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Moises Serrano's *Forbidden*: A North Carolinian DREAMer's Twist on Chicanx Memoir, Testimonio, and Geography

Jennifer Carolina Gómez Menjívar

Moises Serrano's *Forbidden: Undocumented and Queer in Rural America* opens with a black screen and the voice of the 45th president of the United States uttering the now-familiar words, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best..." The mention of rapists, still against a black screen, brings with it chants of "build that wall" against complete darkness. The first 55 seconds of the film are thus impenetrable and ominous. This moment immediately evokes the experience of "living in the shadows" and the fear of being persecuted by a mob fueled by mass hysteria. It is no surprise that *Forbidden* should begin this way. Young DREAMers have increasingly appropriated the concept of "living in the shadows" and metaphor of "coming out" in the last twenty years (Enriquez and Saguy 2016). There has been a step taken by millions across the country to collectively emerge out of spaces of fear into spaces of action. Far from shrinking before chanting crowds like those featured in the first seconds of *Forbidden*, these young people have passionately transformed the immigration debate and brought about changes in policies at the state and federal levels. In fact, the direct challenge to the prevailing "criminal illegal alien," evoked in many political rallies across the United States, with the image of the high-achieving commendable young citizen is unreservedly due to the young DREAMers who have put their bodies and lives on the line to fight for pro-immigrant policy changes (Walter Nicholls 2013). As multiple studies show, California has one of the highest concentrations of undocumented student and community organizations in the country, and one of the most highly networked and organized segments of the undocumented youth movement (Varsanyi 2005; S.I.N. Collective 2007; Abrego 2008; Pérez and Solorzano 2009; Negrón-González 2014). It should come as no surprise that California had the highest number of DACAmented individuals (196,670 recipients), according to the Migration Policy Institute (2018).

What might come as a surprise to some is the matter which brought me to deliver this paper here, at the 2018 NACCS annual conference: with 25,000 DACAmented individuals, North Carolina is the seventh highest state in the program. These figures situate it just after Arizona, which has 25,670 DACAmented individuals. To put this in perspective, the number of DACAmented individuals in North Carolina is approximately

five times that of Minnesota—the host of NACCS 2018—which has 5,520 DACAmented individuals. Yet, we know very little about North Carolina, its DREAMers, and the Chicax experience in that state. In fact, as I suggest in below, there exists a very serious gap in the literature with regard to this geographic region. The time has come for North Carolina and other Southeastern states to be critically examined in our scholarship and for the lives and narratives of its Chicax people to be documented. Moises Serrano himself suggests this in *Forbidden*. As I argue, he delivers a film that (1) blurs the boundaries between memoir and *testimonio* by documenting his memories as well as his reactions to state and federal policies in real time, and (2) brings viewers to consider the DREAMer experience in North Carolina specifically as well as the broader Southeastern Chicax experience within the field of Chicax Studies.

Textures of Memoir and Shapes of Testimonio

After the first 55 seconds of *Forbidden*, the darkness lifts and the mob’s chant of “build the wall” recedes. The obscurity is replaced by over twenty seconds of footage featuring people—brown, white, smiling, serious, adults, children, walking, one in a wheelchair, in street clothes, some in *danzante* and *folklorico* clothing—all preparing for the Faith Action House International Pro-Immigrant Rally in Greensboro, North Carolina. The first time Moises “comes out of the shadows” in *Forbidden* is at this rally. He holds a microphone and translates his own words, slipping seamlessly from Spanish to English, as he tells a crowd his name and informs them that he is there to share his story. “I’m undocumented, and I’ve been living in this state for over twenty-one years,” he tells everyone. He continues with a list of slurs that have been used against him and his community, and declares that it is time to fight for an inclusive immigration reform that doesn’t leave anyone behind. Seconds pass as the images of the rally in Greensboro—which has a population of 287,027—give way to images of Yadkinville—which has a population of 2,926. We see images of the town’s GOP headquarters, open land, more open land, yet more open land, an older *mexicano* working on a car, images of *la Virgen* and other *santos*, *rosaries*, and an older *mexicana* putting the finishing touches on a plate of *enchiladas*, before the brief scenes cut to Moises talking directly to the camera. It becomes clear that he is in his parent’s home and that the *enchiladas* are his mother’s. He says, with a sense of irony, “I am a gay, undocumented Latino living in the South, living in North Carolina, and my rights as an undocumented man and my rights as an LGBTQ man are one and the same.” The film consists largely of public moments of coming out of the shadows like those at the Greensboro rally and more intimate moments like these, in his childhood home, in which he talks “unapologetically and unafraid,” to borrow a phrase from the movement, about his experience in Yadkinville.

As Marion Christina Rohrleitner (2007) notes, the past decade has seen the proliferation of films and texts that highlight the harrowing experience of immigration and its impact on the familial bond. Many of these narratives highlight the separation between parents and their children, as *Forbidden* does with its inclusion of Moises' mother story of being separated from her children during the five days that she walked without food or water across the Arizona desert. It is also present in the testimony of Moises' oldest sister, who shares her feeling of being a prisoner in her own home, given her ever-present fear of being separated from her U.S.-born children. We observe in *Forbidden* a strategy of blurring the lines between memoir, autobiography, and memoir that is often used in Chicana memoirs, especially those written by Chicanas who identify with the LGBTQ community. Rohrleitner explains that they, "are neither *testimonios* in the classic definition of the term, nor are they the individual-driven narratives that dominate most of Anglo autobiographies; instead, they draw on conventions of the testimonial mode and defy mutually exclusive binaries by blurring generic boundaries and creating a hybrid form of life writing that is partly memoir, partly *testimonio*, and partly autobiography" (40). A marvelous feature of *Forbidden* is that it encompasses not only Moises' own haunting experiences, but those of his mother and sisters, which further blurs the borders of the aforementioned genres.

The interviews with the powerful women in Moises' life function in much the same way as family photos in a Chicana memoir. Snapshots of their lives allow us to get to know a private side of the characters in the narrative, in much the same way as if we were to observe details about their hair, dress, posture, and clothing if we were looking at pictures in a friend's family album or, these days, a friend's Instagram. Photographs, as Rohrleitner reminds us, are often associated with preserving personal and collective memories as well as documenting the lives of those whose stories tend to be marginalized or forgotten. They also evoke feelings in the observer for, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo (2016) states, the affective response of the viewer to the image establishes a relationship of familiarity and even kinship between the two. In *Forbidden*, Moises' mother and sister deliver testimonios through hot tears, establishing a relationship between the viewer and the woman on the screen, effecting the necessary affective bond involved in "reading" a testimonio.

Forbidden brings together a variety of voices and testimonial techniques in order to establish affective bonds between viewers and the undocumented and DACAmented individuals in Moises' community. We listen to fragments of his sister's and mother's story, we see DACAmented youth preparing for peaceful protest on buses, and we see Moises deliver keynote speeches in which he comes out of the shadows in spaces as broad as North Carolina's streets, Rotary Clubs, churches, women's groups, and universities. Neither Moises nor the individuals that join him are coming out of the shadows for the first time; their narrative belongs to a genre in which disclosure occurs on multiple occasions.

As Genevieve Negrón-González observes, “coming out is not a singular event for young people, but rather a repeated process that requires a decision to breach the code of silence many have been following their entire lives” (272). For this reason, the testimonios about the past occur in conjunction with both testimonios in real-time and reflections on juridical injustice and poignant political victories filmed at the precise moment they occur. A hand-held camera holds steady on Moises as he reports in 2012, “Today is the day the DMV will start issuing licenses to DACA recipients in Yadkin.” The statement cuts to a conversation with a young woman standing in line for her license who tells the camera about her dreams to take Certified Nurse Assistant (CNA) classes at the community college in Surrey, North Carolina, and her hope to become a pediatrician now that she is DACAmented and can continue her education. The same hand-held camera technique captures Moises’ reaction to the breaking news that the Supreme Court has struck down DOMA as unconstitutional. He gasps, attempts to speak, has no words, attempts to speak again, and chokes up once more, unable to speak through the overwhelming emotion he is experiencing in real-time. The hand-held camera is there again as Moises reads an email on camera in silence, smiles, repeats the word “congratulations,” and looks at the camera before looking back at his laptop screen and reading aloud his admissions letter into Sarah Lawrence College. As in the case of the young woman in line at the DMV, Moises’ glowing smile captures the bliss of a victory in the life of a young individual to whom the promise of a future had been denied.

The film thus encompasses a variety of techniques that fall into classic descriptions of testimonio, memoir, autobiography, the “Latina/o life writing” theorized by Frederick Louis Aldama (2013) and even the “autobioethnography” (1995) theorized by Norma Elia Cantú. I would like to hold onto, however, the important observation made by Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia Curry Rodríguez (2012) in their analysis of the roots of *testimonio* in Latin America and its transformation by Chicanxs and Latinxs. As they state:

This type of writing entails a first person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice in order to articulate an **urgent** voicing of something to which one bears witness. Presented at times as memoirs, oral histories, qualitative vignettes, prose, song lyrics, or spoken word, the *testimonio* has the unique characteristic of being a political and conscientized reflection that is often spoken. . . what is certain is that the testimonio is not meant to be hidden, made intimate or kept secret. (162)

The techniques used to render memories, emotions, legislative battles and legislative victories give *Forbidden* a thick textual layer, situating the urgency of action and the need to win the battle by any means—or narrative techniques—necessary.

Expanding the Boundaries of Aztlán

As I write this in 2018, the number of Chicanx and Latinx intellectuals, speakers, and writers is growing across the South and the Southeast at an exponential rate. The last U.S. Census showed a demographic shift away from California, the Southwest, and the Northeast to states like Arkansas and West Virginia, which until now have not been associated with the Chicanx experience. The migratory flow has critical implications for Chicanx Studies. According to Passel, Cohn, and López (2011), “in 2010, 20.6 million Hispanics lived in the West, 18.2 million lived in the South, 7 million lived in the Northeast, and 4.7 million lived in the Midwest.” South Carolina, the state with the most rapid growth between 2000 and 2010, saw a 148 percent growth in the Latinx population. The figures in descending order were 145 percent in Alabama, 134 percent in Tennessee, 122 percent in Kentucky, 114 percent in Arkansas, and 111 percent in North Carolina.

There is no doubt that the Latinx community is transforming counties across the Southeast and, in due time, we will hear more about our presence in places that dominant discourses have been coded as white spaces—as in the 2014 “Las Voces de los Apalaches,” a community theater project in Kentucky that literally brought Appalachian Latinx voices out of the shadows. Research outside of Chicanx Studies has considered how changes in tobacco farming, Christmas tree harvesting, and agro-processing (particularly turkeys and hogs) have created the conditions for Latinx migration to North Carolina (Torres, Popke, Hapke 2006, *inter alia*). Emerging scholarship, likewise outside of Chicanx Studies, has begun to consider the discrimination faced our community in North Carolina with regard to employment, housing, and public services (Lippard and Spann 2014). A growing number of academics in the South are beginning to bring to the fore the voices of undocumented youth and adults fighting for justice in this part of the United States (Torres and Wicks-Asbun 2014; Bustamante and Gamino 2018).

In her acceptance speech for the 2018 NACCS Scholar Award, Rosaura Sánchez referred to the difficulty of publishing on topics that don’t fall neatly into our expectations for Chicanx Studies. I hold that it is time to challenge the Chicanx imaginary regarding the boundaries of Aztlán, particularly as the number of deportations of our people increase in this part of the United States. Days after the 2018 NACCS conference, three headlines appeared pointing to the urgency of addressing what is happening in this part of the South: “Mother from Honduras Takes Sanctuary from ICE in Chapel Hill Church,” “ICE Raided a Meatpacking Plant [in Tennessee]. More than 500 Kids Missed School the Next Day,” and “Asheville Volunteers Work to Feed Families Hiding from ICE.” The voices of the mother, children, and the volunteers in these news articles have few venues for being heard and, indeed, their strategies for survival have been outside of the frameworks of analysis we have traditionally used to critically examine Chicanx experience. *Forbidden* gives us a

memoir and testimonio with which to begin the challenging feat of incorporating these experiences into our analyses of Chicax (and Latinx) experience. The South, we are reminded in *Forbidden*, continues to be a place where the legacy of civil disobedience and social movements remains rich and powerful. It is a place where justice and belonging in a rural southern homeland is part of the movement's objective. In *Forbidden*, Moises states that something happened when he came out of the shadows at a "Come out of the Shadows" rally in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (a city of 242,000 people). There, "it was ok to be an undocumented immigrant, it was ok to be gay, it was ok to be queer, it was ok to be Southern, it was ok to be fierce." One phrase stands out in his statement: "it was ok to be Southern."

In the United States, being Southern is often equated with being white, inbred, uneducated, and racist (Holloway 2008; Billings, Norman, and Ledford 2010; Guerrero 2017). For DREAMers like Moises, this place is something more. Together, they demand in-state tuition at city-council meetings in Winston-Salem, face threats of arrest and deportation from North Carolina state representative Virginia Fox and house representative Mike McIntyre, challenge ICE's 287(g) delegated authority program which led to a rise in for-profit detention centers, and receive death threats from the county sheriff himself. This is a place of unlikely allies, such as religious leaders from different faiths who use New Testament verses to develop a pro-immigrant theology, and of ponds where you need to watch out for snapping turtles if you go swimming, a place outside of the urban cities in which we imagine Chicax experience, and a place far from the US-Mexico border that has informed our epistemologies. The South is, *Forbidden* suggests, an important battleground for *the* civil rights movement of the twenty-first century. In order to document its landscape and frontlines, and to document experiences of its brave combatants, it is imperative to use all the means we have at our disposal.

Parting Words. Fighting Words.

Something is happening as we speak and work and write, and I wouldn't have realized it, perhaps, if I hadn't lived in the Midwest for 15 years now and if my family hadn't lived in Arkansas for 10 of those years. After all, I spent the first 21 years of my life in Los Angeles, and the South was thousands of miles away from my academic radar.

Chicax and Latinxs are leaving established urban areas in the Midwest and the West Coast and heading to the rural Southeast. This is a demographic shift that has been tracked by census data, the Pew Research Center, and many other organizations. And, yet, research in Chicax Studies has yet to explore this segment of our community or to record its battles and victories. I'd like to advocate for scholarship on the Southeast for what our colleague, Linda García Merchant called in her 2018 NACCS presentation on innovative methodologies, "the search for breadcrumbs." Until we do so, our field might very well be

limited by the lack of a production, circulation, and pedagogical attention to this increasingly important region. For much of our field's history, we have seen these states as spaces full of pick-up trucks and Confederate flags, instead of the tobacco and strawberry fields that have historically exploited brown labor. We have overlooked the meatpacking plants, bagel chip factories, and canneries that at this very moment employ thousands of brown workers. Given the many years of Guatemalan Maya presence in Morganton, North Carolina and the prevalence of taquerías in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the time is now ripe for us as scholars to dive deep into the Southeastern Latinx and Chicanx experiences and to critically examine their testimonios—in any and all existing forms—testimonios that will speak to the lives of brown children and their families who speak with a southern twang and live unrepresented, undocumented and, yes, DACAmented, lives in these southern sites.

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