"WHY DIDN'T YOUR MOTHER LEAVE?": Sexual Abuse, Storytelling, and Survival in Josie Méndez-Negrete's *Las hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed*

Adrianna M. Santos

Abstract: *Violence against women is a widespread social problem that is exacerbated for Latinas in the United States through a systemic lack of access to social services. Women of color and immigrant survivors of incest and domestic abuse, who already face marginalization due to an intersection of factors, are often disproportionally stigmatized by victimization. These social conditions frequently prevent them from getting help. Josie Méndez-Negrete's memoir* Las hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed *offers a rare glimpse into the lives of immigrant girl-women who have survived sexual abuse through formed bonds of love and sisterhood. The text describes how the author and her family navigated a criminal justice system that is ineffective in assisting victims, especially those who are undocumented. This essay provides an examination of the text through a critical race, gender, and sexuality lens, draws from testimonio studies, and links to growing numbers of sociological research studies on Latinas, immigrants, and sexual abuse as key components in social movements that target violence against women. An Anzaldúan analysis is coupled with an interview with the author. The article 1) contributes to broader anti-violence scholarship that seeks to confront the social stigma of speaking out against abuse, 2) addresses how narratives such as these challenge an oppressive patriarchal system that devalues women and girls by facilitating gender violence, and 3) demonstrates the importance of giving voice to immigrant survivors.*

Key Words: *gender violence; immigrant; incest; memoir; narrative; sexual abuse; storytelling; survival; survivor*

While violence against women is a global issue that is not confined to any particular community, it is important to shine light on the disproportionate lack of access to social services for victims from vulnerable populations and to hear directly from survivors about their experiences. Latina

immigrant survivors of sexual abuse in the United States, for example, face specific challenges to escaping abuse. These are informed by interlocking systems of oppression that affect women and children disproportionately and keep them from seeking help—factors such as language barriers, access to education, socioeconomic location, and citizenship status, to name a few. In this essay, I consider why immigrant women who have been victimized have trouble leaving their partners, investigate the complex relationships between survivors and the state, and explore survival as a key ingredient in this brand of social protest literature. I take as a point of focus *Las hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* (2005) by Josie Méndez-Negrete, as well as insights from the author gleaned in an interview. In a poignant incest narrative, Méndez-Negrete describes her journey from a joyful youth in Tabasco, Zacatecas Mexico to the United States—through which her father began to subject the entire family, particularly the female members, to horrific emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Through an intersectional perspective, I explore how the book complicates our understandings of how government intervention acts upon the undocumented population even while survivors are dealing with terrible acts of violence on a day-to-day basis. Méndez-Negrete's particular type of storytelling, told from a perspective of "reclaiming survival," both accessible and erudite, socially conscious and culturally responsive, offers a compelling case for privileging the voices of Latina immigrant survivors themselves.

My goal is to help continue to shift the perspective from victim-blaming to understanding victimization within the broader context of the connections between interpersonal and gender violence, structural oppression, survival, and storytelling.[1] I refer to the text as a Chicana survival narrative in place of a rape or incest narrative because Méndez-Negrete frames her work as a testimonio that links interpersonal experiences of abuse to systemic oppression by exploring connections between the individual to the collective, and the personal to the

political.[2] The memoir has the potential to reach beyond the walls of the ivory tower. *Las hijas de Juan* (*LhJ*) can be transformational for readers, as it has been for the author and her family in that it offers an example of one pathway to healing from sexual assault. Not only will the book inform future scholarship, but it may spark more survivors to come forward to share their stories. I aim to center storytelling as a powerful instrument of social justice in the movement to end violence and note that survival narratives are an important kind of activism that can reach a wider audience than traditional scholarship and should be scrutinized in conjunction with academic studies about domestic abuse and incest. I also argue that Méndez-Negrete's standpoint as a Chicana, an immigrant, and a survivor of childhood abuse, as well as her position of privilege as an academic, enables her to speak truth to power in affirming ways that challenge the patriarchal system of sexism, the racist system of criminal justice, and the cycles of abuse that target women and children. In particular, I explore the nuances of the inquiry that Méndez-Negrete identifies as the most often asked: "Why didn't your mother leave?" This complex question can be explored by examining the narrative as a point of departure for discussing the issue of violence against women and children in immigrant communities, what Méndez-Negrete calls a "vehículo for a voice" (Interview 2012).

Las hijas de Juan in the Continuum of Incest Narratives

With its particular focus on immigrant experiences, *Las hijas de Juan* is an exposé of a patriarchal society that facilitates gender violence compounded by issues of race, class, and citizenship. As such, Méndez-Negrete's testimonio is meaningful to studies about violence for several reasons. First, the vast majority of incest narratives that were published during a boom in the 1970s and 80s were written by white, middle-class women (Barnes 2002; Boose and Flowers 1989; Carlin 1995; Kalman Harris 2000). While considerations of race, ethnicity, and citizenship are mostly absent in these narratives, what can

be parsed out within the texts are the universal feelings of shame and isolation that survivors suffer, the linkages between interpersonal and systemic gender violence, and the potential for sparking a conversation about healing. These early texts and the subsequent academic volumes dedicated to them were especially significant because they brought issues of familial abuse to light as not a rare occurrence, but rather an ordinary one. The stark reality is that one in five women and girls in the United States has been traumatized by sexual violation, often by someone they trust. Statistics show these violations are perpetrated most often by the victim's father or partner (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Furthermore, stories of sexual abuse trace the sociohistorical contexts within which women have, or have not, had access to telling their stories, focusing primarily on the feminist movement as facilitating the telling of incest stories.[3] For example, Christine Froula describes what she calls "the hysterical cultural script: the cultural text that dictates to males and females alike the necessity of silencing woman's speech when it threatens the father's power" (Froula 1986, 622). This casting of women as wounded, mute, and mentally unstable against an all-powerful patriarch continues to shape the ways in which survivors are represented (Ballinger 1998; Kimura 2008). Victims are rendered voiceless in the historical record. Their memories are scrutinized and their trauma minimized. The social construction of gender norms and behaviors in which females are expected to remain submissive and silent also governs the lives of immigrant women and their children and create barriers to speaking out. Chicana scholars have frequently written about the importance of centering women's narratives to challenge the cultural script that criminalizes, ignores, and erases their stories (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; Perez 1999; Smith 1999).

Although survivors are further marginalized within academic discourse, Méndez-Negrete's text offers the opportunity to explore the reasons why immigrant women, specifically, face intersecting obstacles to escaping abusive

situations as it draws on Chicana feminisms to "constitute a political stance that confronts and undermines patriarchy as it cross-cuts forms of disempowerment and silencing such as racism, homophobia, class inequality, and nationalism" (Arredondo, et al. 2003, 2). Chicana feminist works such as *LhJ* explore the theme of violence in myriad traditions, but the potential for healing as a goal, both for individuals and communities, connects them in important ways.

Méndez-Negrete's memoir is particularly significant because it directly addresses the unequal power relations that brown women combat in the United States, a patriarchal society founded on the blood of indigenous people and maintained through the persecution and exploitation of immigrant labor. "Women and in particular, women of color, are still the beasts of burden, the ones that are targeted for attack" (Interview 2012). Méndez-Negrete also deconstructs the idealized notion of "family" to expose unequal power relations and expected female subservience in the context of US imperialism. Moreover, she troubles the dominant narrative of familism or familismo (Zinn 1982) that frames the family unit as sacred and places all power in the patriarch. The memoir's epigraph reads, "We must move beyond a celebration of *la familia* to address questions of power and patriarchy . . . [W]omen's legacies of resistance reveal their resiliency, determination, and strength" (2006, vii). This false conception of the family structure as an unbreakable unity and the male-dominated structure as absolute perpetuates a dangerous culture of silence that enables abuse to go unchecked. She further identifies the home—"where people have been enmeshed in a culture of silence and denial that then colludes with the violence in society that reproduces a culture that's heartless"—as a space of complex intermingling of socially determined gender roles and personal relationships in which racial injustice intersects with sexism and violence and states that "[the book] lends itself to disrupting mythic and romanticized notions of the family as a space of nurturance and safety" (Interview 2012). The

author illuminates the difficulties of living with the constant threat of violence fomented by the external pressure of ethnic discrimination and instability of perpetual migration.

Much of the memoir is framed through a physical connection to work, another important aspect of the book as a contribution to our understanding of the socioeconomics of abuse. The author describes herself as the daughter of an abuser and further, as the offspring of many generations of patriarchal control and humiliation. She describes her relationship to her father as a debt that she and her sisters were forced to work off as repayment for being born girls. She charges that women are measured not by their own inherent humanity and value as human beings, but in the labor that they contribute, or don't, to the family. In fact, she frames the narrative through an indictment of economics, labor, and manipulation, such as in the opening pages in which she writes, "although I worked in the fields with him, it wasn't love work—it was exploitation, a way of making more money as a family. It was a way for us to pay back for being born into the family" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 1). She describes the young women in her family as indentured servants, beholden to their father, and, by extension, the society that exploits, abuses and undervalues them, justified through what she describes as the unfortunate fact of their sex. She writes, "*Soy una hija de la chingada*, because I was born female. For this accident of life, I am still trying to make redress" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 1). In this particular passage, Méndez-Negrete's text responds directly to a common description of the Malinche narrative, in which women are victims and traitors. It connects to the legacy of Malinche, the mythological mother of the Mestizo people, and the legacy of colonial violence on women and their roles in society, cultural images and gender norms and expectations.[4] Women are perceived as expendable, valued only for their labor and easily exploited in a society that reinforces this notion legally, professionally, and within individual family units. Placed within the context of

a complex history of anti-immigrant rhetoric, the politics of globalization, and failed immigration reform in the US, *LhJ* confronts labor exploitation within the family as reflective of broader socioeconomic structures.

Additionally, the climate of scrutiny surrounding survivor stories emphasizes the necessity for scholars to recognize the voices of those who have been victimized. And the magnitude of a problem like abuse is evidence of a symptom of a society fraught with systemic violence: one that devalues its members based on presumed markers of difference such as, but not limited to, sex and gender, culture, ethnicity and race, religion, sexuality, socioeconomic location, politics, ability, health, and education. According to Janice L. Doane and Devon L. Hodges, "producers of the incest survivor memoir still insist upon the truth of their memories of incest, that 'the thing' really happened" (Doane and Hodges 2001, 9). They argue that by examining survivor stories through a critical lens, "readers will not have found a litmus test for deriving the truth or falsehood of incest stories" but can consider "the multiple ways in which women have told incest stories and gained a hearing" (Doane and Hodges 2001, 9). In the author's note to *LhJ*, Méndez-Negrete specifically addresses the issue of the "real" or "true" story. She states, "Because of the time elapsed since these events occurred, and, in some cases, the trauma of reliving these experiences, I have had to fill in some gaps. These recuerdos do not, however, distort the reality of what happened to my family and to me. Unearthing the bones I thought buried, I have had to reconstruct my recollections. This is a true story. It is no fabrication," (Méndez-Negrete 2006, xv). While Méndez-Negrete does specifically speak *her* own truth, and does not attempt to speak *for* all, at the same time the text ends up also speaking *to* so many who have been unable, for various reasons, to speak *theirs*. The *truth* expressed in *LhJ* not only challenges our considerations of what constitutes violence in these marginalized populations, but also the ways in which knowledge about survivors is substantiated, deconstructed, and ultimately understood.

A Testimonio of Survival

LhJ is generally regarded as a memoir, but Méndez-Negrete has specifically identified her work as testimonio (Méndez-Negrete 2005, 194). Testimonio has been posited as a means for oppressed peoples to share their personal stories, while speaking about larger issues they have witnessed in the context of community struggle (Avant-Mier and Hasian 2008; Beverley 2004; Gilmore 2001; Irizarry 2005; Roman 2003).[5] The genre is hailed as a subversive art of social protest that links individual trauma to collective experiences of domination, subordination, and violence.[6] Specifically, *Latina* testimonio is concerned with capturing heterogeneity of experience, complexity of both group and individual identity, acceptance of difference, and issues of respect and equality as a way to confront violence. The anthology *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, for example, is a germinal collection of Latina narratives in which testimonio is theorized as a point of political solidarity (Latina Feminist Group 2001). As the editors note, "Breaking the silence, we uncovered the shame that came from abuse . . . . Naming pain and using collective support to begin the process of empowerment became integral to our survival as individuals and as a group" (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 14). Empowerment through understanding one's own oppression and working to change the structures of oppression are steps in the process of breaking down those structures that enable gender violence, first individually and then collectively. It is not only individual survival at stake. The editors of *Telling to Live*, who call themselves the Latina Feminist Group, argue that for disempowered communities, the goal is a collaborative approach to fighting injustice that involves working together in a sustained and ever-evolving effort in which the "texts are seen as disclosures not of personal lives but rather of the political violence inflicted on whole communities" (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 13). For them, and many Chicana cultural producers, writing as resistance has long been a driving force behind social justice movements.

One of my main goals in this essay is to trace survival as both a theoretical concept and lived experience and explore how it is used in Chicana/Latina texts like *LhJ* that address violence and oppression. As Facio notes, "writing in the flesh of a new mestiza consciousness engenders a process of survival, healing, and transformation for the individual, their community, and the larger society" (Facio 2010, 73). Additionally, by delving further into the relationships between academia, sociology, violence, pain, and ethnographic research, Gloria González-López has identified "epistemologies of the wound" that can help to explain sexual violence through a multidimensional state of being. She melds ethnographic research methods, storytelling, and the Anzaldúan concepts of *la facultad*, *nepantla*, and spiritual activism and applies it to her work with survivors of incest in Mexican families (González-López 2006; 2010).

LhJ similarly theorizes how survival entails both individual and collective healing from trauma and abuse, and situates that healing process within multiple layers of systemic oppression. The description of *LhJ* on the Duke University Press website describes the text as a "feminist memoir and hopeful meditation on healing," although I would add that the process of writing, publishing, and distributing the story implies a more active purpose. Similarly, while she identifies *LhJ* as an autobiography, Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes in a review for the *Latino Studies Journal*:

> *Las hijas de Juan* breaks new ground in the literature of Chicano/a autobiography by taking on the shameful issue of paternal incest at the same time that it demonstrates the process of healing through speaking, writing, and remembering. This book is the genuine song of the *survivor*, [emphasis mine] and the narrator's personal story is also a political reality of the Chicano/a and Latino/a community, an ugly beast fed on silence that must be both contained and confronted. More

> than anything, *Las hijas de Juan* shows us the imperative need to speak the secrets that, unfortunately, bind and damage so many mujeres in our communities." (Gaspar de Alba 2003, 469–70)

I agree that the narrative is groundbreaking, and brings the discussion through an individual experience into a collective, historical context and expands our understandings of the social conditions that devalue women and girls, the most targeted members of society worldwide in regards to economic and sexual exploitation.[7] It is crucial that we speak out but as Méndez-Negrete herself relays, storytelling is only one avenue for healing. She writes:

> Since writing *Las hijas de Juan*, I have come to see it as a self-healing project that provided me a venue for understanding the ways my socialization and cultural experience as a girl helped me deal with the violence I lived with as an individual and as a member of a collective, my family. I have come to learn that healing does not always take place in the telling but that it is recovered in the reclaiming of survival. For my sisters and me, the healing did not rest in voicing our stories, but in recognizing and accepting that we did all we could to stay alive under the circumstances. (Méndez-Negrete 2005, 185)

Méndez-Negrete documents hidden horrors of violence, not through metaphor or allusion, as has been the case in many Chicana works of fiction that address sexual assault, but through the journalistic prose of a young girl testifying about how she lived through harrowing experiences.[8] Her testimonio engages with the community from a critical perspective but does so in an accessible way that allows for a wider audience for the text. She presents two distinct perspectives: both a working-class consciousness, exhibited through the memories of a Mexican immigrant survivor of incest, as well as the critical, temporal distance

of privilege afforded to an academic trained in sociological research methods and counseling. Building upon foundational understandings of storytelling as a tool of social justice, as well as the author's own focus on survival, I identify *LhJ* as a survival narrative, a particularly powerful mechanism for telling stories of sexual assault and linking patriarchy, and for theorizing the intersecting oppressions of classism and sexism, and violence against women for which the ultimate goal is healing—of self and community.

Latina Immigrant Survivors' Barriers to Escape

It is imperative to note that *LhJ* does not pathologize the entire Mexican American or immigrant community as particularly violent or criminal. Violence against women remains an issue across national, ethnic, and racial borders and is a symptom of patriarchal control and oppression. According to a report by the US Department of Justice, domestic violence is a serious and damaging problem in the general population and is not exclusive to any particular race, ethnicity, or social class (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Women of color do, however, experience a significantly higher incidence of rape, physical violence, and stalking in their lifetimes than do White women (Breiding, Chen and Black 2014). As I will explore further, these numbers often correlate to other external factors which include language barriers, unstable social support networks and isolation, financial dependency, and legal status. Lack of education, fear of deportation, jeopardizing of legal status, or fear of having their children removed also often prevent immigrant women from seeking assistance (Crenshaw 2007; Menjívar and Salcido 2002; Russel y Rodríguez 1997). Furthermore, people of color are disproportionately affected by the standards of punishment within the criminal justice system. The disparate imprisonment of both black and brown people demonstrates a legacy of racial discrimination in the US and continues to rise. Latinos are projected to surpass Blacks as the most incarcerated ethnic group in the US by

2050 (Velasquez and Funes 2014, 273). What's more, women of color, women in poverty, and immigrant women have grown to distrust law enforcement and social services and hesitate to contribute to the criminalization and deportation of men in their own communities. Then, if they do decide to come forward, they are often retraumatized by the criminal justice system. Finally, the state, in many varied incarnations, often acts as an instrument in a system of oppression that enables perpetrators to abuse women and children in the context of the home while at the same time perpetrating their own acts of violence on communities. This is evidenced through forms of institutional oppression including forced sterilization and other eugenics programs, harsh sentences for convicted survivors who have killed their attackers in self-defense, outrageous expenses for sub-par health care, racial profiling, dehumanizing work and housing conditions, and a host of other atrocities affecting women who have been abused (Rojas Durazo 2014, 120). To further complicate the issues, other recent studies have explored acculturation as both determining and risk factor in domestic violence situations (Gaviria, 2016; Kimber, et. al 2015; Sabina, Cuevas, and Zadnik 2011).

Méndez-Negrete illustrates several of these factors in the text, describing how women are the ultimate scapegoat and target of sexual abuse in these situations and are forced to operate within a sexist and racist justice system, which leaves them no simple recourse against or escape from domestic violence and incest. Moreover, immigrant "illegality" as a construction also informs the ways in which undocumented and migrant people interact with law enforcement (Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013). These social pressures are further exacerbated by what Leo Chávez refers to as "The Latino Threat Narrative [that] constructs distinctions between citizens and noncitizens, elaborating a segmented citizenship in which some members of society are valued above others. Such differences, once constructed and normalized, rationalize and

justify governmental practices and policies that stigmatize and punish certain categories of immigrants and their children" (Chávez 2013, 45–46).[9] Also, as Cecilia Menjívar and Olivia Salcido point out, "there has been a common tendency to stereotype domestic violence in some ethnic groups as an inherent part of their cultural repertoire" and this is dangerous because "such notions not only serve to substantiate host governments' perceptions that domestic violence among immigrants is inherently a part of their culture—and thus nothing can be done about it—but also that domestic violence is higher among immigrants because they import it with them"—an unsupported claim (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, 901). Roberta Villalón addresses impediments to escape from violence and their direct links to lack of citizenship for Latina immigrant survivors, while describing a "nuanced agency" from which immigrant women who have been victimized navigate their precarious situation as undocumented women in the United States (Villalón 2010, 15). In the text, Méndez-Negrete describes the difficulties moving within an anti-immigrant society, what she describes as her father's "U.S. dream [that] had turned into a nightmare" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 2). This statement challenges the "bootstrap" mentality of "The American Dream" and positions immigrants as operating outside US narratives of success.

Moreover, this oppression creates limited access to agency, evokes the fear of speaking out, and leads to enormous obstacles to escaping violence for those who are living in abusive circumstances, particularly women and girls. Survivors' situations "are often exacerbated by their specific position as immigrants, including limited host-language skills, lack of access to dignified jobs, uncertain legal statuses, and experiences in their home countries, and thus their alternatives to living with their abusers are very limited" (Menjívar and Salcido 2002, 901–02). According to Méndez-Negrete, the abuse in her family ended thanks to a concerned neighbor who finally reported Juan to the

authorities after they settled in Santa Clara. The author writes, "A woman freed us from my father's tyranny. I forever will be grateful to Mary Reynaga for unlocking the door to our freedom" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 141). According to Villalón, "Battered immigrant women's isolation and their immersion in and shame over the violent relationship often impede them from reaching out, but once they do, the support of friends and kin (be it emotional, informational, or material) is vital for their efforts to get free" (Villalón 2010, 23). Méndez-Negrete's mother did not recognize her daughters' victimization and did not herself come forward to report her husband. This is understandable when considering the multiple elements that inhibit Latina immigrant survivors' agency and freedom of movement. Méndez-Negrete pointedly addresses these obstacles in our interview, "The question that invariably gets asked is 'Why didn't your mother leave?' Which is really the most ignorant of all the questions anybody can ask. If you know anything about post-traumatic stress disorder and the impotence of a woman with a second grade education, not speaking English, not having a job, etc." (Interview 2012). Even through atrocious acts of exploitation, as well as the constant movement from place to place, as was the nature of her father's work and torture, Méndez-Negrete and the women in her family are survivors. She writes, "Now captive, we lived inside the isolation of migration, ready for the abuse he might've planned to begin when he brought us here. Although our migration was geographical, we lived in the bounds of emotional turmoil. Here, we had to create a space for survival" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 122). Méndez-Negrete links the physical and emotional chaos within which she, her sisters, and her mother navigated and also calls into question the systems of labor exploitation and gender violence that facilitate such abuse. Menjívar and Salcido (2002) also point out that social networks and access to community and state resources are often controlled by male partners and that isolation also plays a role in domestic violence situations. Méndez-Negrete expands further in the epilogue, "He kept us in denial about our own

hurt, and incapable of hearing each other's pain, blind and speechless about the horrors we lived. Speaking out was out of the question" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 188). He threatened to kill them regularly. Ultimately, Méndez-Negrete and her family did what they believed to be best for themselves, and especially their mother, in that their ultimate goal was survival. They struggled to keep themselves and their mother alive by keeping their secrets.

Méndez-Negrete points out how the state enacted numerous types of institutional violence on the family through the continuum of victims' services and the criminal justice system while at the same time highlighting her experience with education as both an escape and a form of empowerment. As Méndez-Negrete notes, "When the juvenile justice and welfare department workers descended on the school with the police to question my sisters about our family life, even though frightened and intimidated by them, my sisters didn't keep the secret. Feeling protected and free from the burden we had been forced to endure, my sisters could finally tell the truth at the school nurse's office" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 141). Despite their fear of the criminal justice system, social services, and INS, they found strength in familial and community support, but the torture they were subjected to in their interactions with the justice system was just beginning. For some survivors, the process of interacting with authorities is yet another form of abuse. Memories are questioned and survivors are scrutinized in a process that rarely brings perpetrators to justice. In addition to all the barriers immigrant women face to escaping domestic violence, state responses to women frequently have the opposite effect of protecting the batterers. In her case, Méndez-Negrete writes that she "wanted to testify, but . . . was spared. Didn't have to be poked and prodded by tests and exams as my sisters were. Didn't have to endure their questions in front of all to hear, to pick apart, to doubt" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 145). The girls who do act as witnesses, Mague and

Felisa, are then violated by the legal system, retraumatized by the process of "legal gymnastics." As Felisa recounts, she felt "doubted, accused of being a liar, judged by all the men who defended my father, and doubted by the attorneys on both sides. It was like a rape without touching" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 146). The phenomena she describes, called "re-rape," is a common experience of survivors who must recount their stories in the legal process. Their experiences are doubted. Their humanity is devalued. The questions asked by the lawyers were heinous, but not out of the ordinary. Some of them, directed at the teenage girls and their mother, included, "Had she slept with anyone? Did she like having sex with her father? Who started it? Why didn't she stop it? How come she didn't tell anyone? Where was her mother? How could she not know? It was happening right under her nose. Why didn't she do anything about it?" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 146). In documenting these abuses, Méndez-Negrete articulates the various ways that survivors of violence are retraumatized by the very structures that claim to support them, perpetuating the cycle of torment that so many victims experience both in the home and in the system. She further explains how survivors are plagued by physical and emotional ailments even after escaping. Gloria Gaviria suggests that Latinas, particularly undocumented women, are at greater risk of not only domestic violence, but also mental health problems that accompany post-traumatic stress disorder and ongoing abuse (Gaviria 2016). Méndez-Negrete's text illustrates this finding, documenting the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that she and her family experienced poignantly: "With the court hearing over, the younger children complained for weeks of stomach problems and headaches. We would fight for no reason. We also learned that Amá had a temper" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 147). These kinds of physical ailments, anxiety disorders, and symptoms of rage have been identified as a subset of PTSD called Rape Trauma Syndrome and they are felt by all the members of her family to varying degrees.

As an adult, Méndez-Negrete understands the interlocking systems of oppression that disenfranchised her and her mother. Socioeconomic location, citizenship status, gender, ethnicity, and language intersected to place her family at the lowest rungs of these hierarchies as migrant workers, non-citizens, Spanish-dominant, expendable women in the United States. So, she forgives her mother for remaining silent about the abuse, looking past the blame that others attempt to impose upon her by explaining how she identified with and understood her mother. In fact, she places blame where blame is due, on the perpetrator and a society that perpetuates violence against women. When the authorities arrested Méndez-Negrete's father, her mother was emotionally supportive of her girls but entered into an entirely new world of uncertainty. The author writes, "While we celebrated, Mother was more concerned with the family's survival. Who would support us? As a family without a provider, how would we make do? She barely spoke English. She didn't know how to drive—he had refused to teach her. She had no trade. All she knew was the fields . . . . How would she support us?" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 137). All the concerns that prevented her mother from leaving would come to bear on the family but with the support of friends and family, they created a loving home free from abuse. Although "incest is a wound that never closes," Méndez-Negrete would eventually reclaim survival as a tool of self-healing because for her and her family, "the personal has become political, for our experiences transcend the trauma of one to include the collecting remembering of the family unit" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 187). And I would argue that her trail-blazing testimonio has also become part of a broader, ongoing antiviolence movement and will continue to have ripple effects for many years to come.

So many variants make the question of Latina immigrant survivors' agency extremely complex, but these navigations need to be further studied to parse the best responses to victims' needs. Many scholars have highlighted the lack of adequate research about Latina immigrants pointing out that there is much

work to be done to accurately respond with cultural sensitivity to cases of domestic abuse (González 2010; O'Neal and Beckman 2016; Ogbonnaya, Finno-Velasquez, and Kohl 2015; Raj and Silverman 2002; Reina and Lohman, 2015; Reina, Lohman, and Maldonado 2014; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). Most of these studies have chosen ethnographic and qualitative research methods to facilitate a space in which survivors can speak to their own experiences. These studies point out that cultural difference and nuance must inform an understanding of vulnerability to violence and barriers to engagement with social services to aid survivors. Moreover, Gloria B. Santiago notes that "because of cultural and religious beliefs, Latina battered women continue to use existing community agencies to escape a violent home . . . because of language and cultural barriers, most of these women have received no assistance or protection from police, legal aid, welfare, family counseling, agencies, or community mental health centers" (Santiago 2002, 465). She further relays that "there is an urgent need for pro bono legal services and client advocacy for the women in this study, and that traditional law enforcement and judicial agencies should provide culturally sensitive, bilingual services to this oppressed group" (Santiago 2002, 465). She concludes that "Empowerment is unlikely when women are treated as if they have acted illegally, are as culpable as the batterer, or cannot be believed" (Santiago 2002, 469). Survivors are also subjected to imbalances of power in their relationships with non-profit and domestic violence shelter employees, dehumanizing experiences with health care professionals and law enforcement, and complex interactions with other survivors. Intersectional approaches to the study of violence in marginalized communities open up possibilities to respond more effectively to survivors in those communities. *LhJ* helps illustrate how all of the factors described above intersect. They need to be studied further to help address the broader social problems of sexual assault and incest. And survivors' voices must be heard and understood within these particular contexts.

Storytelling and Survival

Storytelling is a powerful tool in the struggle for social justice. While *LhJ* cannot speak to every single experience of violence, nor can it bring about a singular truth about violence within the home of Chicana/o, Latina/o, Mexican or immigrant families, Méndez-Negrete tells her story not only for her own benefit but also for her communidad. Forgotten and erased histories drive Chicana/o cultural producers, academics and activists to document stories of injustice. This is the space of critical juncture, where storytelling meets social action. For example, Barbara A. Misztal concludes, "Although narrative alone is incapable of saving lives, action in order to prevail needs to be narrated. Thus, narration matters because only through memory of the action told to others (audience, readers, and spectators) can we recognize the deeds and identify the agent of the story . . . and because narration is an important agent of transformation" (Misztal 2010, 95). Nancy Naples argues further for a deep and sustained critical inquiry of intersectional oppression and violence in that, "[the] methodological challenge for an oppositional survivors' movement is to go beyond the local expressions of particular experiences in order to target the processes by which such experiences are organized" (Naples 2003, 1157). Moreover, Vittorio Bufacchi and Jools Gilson advocate for prioritizing the "experience" of the survivor as opposed to the "act" of the perpetrator and recognize that the enduring "ripples of violence" often have long-term effects on victims for "violence starts as an act, but it does not end when the action terminates. For those at the receiving end of violence, the experience is indeterminate" and that, most important, "this is why first-person narratives are powerful, and irreplaceable" (Bufacchi and Gilson 2016, 36). Méndez-Negrete's storytelling enlightens us about violence, silence, and survival. Ana Clarissa Rojas Durazo advocates for a "meaningful and continuous commitment to feminist, queer, and trans-Chican@/Latin@s" one that centers the marginalized voices within Latina

communities, including those of immigrants and survivors of incest and domestic abuse" and I agree (Rojas Durazo 2014, 249). Furthermore, Chicana feminist anti-violence projects can also turn to Anzaldúan theory to advance thinking about the connections between storytelling and healing. In "Let us be the healing of the wound: The Coyolxauhqui imperative – la sombra y el sueño," Gloria E. Anzaldúa writes:

> Changing the thoughts and ideas (the 'stories') we live by and their limiting beliefs (including the national narrative of supreme entitlement) will enable us to extend our hands to others con el corazón con razón en la mano. Individually and collectively we can begin to share strategies on peaceful co-existence y desparramar (spread) conocimientos. Each of us can make a difference. By bringing psychological understanding and using spiritual approaches in political activism we can stop the destruction of our moral, compassionate humanity. Empowered, we'll be motivated to organize, achieve justice, and begin to heal the world. (Anzaldúa and Keating 2009, 312–13)

If writing and reading is practiced as resistance to oppression, literature, art, and other cultural works become a transformative method of healing in oppressed communities.

Healing and survival go hand in hand, as they are major themes throughout the book and it is especially related to the love that Méndez-Negrete shares with her family. In recounting her story of abuse, the author discovers why she and her mother had come into one another's lives. "She came to care for me and to love me and I to love and to protect her" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 4). She relates how it is through their love for one another that they cling to survival. Through appreciation and praise, though, the family learns to operate in a different way

now that they are free. Through nurturing and generosity of spirit, healing begins. She says, "Together, with my siblings and [my mother], we learned to speak about love. We learned to tell each other we loved each other. We learned to complement each other, to appreciate the contributions we were making to the family, the talents that each of us brought into the household" (Interview 2012).

The mother-daughter relationship explored in the novel is one of empathy and understanding. Although the abuse was not discussed between the women as it was happening, Méndez-Negrete felt compelled to protect her mother, her sisters, and herself because she recognized the similarities between them. "While there was all this abuse of authority in our home with physically, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, I did not directly connect it to mom, to Amá, because I saw her as one of us . . . . She was a girl-woman experiencing the abuse of men through my father's actions" (Interview 2012). She and her mother both shared the unfortunate circumstance of being born women and so Méndez-Negrete did not blame her mother or resent her for her inaction. Their relationship is complex but founded on mutual respect and connection. She expands on this concept:

> I understood that [my mother's] hands were tied . . . because I witnessed the many beatings as a consequence of how Juan might have silenced her so that we could be silenced in the process. Or silenced us so that she could be silenced. He manipulated those batteries in a very sophisticated way. . . . I didn't think of my mother as the enemy. I knew that she loved me. . . . She loved me through her cooking . . . her sewing . . . her stories . . . her singing, she loved me through her . . . indoctrination with religion because she thought she was doing the right thing. . . . My relationship to Amá was one of love and affinity in the context of understanding that we were targeted as girl-women in relationship to each other. (Interview 2012)

She emphasizes the strength that came from a mother's love of her daughters, expressed through everyday actions, and the choices that she felt were best at the time to ensure their survival, despite personal consequences. She writes, "[m] other did what she could to protect us. Paid the price with her body and her mind. When she tried to stop him, he turned on her. . . . Numbed into silence, she was a walking mute" (Méndez-Negrete 2006, 122).

Méndez-Negrete eventually becomes a reflexive storyteller, the archetypal "wounded healer" guiding the reader through the narrative as a way to heal herself and others. For the author, self-healing came not necessarily through the serving of institutionally imposed justice, or from telling the story, but from a recognition of the complex interplay of individual and group survival strategies. *LhJ* also reveals the importance of networks of support, crucial connections forged between survivors, and how they may begin to combat issues of violence by speaking out and speaking to one another. In her words, "My hope was that it would become a catalyst and a voice, a vehículo for a voice" (Interview 2012). Survivors and the loved ones of survivors who read this book can relate to the shame, secrecy and scars that are the result of prolonged abuse, manipulation and domination. In our interview, she pointed out that many survivors disclose their own experiences to her as a result of reading her story, including colleagues, friends, students, and strangers. This happens at both community readings and in classrooms. But it is not only for those who have been victimized. The book makes a profound contribution in that it also addresses structural problems that exacerbate the situation for certain individuals and communities and helps make those connections clearer for anyone who reads it. Social issues are revealed and discussions about the very real, lived experiences of marginalized Latina immigrant victims are voiced. By telling her story, Méndez-Negrete (2013) responds to the resounding silence surrounding sexual assault and emphasizes the power of reclaiming survival. She reflects on this process in a recent essay in *The Journal of Creativity and Mental Health*:

> The use of expressive arts as a way to recover and document the survival of trauma, whether through the facilitation of a creative counselor or as a self-therapeutic intervention for healing, allowed me to understand the trauma from the outside in, as the survivor. I reconstituted my fragmented self, in the process of exploration of the pain, to purge it from my body, mind, and spirit . . . Creativity allows helping professionals, as well as those who teach, to reconfigure a world inside historical legacies of pain and trauma and to reclaim survivorship, healing through the creativity. (324-50)

Conclusion

In this article, I have centered *LhJ* as a powerful linguistic apparatus of resistance to violence. By focusing on a discussion of abuse in the home that is fomented by the social conditions of sexism, racism, and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US, I identify the memoir as a survival narrative. Much of the knowledge from scholarship never leaves the academic space but memoirs like *LhJ* have the potential to reach a much wider audience. Discussions of sexual assault within Chicana/o, Latina/o and immigrant communities must be raised despite the external pressures that serve to either silence or criminalize. With the passage of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and other asylum litigation, the government has begun to acknowledge that specific services for immigrant women are necessary to address their particular needs. VAWA was passed in 1994 and reauthorized by President Obama in 2013. It provides services to individuals like legal aid, housing waivers, and financial support for victims of violence, as well as educational programs, grants, and outreach that attend to larger structural problems. It also provides a pathway to citizenship for immigrant survivors. But the laws remain complex, often contradictory, and open to interpretation (Menjívar and Salcido 2002). Members of Incite!, for example, have argued that through VAWA the

government has succeeded in framing violence as a personal problem in order to absolve the state of crimes against humanity, both present and historic (2006). Villalón (2010) refutes this contention, however, arguing that "activists, artists, and researchers alike have considered VAWA and VTVPA [Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 200] to be pivotal in the struggle to end violence against immigrant women, and thus the chances they have to become citizens of the United States" (36). These are important conversations about how sexual assault is addressed both on an individual and systemic level, but there is no guarantee that these programs will continue in the current political climate. Above all, the voices of victimized women and children themselves must be heard so that advocacy, prevention, and eradication can be studied also through culturally responsive methods like *LhJ*, because studies show that state intervention alone is inadequate in addressing Latina immigrants' specific experiences.

Ultimately, survival narratives like *LhJ* represent opportunities to break the silence and explore alternative interventions to dismantling structures that facilitate gender violence. They can help us to examine the best ways to advocate for victimized women and children, address inequities in social services for immigrants, encourage survivors to find their own paths to healing, and contribute to breaking down oppressive social systems. This survival narrative allows us to delve beyond the question, "Why didn't your mother leave?" as it reveals the author, her sisters, and her mother re-forged loving bonds with each other in order to survive the trauma. Rather than holding on to anger or blame, their healing process allowed them to come to the realization that they were all the victims of interlocking systems of oppression, even if they could not articulate the trauma they endured as young girls. Indeed, more compelling questions we might ask include: How does state intervention in domestic violence and incest act upon the immigrant (undocumented) family uniquely?

What are the stakes in reporting this kind of violence? Furthermore, what constitutes justice for a Latina survivor of sexual abuse? And, by turning to *LhJ* and other Latina survival narratives as a point of focus, what can we learn from the texts about how to support Latina and immigrant survivors and work to change the culture of silence that enables such violence? We need to continue to amplify the voices of survivors.

Notes

[1] Gender violence is defined as "misogynist violence against women for being women situated in relationships marked by gender inequality: oppression, exclusion, subordination, discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization. Women are victims of threats, assaults, mistreatment, injuries, and misogynist harm" (Lagarde y de los Ríos 2010, xxii).

[2] They are identified through recognizable types that are: 1) narratives that break the silence, 2) those that reject "false memory syndrome" or the suggestion that women who tell these stories are mentally ill or hysterical and 3) counter narratives that balance between the acknowledgement that memory is fragmented and the insistence that the incest actually happened, that their experiences are based in reality. This construction, however, serves to continue to blame the victim through instruments of patriarchy like dismissal, erasure, and silencing of women's points of views in which specifically feminist stances are painted as emotional, hysterical, and consumed with the personal over the political.

[3] See specifically Elizabeth Barnes, *Incest and the Literary Imagination*, a collection of essays that trace the cultural and historical implications of incest narratives that informed the personal and political in the discourses of violence, intersectional oppression and family. A bibliographic resource, it is the first of its kind to cover such a large historical scope with the unifying theme of incest.

[4] See the seminal misogynist reading of Malinche in Octavio Paz's "Hijas de la Chingada," in *Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (1962), historical documentation of gender violence in Antonia I. Castañeda's, "History and the Politics of Violence against Women" (1997) in *Living Chicana Theory*, and subsequent feminist readings of Malinche, one of the most recent being Alicia Gaspar de Alba's *[Un]framing the "bad woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause* (2014).

[5] Testimonio studies have led to innovative new ways of examining inequitable power relations and how marginalized communities react and respond to hegemonic oppression. One notable example is *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1985). Although criticized by some scholars in terms of its grounding in historical fact, most notably David Stoll, this memoir is world-renowned as an exemplary model of the power of testimonio as a literary genre as well as driving tool of social change.

[6] Menchú has described her story, as not just her own, but as the reality and the story of her entire people. The controversy created through this dialogue, moreover, has served to expand the discourse of narrative and truth-telling beyond a fact versus fiction dichotomy and towards a theory of testimonio as a potential tool of social transformation in its ability to uncover historical injustice.

[7] "Violence Against Women." (2013). Amnesty International USA website, accessed July 27, 2013. http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/women-s-rights/violence-against-women.

[8] Many contemporary Chicana authors have written about violence against women as metaphor or allegory, others fictionalizing the rape and murder of individual characters in memorium to real lives that have been lost along the border. A few other Chicana texts that examine violence include *Desert Blood: The Juárez Murders* (2005) by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *What Night Brings* (2003) by Carla Trujillo, *Cactus Blood* (1995) by Lucha Corpi, *So Far From God* (1993) by Ana Castillo, *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) and *The House on Mango Street* (1985) by Sandra Cisneros, and *Rain of Scorpions* (1974) by Estela Portillo Trambley.

[9] Chávez includes a short discussion of Arizona Sheriff Joe Arpaio's aggressive treatment of immigrants, and raids that were later found to be unconstitutional (Chávez 2013, 44). Arpaio who called himself "America's toughest sheriff" led a department that was found to have mishandled over 400 cases of sexual assault in Maricopa county. Most of the victims were Latina/o, and many of them were children of undocumented immigrants (Lacey 2011; Peralta 2011). This disregard for immigrant lives is an excellent example of how law enforcement in positions of power can potentially contribute to rape culture and exacerbate the difficulties for Latina/os and immigrants specifically. CIVIC (Community Initiatives for Visiting Immigrants in Confinement, a California-based non-profit organization) has filed a complaint against the Department of Homeland Security because of the frequency with which detention centers are known to ignore the sexual assault reports of detainees (Scaccia 2017). Some police officers, however, particularly in what have been deemed "sanctuary cities" across the United States, feel very differently about how to approach sex-crime and undocumented victims and their children. On Tuesday, March 21, 2017, Los Angeles Police Chief, Charlie Beck said that domestic violence and sexual assault reports from Latino residents had dropped to 25 percent due to fear of deportation in the Trump era. He drew criticism from advocates for immigration enforcement like ICE and The Center for Immigration Studies in Washington, D.C. Several officials from cities across the country like Houston and New York reported a similar drop in engagement with the police from what they also described as fear of deportation (Medina 2017; Queally 2017). In an egregious disregard for immigrant survivors of violence, The Department of Homeland Security recently launched a searchable database that includes the personal information of victims of sexual assault, including where they live or are being held in detention, putting the lives women and children who have been victimized in grave danger (Levin 2017).

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