the tissue box and she captured her tears as she cried. My eyes swelled up. Together we thanked Ruiz for rupturing the omission of Chicanas' participation in history.

During my third year, Larissa came to my office in shock that I had just delivered a lecture on El Salvador and Salvadorans in the United States. Her family migrated to the United States after escaping the civil war in El Salvador. As she began speaking, she reached for the tissue box. She waved her hands as to dry her tears and said, "I'm here to talk about the project. Not to cry." I assured her that it was fine to cry, and we discussed her research topic. She knew she wanted to write about Salvadorans in the United States, and she said in a determined voice, "But there are no books on Salvadorans." I remembered that feeling as a student. I picked up Leisy Abrego's (2014) book *Sacrificing Families*, handed it to her and said, "read this." That night Larissa emailed me: "To be Salvadoreña AND an academic. That's what I want to be. This book gave me so much life." I emailed Leisy that night, thanking her for inspiring Larissa.

Rituals and Vulnerabilities

Despite being told by dominant society that I shouldn't cry because I am a man, I believe in the importance of creating a space, especially in university settings, where crying is not only allowed but seen as necessary. When I walk into my office today, I turn on the lights and I glance at the air-conditioning unit in my office. "Lo logramos, apa," I tell my dad's photo in my office. Esteban Aguilar Muro, my father, was my first mentor. I am the youngest of nine children and he wanted me to graduate from high school so that I could access an air-conditioned job. After a day of work in the strawberry fields of Oxnard, California, he often arrived home with back pain. He would remind me that he was working that hard for me: he wanted me to graduate high school so that I wouldn't have back pain, so that I could sit in an office job instead of working under the sun. I achieved my father's dream for me—I accessed an air-conditioned job when I landed a tenure-track position. However, I arrived to that position with multiple back problems that began during my academic trajectory in higher education. Air-conditioning didn't save me from back pain. I cried when I realized this: I felt guilty that my back pain was evidence I was betraying my father's immigrant dream for his U.S.-born son.

My father mentored me through his pain because he loved me. This realization informs my approach to mentoring students. Universities often wound those of us who are first generation, queer, and of color while simultaneously shunning us for expressing pain. I am reminded of Professor Sánchez at Moorpark College and Danny at UCLA, who listened, engaged, and centered me holistically (with my pain, curiosities, and questions) during office hours. I remember their intentionality in listening to and learning from me, really wanting to know what I thought about the course material. And I remember them holding space when I cried. Now I sit in their seat, committed to continuing to learn how best to mentor and advise students in a way that allows my students to feel like they belong in my classroom, office, the university, and beyond. At this point in my career I've learned that crying isn't a sign of weakness, but instead a ritual, a manifestation of resistance, a transformational pedagogical practice that values our pain, experiences, and emotions.

Office Hours as CRF Praxis

Our *testimonios* are two examples of how first-generation faculty of color engage their students through a CRF praxis in office hours. They show how our understanding of office hours evolved from not understanding their purpose to seeing their potential to disrupt coloniality in academia. While the context of where we work, specifically the student population we serve, is drastically different, we have shown how this work is possible across institutions. For Alma, being at a

majority-white university has pushed her to use her office hours as a space for unearthing privilege and challenging systemic oppression. For José, office hours are a space of challenging the historical omission of minoritized peoples. As nepantleras, we approach mentorship holistically; our focus is not just students' performance in our classes, but their whole beings. We want students to know that we genuinely care about them while nurturing their critical consciousness and affirming their place in higher education. While some faculty may see office hours as a one-way transaction of knowledge where students ask questions and faculty respond, we have experienced them as spaces of transformation and healing. So, whether it is sage to cleanse the air after a difficult session with a student or a tissue box to dry our tears from seeing a student's feeling of validation, we see the transformative potential in office hours.

Based on our *testimonios*, we provide some reflections and recommendations. First, we see the necessity to include office hours as pedagogical spaces within research and teaching trainings. Often, discussions of pedagogy are limited to the classroom, but as discussed here, it extends into the office hour space. As a research topic, we see the necessity for ongoing qualitative and quantitative studies, specifically on first-generation faculty of color, that are funded and supported by research institutions and universities to measure the ways in which office hour spaces can be valued more by faculty and students alike. Second, considering the amount of labor that first-generation faculty of color perform, including teaching and mentoring in office hours, departments and universities need to value the labor done within office hours. Specifically, we see performance evaluations and retention, tenure, and promotion processes as places where that labor is intentionally acknowledged and valued. Last, it is necessary that institutions support faculty with office space. While both of us are fortunate to have our own offices, we know that is not the case for all faculty, especially part-time lecturers. Our *testimonios* show how important office space is for teaching and mentoring students.

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