

Learning with Maryland's Immigrant Communities: Digital Storytelling as Community Engagement

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we explore digital storytelling as a community-engaged pedagogy to create students' immigration stories in Maryland as part of the project "Intercultural Tales: Learning with Maryland's Immigrant Communities." Stories highlight students' lived experiences of immigration, language, and identity. By envisioning themselves and their classmates as community members, students and their stories challenge the assumption that the university is disconnected from local communities. In turn, this process of collaborative storytelling shapes teaching and learning as student-centered practices where it is possible to learn about immigration from inside and outside the classroom.

Keywords: community-engaged scholarship, digital humanities, higher education, immigration studies, critical intercultural communication

INTRODUCTION

"Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership" bell hooks (2009, p. 43).

"When are you going to the community?" an audience member asked us during the question and answer session after a public screening of our students' stories from the project "Intercultural Tales: Learning with Maryland's Immigrant Communities."¹ As professors at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), we envisioned that our project would connect our students with Maryland's immigrant communities. But our students' digital stories and experiences challenged the concept of community engagement and blurred the boundary between

university-community. Students' projects went beyond our expectations and helped us imagine different ways of building community within our institution. The audience member's critical question demonstrates the expectation that we should take our students out of the university and connect them to immigrant communities to which they do not belong—the way academics most commonly carry out community-engaged projects. At our own university, digital storytelling as community engagement has generally followed this model,¹ and used the workshop method associated with Joe Lambert's StoryCenter¹. In contrast, our screening had showcased how students' identities are also part of the university, and their stories explored how community engagement can celebrate students' existent ties with their own communities.

UMBC has an active community of digital storytelling practitioners, with an institutional website, an active faculty working group funded by the Dresher Center

of the Humanities, and multiple related workshops and talks every year. In the Modern Languages, Linguistics, and Intercultural Communication (MLLI) department, the use of digital storytelling supports language and content classes in most of the areas and languages that make up MLLI (Applied Linguistics, Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Spanish, Wolof). In the MLLI's Spanish Area, especially in our Latin American Studies courses, we have used digital storytelling as part of the content and assignments. Thania Muñoz Davaslioglu, for example, has discussed Tania Lizarazo's digital storytelling project *Mujeres Pacificas* as a way for students to learn about the genre, Afro-Colombian communities, and activism. As immigrants ourselves, we have learned migration is not only about moving to a different space but also about community building. And as our own experiences of migration reveal, not all experiences of migration are the same.

In this paper, we trace the origin, process, and outcomes of a collaborative process about immigration centered on community building in the classroom—a political strategy that treats personal stories as nodes of collaborative knowledge production. In the process, we explore how to make space for narratives and experiences of migration that center students' knowledge and experiences. We turned the fast-paced workshop model of the StoryCenter into a personal or one-on-one engagement in co-creating stories. What started as a service-learning approach became an innovative project that recognized students as community members and knowledge producers about immigration, and even expanded the geographic limits we had envisioned.

The practice of community building is a collaborative and often intentional process. But collaborative work is not encouraged as part of the responsibilities of junior faculty in the humanities, even if it has become essential for digital humanities projects: "Scholars in the humanities are still primarily rewarded for single-author texts. Tenure and promotion committees regard books and articles that have

one author more favorably than multi-authored texts" (Bailey, 2018, p. 239). Against these odds, we started a collaborative project to make visible what we most needed during our transition to become professors. As for many minority scholars, our professional survival depended on creating the communities we were missing. Based on an ongoing project that started when we met in 2015, this article is the first scholarly product from our collaboration that has expanded to include students as collaborators. And, while we have learned with and from our students, we have created community-building practices that are not easily translated for tenure and promotion committees, as they are rooted in "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al, 2015; Berg & Seeber, 2016).

As UMBC faculty, we are part of the MLLI department. We are both also faculty with multiple affiliations with humanities and social studies departments and programs. These intersections inform our pedagogies, especially the way we teach Intercultural Communication in our core department. We named our project "Intercultural Tales" to place an emphasis on intercultural communication. Building on storytelling as "an everyday communicative event" (Willink et al., 2014, p. 305), we approach our process of co-creating personal stories in a public-facing feminist pedagogy as part of the project of Critical Intercultural Communication. While our fields are Latin American Literature (Thania Muñoz Davaslioglu) and Latin American Cultural Studies (Tania Lizarazo), belonging to a department with Intercultural Communication in its name and teaching classes as part of a Master of Arts in Intercultural Communication led us to learn and teach about the field. In particular, our project aligns with scholars in the field of Critical Intercultural Communication who, "call for the reconceptualization of 'culture,' shifting away from unitary understandings that link culture to 'the nation' or a 'sharedness' of values, beliefs, and attitudes, toward an intersectional understanding of culture that includes the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and

other contextually salient markers of difference” (Willink et al., 2014, p. 292). As a result, *Intercultural Tales* is about finding the nuance of belonging to immigrant communities by exploring students’ personal experiences while foregrounding immigration as part of, not external to, life at UMBC. This approach to learning about immigration is a collective practice of what Jacqui Alexander calls “teaching for justice” (2005), a theoretical framework and teaching philosophy central to this project.

We recognize the non-linear character of collaboration, digital storytelling, and the multiple actors involved in telling stories of a community as part of critical intercultural communication in practice. Our collected stories create a “we” that weaves our individual experiences into a narrative of collaboration. This narrative references our roles as instructors and facilitators as well as members of the communities we created—in the classroom, in and beyond Maryland. That said, as co-authors of this paper, and co-leaders of the project, our “we” reflects also our role as professors, facilitators, and researchers, which, even if it is influenced by this collaborative learning project, cannot fully represent the heterogeneity of immigrant communities in Maryland.

We chose digital storytelling as a tool and output that provided space for collaboration and dialogue. Storytelling and its digitization have “allowed renewed and varied engagements with systemic issues of racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and colonialism” (Rice & Mündel, 2019, p. 123), and have been associated with the democratization of media (Couldry, 2008, p. 54). Digital storytelling has also been highlighted as a successful pedagogical tool in second language acquisition research, because of how multimodal media integrates and develops writing and oral skills (Castañeda, et al., 2018, p. 1). While Poletti (2011, pp. 73–83) has read the digital storytelling process as coaxing life narratives that reinforce ideas of universality, we choose to explore digital storytelling as a collaborative process with the potential to change the

traditional directionality of teaching and learning. As a community-engaged project, we hoped digital storytelling would help promote visibility of an often-overlooked group—immigrants—and empower students as community members to become producers of knowledge. In the process, as students, facilitators, and researchers, we learned from students’ stories about migration as a process connected to the institution. Digital storytelling also provided students with an alternative mode of expression to writing, an outlet for their creativity, and a potential connection with audiences beyond the classroom.

This piece is about teaching as learning. As we discuss *Intercultural Tales*, we discuss our positionality in relation to our teaching practices as much as we do the stories co-created in our classes as part of community building rooted in interculturality. We start by exploring how our positionality informs our teaching and research practice in our transition from graduate students in California to becoming professors in Maryland. By narrating the origin story of *Intercultural Tales*, we discuss our identities and context as contributing factors to a transition from designing a service-learning oriented project to a classroom-based one where students became the protagonists and creators. Second, we discuss the rationale for choosing digital storytelling as methodology and output, and explain how the project became an example of community-engaged research and public humanities. Finally, we do a close reading of *Intercultural Tales* stories as examples of knowledge production on contemporary issues of language, identity, and immigration in the United States, revealing multiple productive dimensions of digital storytelling as a transformational, humanizing, collaborative learning practice.

Beginnings: Rebuilding and Redefining “Community” at UMBC and Maryland

For us, arriving to California was a soft landing. Maryland was a challenge. UMBC hired us as assistant professors in 2015. Moving from California to Maryland required learning and unlearning our own identities.

We were used to being mentees, not mentors, in a state where diversity looks very different from Maryland. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 10% of Maryland's population is Hispanic/Latinx—in Baltimore city only 5%—compared to California's 39%. Rebuilding our community meant rebuilding our cultural identity in a context in which we were no longer part of the “majoritarian minority” group—Latinx people are one of the biggest minorities in California. At UMBC, for the academic year 2015-2016, we joined a group of 13 tenure-track faculty identifying as Hispanic/Latinx (this included faculty from Spain) in a campus of 1,020 faculty members.

In a new setting, we looked for possibilities similar to our community-engaged work in California to create connections and build community. This community orientation influenced Tania Lizarazo's participation previously in the project *Sexualidades Campesinas*, a digital storytelling project in collaboration with sexually heterodox immigrant farm workers in the Central Valley of California (Lizarazo et al., 2017). Thania Muñoz Davaslioglu collaborated with first-generation Latinx communities in Santa Ana, California, through Workshop for Community Arts, where she led the project *Cartonera Cartography*, a bookmaking and story writing workshop that focused on local histories from the perspective of immigrant communities. Based partly on these experiences and practices, we envisioned a project that would allow us to meet our new students and new state while learning about local immigrant communities. “Learning with Maryland's immigrant communities”—the subtitle of our project—describes what we hoped would be the outcome of our project.

We submitted a grant application in late 2016 that presented this vision as part of a service-learning project. But, with the proliferation of xenophobic discourses, dehumanization, marginalization, and criminalization of immigrants in the United States, this project was among our coping strategies for navigating professional and political transitions. Our starting point was the

assumption that lack of information about local immigrants in higher education classes can produce and reinforce xenophobic attitudes, where diversity does not always translate into respect for difference. We noticed in our classes that non-immigrant students' knowledge about immigrants and the immigration experience was frequently limited to media representations that homogenize the experience of immigration as one of precarity and poverty. While UMBC is known for the racial and ethnic diversity of its student population, in 2019 only 7% of students identified as Hispanic, making Spanish and Spanish speakers rarities at UMBC. We hoped with this project UMBC's community could benefit from understanding how the lived experience of immigrants differs from well-known stereotypes.

We chose digital storytelling as the method and output of the project as it could capture immigration as part of storytellers' lived experience. In 2017, we were granted the on-campus grant “Hrabowski Fund for Innovation” under the category of an “Adaptation Award,” which supports the adaptation and implementation of existing successful innovations into other courses, programs, or disciplines. However, due to increased xenophobia after the 2016 election and Donald Trump's inauguration, we decided to avoid burdening the communities targeted during this time by encouraging students to explore their own personal narratives and those of their close networks instead.ⁱ Since 2017, we have learned immigration is not merely a topic of study but rather a lived experience for our students and those in their networks. At the same time, even for our non-immigrant students, we also learned, this country's immigration discourses shape how they view this topic and how they experience it in their everyday lives. In facilitating a space of collaboration in the classroom, our students have also widened our definition of “community.” We have learned making space for personal narratives while practicing a cooperative vision in the classroom is a strategy of challenging the neoliberal university in times

of crisis and echoed the concern expressed by the editors of *Disrupting the Digital Humanities*: “[w]hat place is there for pedagogy in a world where education has been so systematically devalued, where students worry that even their classroom isn’t safe from an ICE raid?” (Kim & Stommel, 2018, p. 19). While we encouraged personal narratives, we understood the importance of students’ agency in deciding what and where to share their stories.

We embraced digital storytelling as a method that can be used for education as much as advocacy (Vivienne, 2016) to learn more about, and advocate for, local immigrant communities to which most of our students belong. *Intercultural Tales* has been at the inter-section of community-building and education as we encourage students to value and share their personal stories as part of, or in connection to, Maryland’s immigrant communities. Working on creating these immigration stories and being the audience for their classmates’ stories has helped students better understand the challenges and diversity of immigrants’ experiences. We wanted to avoid what Eve Tuck calls “a damage-centered framework,” where “pain and loss are documented to obtain particular political or material gains” (2009, p. 43). Instead, we envisioned moving toward “desire-based research frameworks” that are “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416). As we have interpreted this project differently depending on the class, group of students, etc., we envision a desire-based research framework that challenges stereotypes while valuing the knowledge produced by students, the communities, and networks to which they belong. By challenging the idea of a community of immigrants that dwells exclusively outside of the university, we trusted students’ knowledge in decision-making for their digital story work, as immigration is a lived experience.

At the beginning of our project, the topic and technical expectations (audio recording, creation of original images, writing scripts, and video editing) of the assignment

overwhelmed students. But they were very interested in listening to each other’s stories. Their own sense of community moved the project forward and after one semester of collaborations we could share many stories with our campus community. In December 2017, we organized our first public screening event with the goal of creating an audience for students’ stories. Some students shared their own individual stories, while others chose to co-create stories with their classmates. Participation was optional. Twelve storytellers volunteered to share their projects. These students, from an upper-division class on Latin American literature, a seminar on Afro-Latin America, and an introductory class on Global Studies, received feedback from an audience of students and professors from MLLI and Global Studies. In May 2019, we organized another public screening, including an opportunity for an open dialogue due to major ICE raids affecting communities in the region and the desire to provide a space of solidarity. During the event, we encouraged attendees to create their own stories and share them using #interculturaltales to create a digital archive. Stories whose authors gave permission to share publicly were made available on the *Intercultural Tales* website. Public storytelling enables intercultural dialogues that are not possible when assignments have the instructor as the main audience. During *Intercultural Tales* public screenings, audience members have shared their reactions and feelings of watching the stories along with their own stories of migration. Practicing intercultural communication as digital stories can become conversation-starters, even as drafts. They can be also reminders of the importance of thinking about teaching and learning as holistic experiences where both students and instructors bring a multitude of stories and identities.

Intersectionality in critical intercultural communication addresses the intersecting oppressions that can impact student learning in the classroom.^v In our classrooms, intercultural communication has helped us (re)envision how we teach, particularly in relationship to the way we plan curricula that

seek to engage students beyond class assignments. Intercultural Tales became a space to practice the tools and concepts that make learning a mutual and collaborative experience, from story circles to public screenings.

With this project, we have learned that simply including immigration or a feminist approach in our pedagogy is not a guarantee of justice or inclusion. As Alexander asks when writing about teaching for justice, “Does this practice travel into the classroom and erase those same histories and the histories of immigrant women from our syllabi?” (2005, p. 14). In our syllabi and assignments, we envision more than a superficial inclusion that elevates only the voices of privileged immigrant women academics such as ourselves. An inclusive pedagogical practice may not only interrogate representation in written canonical and academic texts, but may also introduce other genres and other knowledges. While we recognize the limits of digital storytelling for achieving justice, we also recognize its potential for creating learning spaces that include the communities we teach about. We have learned more about Central America from our Central American students than from our graduate programs on Latin America, for example. Intercultural Tales has become an opportunity to promote digital literacy, practice listening and collaboration, and empower students as producers of knowledge about their own communities. Stories have become valuable for engendering future spaces of reflection about immigration, both inside and outside academia.

Digital Storytelling as Community-Engaged Research and Intercultural Teaching

“Everyone has a story to tell” is a tagline associated with Joe Lambert, the founder of StoryCenter (formerly the Center for Digital storytelling). Even though our use of digital storytelling follows the StoryCenter’s method (Tania Lizarazo received training by Jesikah Maria Ross), we use a similar one-on-one adaptation as the one used in *Sexualidades Campesinas*.^v This adaptation differs from the StoryCenter’s canonical process, which has been described as a seven-

step guide (Lambert & Hessler, 2015) where (1) a specific point of view is communicated through a (2) dramatic question or conflict by crafting (3) an honest personal narrative that uses a (4) unique voice (5) powerful soundtrack, and (6) economic pacing to (7) engage the audience. These seven elements are traditionally stitched together in a workshop in which participants use a story circle to brainstorm before writing a script and selecting images they will use to illustrate the audio recording with video editing.

Our process uses the collective power of brainstorming in public that is the story circle, and trains students in the basics of audio recording, image production, and video editing as part of every class. However, these in-classroom practices are rehearsals for students’ actual recording of their stories, selection of images, and putting together of all the elements outside of the classroom—sometimes they tell their own stories; sometimes students work with a classmate, a friend, or a family member to co-create their stories. Our semester-long process—in contrast to intense weekend-long traditional workshops—is an in-depth process of storytelling that makes students accountable to their classmates and communities. More importantly, the stories become a way to create a truly student-centered classroom that leads to the creation of a micro-community through constant sharing of stories, and of experiences of the process of making them.

In our classes, we have introduced our students to digital storytelling as a method that makes everyday storytelling accessible to a wider audience by using digital tools to produce audiovisual pieces that can be shared online. We learned about its history and introduced them to the StoryCenter based in Berkeley, California. StoryCenter’s description of their method explains the widespread use of digital storytelling since its origins: “Through our wide-ranging work, we have transformed the way that community activists, educators, health and human services agencies, business professionals, and artists think about the power of personal voice, in

creating change” (StoryCenter, n.d.). Due to this guiding force, many organizations, including development and women’s rights organizations, have adopted digital storytelling as a tool for activism, healing, conflict resolution, and empowerment.

The main topics we have discussed regarding the medium of digital storytelling were the components and process of digital storytelling: script writing, creating storyboards, the importance of audience, ownership and consent, the role of sounds and visuals, and editing. As a response to in-class conversations on immigration, we have also talked about how this storytelling can be personal and bring up emotions difficult to deal with, for both the storyteller and the audience. Telling personal stories about immigration can sometimes trigger strong emotions and can be difficult for those who have left their country of origin. Digital storytelling is grounded in the storytellers’ control over the medium—words, images, and audio—so that learning and production is as powerful for the storyteller as the end product is for the audience. We have asked our students to produce a digital story of 3–5 minutes of images, voice, text and, if they’d like, music, stitched together using a video editing software of their choice (they were shown options including Adobe Spark Video, WeVideo, iMovie, and Microsoft Movie Maker). Storytellers could narrate first-person scripts and we encouraged English subtitles (if stories were in Spanish) to make the videos accessible to multiple audiences.^v

Even though the digital storytelling framework can be understood as community-based-research, its practice in different iterations assumes the preexistence of a community and reinforces the academia/community binary. We challenged the traditional service-learning approach and the canonical digital storytelling workshop format to avoid contributing to burdens on communities facing separation, stigmatization, and fear. We suggested an autoethnographic exploration of interculturality and immigration to encourage students to avoid portraying immigrants as

“others”. Our more flexible approach to digital storytelling transformed our initial service-learning approach that assumed students were disconnected from communities to an inclusive approach to community that discouraged a transactional approach to civic engagement.

Sharing the spectrum of what digital storytelling can look like, and the responsibility associated with sharing stories, requires thinking about various uses: “While some digital storytellers engage in personal sharing as therapeutic catharsis and others consciously perform vulnerability as a strategy for winning audience approval, the social consequence of autobiographical storytelling is most pertinent to everyday activism” (Vivienne, 2016, p. 21). Seeing examples from different projects, including DACamented and Humanizando la deportación, among others, helped students understand different approaches to storytelling in terms of themes, narrative arcs, selection of images, music, narrations, and even transitions when editing video.

At the beginning of the project, students asked for more information about supporting immigrant communities they belonged to or were close to, and we thus learned about our responsibilities not only as facilitators but as caretakers: “[T]he classroom is a Sacred space. In any semester a number of Souls are entrusted into our care, and they come as openly and transparently as they can for this appointment” (Alexander, p. 8). As part of UMBC’s Dresher Center for the Humanities Faculty Working Group on Immigration, to which we both belong, in early 2017, we organized an event titled “Solidarity in Times of Crisis,” inviting local experts on immigration. More than a roundtable, this event’s format was a two-hour long question and answer session, where students asked questions about recent changes on immigration policy and threats to their communities. Participation in this event catalyzed conversations in the classroom about how solidarity is hard work, but it can be learned. A community-based digital storytelling approach allowed us to create space for stories that exemplify heterogenous represent-

ations of immigrant communities in local contexts. We have developed stories as part of different classes and have shared them online to promote visibility of immigrants in the greater Baltimore area, and to make available educational materials to share with Maryland's communities. As an ongoing project, these stories are a growing repository of multilingual primary sources (most in Spanish and English) that can be used in the classroom by second language learners, and students in multiple fields.

Learning in Public: Storytelling as Community Engagement

As our students initiated thinking about their project they quickly came to a common conclusion: their friends on campus, family members, and neighbors had stories of immigration to tell and were sources of valuable knowledge.^v One student, Taylor Nuse, was moved specifically by one of her classmate's stories. Taylor became interested in Raymond Bascal's story of immigration from India to Maryland and his process of learning Spanish. In turn, Raymond decided to create his own story of migration in a different class. This interaction triggered an in-depth discussion about the stories of immigration of other students in our class, and even in creating common space across classes. Students realized, as we had, that their communities on campus were important reflections of immigrant communities within and beyond the campus. Retelling stories and receiving feedback (especially from peers) became an encouraging process of sharing and valuing knowledge, in some cases reframing fear, confusion, and shame with pride, solidarity, and insight. At the end of the semester, using digital storytelling, most students had not only a more nuanced understanding of immigration, but also a renewed appreciation for their classmates' knowledge, which in turn shaped a less hierarchical learning space.

Intercultural Tales engages with issues around language and cultural diversity. As Latinas and Latin American Studies professors

teaching some of our classes in Spanish, we are aware language diversity has caused (and is still causing) a heated debate in the United States. The presence of Spanish raises concerns regarding Latinx immigrants' retention of Spanish and potential failure to assimilate, thereby threatening a sense of American national unity.ⁱ Most Intercultural Tales' storytellers are students of our Spanish language program, whether or not it is their major, or they created their stories in a class with English as the medium of instruction (Global Studies students). Spanish is also the first, second, or heritage language of some students. This is why we chose to emphasize Spanish's centrality as part of a project on migration and interculturality. Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa has taught us about the divisions that can come from language: "Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper" (Anzaldúa, 1999, p.58). Even though our project was multilingual from the beginning as we envisioned a multicultural and transdisciplinary collage of personal stories, language is a contested space: "Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself," Anzaldúa wrote (1999, p. 81).

Language is central in students' stories and is challenged by stereotypes, identity, and conceptions of race that can facilitate intergenerational conversations. Hannah Jackson's dialogic story "I Love Them Both," for example, underlines these topics through the experience of Chagüi —her Peruvian immigrant mother living in Maryland. Hannah's collaboration explores her mother's experience of immigration from a city in Perú, where it never snowed, to the extreme cold temperatures of Maryland's winter. In multiple occasions in the story, her mother narrates in Spanish how she learned English: attending night school or watching "Sesame

Street” at her babysitting jobs. But, toward the end of the story, Hannah weaves her own reflection of being the child of an immigrant and her mother’s identity conception after many years of living in the United States:

Hannah: Identity is a weird thing for immigrants and their children. I’ve never felt like a typical American girl, but I’ve also never felt like a Peruvian. My heritage has both, my roots are in two places, but my life is in the U.S.

Chagüi: I feel like I’m from two worlds. I feel like I’m Peruvian, a Latina but I also feel like an American. I haven’t faced a lot of discrimination, not much at all because I’m considered a White Hispanic. It’s different for other Latinos who are mixed, Indigenous, or Black. And people, most people don’t know that I’m Hispanic until I speak and then when I begin to speak, they know that I’m not from here, but yes, I love them both with all of my heart and all of my soul.

Chagüi’s ability to be able to claim both identities is embedded in her recognition of her white skin privilege and in being able to “love both” countries. Chagüi’s experience is not representative of most immigrant stories created as part of Intercultural Tales. As Juana Rodríguez teaches us, identity is not stable: “Identity is about situatedness in motion: embodiment and spatiality. It is about a self that is constituted through and against other selves in contexts that serve to establish the relationship between the self and the other” (Rodríguez, 2003, p. 5). The majority of the stories collected for our archive question conceptions of race and belonging.

In one of the stories, “The life of Rosa,” Colin Hrenko and Rosa Asitimbay address Latin America’s Indigenous communities and immigration. Rosa identifies as mestiza, but recognizes her Indigenous roots, and she discusses Ecuador’s colonial past. Although she does not use the word “colonization” explicitly, she centers her

experiences as an Ecuadorian who stopped wearing traditional clothing after moving from a farm in Cañar—a province in Ecuador—to the country’s capital. Her experience in the city is marked by discrimination because of her clothing, skin color, and Indigenous last name. In Quito, she was discriminated against for her Indigenous roots, echoing the multiple ways these communities have been “othered” across the Americas. She declares, “When they will see me wearing traditional clothing, they would treat me as an Indigenous person. I didn’t like this, they made me feel as if I had no value, they made me feel as if I was dirty—it was the same way Spanish colonizers treated Indigenous communities.” Through her story, she emphasizes the inherited racism present in Latin America. It’s no surprise then, that when Rosa immigrates to the United States, she finds herself questioning not only racism, again, but also “colorism.” She realizes the color of her skin does not fit into the binary relations of the school she attended in New York City; she suffered from discrimination from Black and White communities. Rosa did not identify as a “Latina” as she didn’t feel she fit into that “stereotype,” she confesses. In contrast, as a White Latina, Chagüi can pass as White and benefit from the privileges of this association. Quiros and Dawson (2013) have argued how colorism limits dark-skinned Latinas’ negotiation of race and ethnicity: “White and light-skinned Latinx have the ability to move in and out of racial and ethnic categories depending on the context of the situation, but negotiation of identity is limited for dark-skinned Latinx whose ethnicity is more likely to be silenced and conflated because race trumps ethnicity” (p. 289). While Chagüi in Hannah’s story navigates both of her identities with pride, Rosa’s illustrates her continuing struggle of “belonging” as an immigrant in the United States because of the color of her skin.

Alison Daisey’s story, “México lindo y querido” brings us back to Maryland. Alison’s story honestly captures her experience of growing up in a family where xenophobic narratives are background noise, as illustrated

with a picture of her living room where Fox News is visible on the TV. She reveals not only her family's and friends' preconceived ideas about Mexico as a dangerous place when she announces she will study abroad in Oaxaca, but her own fears as illustrated by a pro and cons list. Alison presents study abroad as a challenging intercultural experience that becomes valuable for more than academic reasons. Her pictures and narrative describing learning from her host family and her new context create a space for imagining change as a possibility and dismantling xenophobia as a destiny for U.S. citizens. That such a temporary experience of traveling can fracture inherited narratives about the immigrant as "other" and their countries, especially Mexico recently, as dangerous, inverts the gaze to U.S. citizenship as shortsighted. Alison's story reinforced how redirecting our project to not burden immigrant communities to promote self-reflection can also be a strategy for community building. By embracing the possibility of learning, Alison models an approach to intercultural communication that is not instrumental and is based on self-reflection about learned stereotypes instead of reproducing them. Hannah's and Alison's stories originate in Maryland and portray the experience of a heritage speaker and a second-language-learner. Each of them originated from the same coordinates but portrays interculturality and the role of language differently. Opening up a space in which orality takes precedence over writing through digital storytelling and where life stories are trusted as much as theoretical citations creates a space of mutual learning.

Students' stories also challenged stereotypical understandings of Latin American immigration in the United States. Heejin Hong's story, entitled "Empacar la maleta" ("Pack your Bag"), challenges the notion of migration as a once-in-a-lifetime experience that reinforces the binary of homeland and new country. Heejin shares an autoethnographic narrative of migration from Paraguay to Brazil, from Brazil to México, and from México to the United States. She draws the

audience's attention by subtitling her mother's Korean words into English: "Heejin, pack your bag, we are going to the United States." From then on, Heejin narrates her story in Spanish. In the first minutes of her voiceover, she identifies herself as Korean, Paraguayan, and hopefully, soon, also a U.S. citizen. Her multiple identities are marked by the experiences of her parents, who were the first immigrants of her family. Her melancholic tone of voice is accompanied by family pictures and by detailing that she had to move multiple times due to economic reasons; Heejin expresses, she never had a choice, never had a home. She concludes her story by reflecting upon how the United States is the first place where she has lived longer than four years and although she still dislikes packing her bag, she now knows how to prepare herself for any journey.

In every screening, Heejin's immigration journey and her family's experiences in Latin America have incited critical dialogues among our students and colleagues about the presence of Korean communities both in Latin America and locally. Heejin's language choices also highlight how immigrants reflect upon language as preference and as identity marker. As a young immigrant, she experienced immigration not only by the actual shift between places, but also the languages spoken in those places. Embracing and teaching the markers of identity in our language as part of our lived experiences creates spaces where what counts as knowledge and who is a knowledge producer become flexible. As speakers of academic varieties of Spanish (as a first language) and English (as a second language), students perceive us as enforcers of standard Spanish (both written and spoken) and as outsiders/immigrants when we speak English. Having a diversity of Spanish in Intercultural Tales, from speakers of Spanish as a first language, heritage language, second or even third language, these stories have become sources of knowledge in other spaces (second-language classes and even outreach for other digital storytelling projects).

Intercultural Tales became a multi-lingual space where Spanish and English coexist with Korean, Filipino, and other languages students chose to include as part of their stories. While not all stories created as part of the project are in Spanish, we decided to foreground it in our analysis of most of the stories, and in our project in general, as it is the most visible. We see Spanish not as a “foreign” language, but as a tool for communication used daily by members of the greater Baltimore community. We learned through our experience with language in this project that students use Spanish (and other languages) in real contexts and beyond the classroom. Language learning is a complex process that can sometimes hide differences among students, as second-language learners coexist with heritage speakers. As Spanish and English bilinguals, we think about storytelling as a language practice. And language, as storytelling, is a cultural experience.

The role of language and immigration is not central for Isabel Morales Gaskin in her story titled “Mixed.” Her voiceover is illustrated by a collage of family pictures. From the first seconds of her story, we can tell the centrality of identity exceeds the bureaucratic option of choosing her race: “White or Asian? White or Asian? My mother would always tell me to be proud of who I am. I’m both. But, can I be both? Maybe I’m neither.” The in-betweenness of her identity is reflected in the struggle that Isabel presents as a narrative arc. The tension between her dad’s and her mom’s identities is eventually replaced by the acceptance of a “mixed” identity that doesn’t require choosing between bureaucratic categories or cultural backgrounds. Her dual identity gives her access and understanding of the arbitrariness of identity boundaries and external approval. The affective connection of this narrative with a minimalist aesthetic and a vulnerable spirit exemplifies the power of sharing the struggle toward self-acceptance. By revealing her inner conflict, Isabel models the performative potential for storytelling as a creation of a new reality where she can choose an identity

independently from available categories. This is one story in which the storyteller discusses race not in terms of immigration, but as situated interculturality in the United States.

After three years of Intercultural Tales, we have found that for most of our students the intersection between identity and language is central in telling stories of immigration. Additionally, this is something that students have also highlighted in their final project self-reflections,^x classroom discussions, and public events; for example, “learning another language” is a common thread in their stories and their own experiences as immigrants and students at UMBC. For example, in “Estadounidense: The Story of Oscar Flores,” issues of language and assimilation are presented through the voice of a college student who immigrated from Bolivia to Maryland; Oscar shares his experience by proudly stating that his family and he, “adapted quite quickly and learned the language quite quickly; I’m in college now, so something went well.” Will Hutchins, the narrator of the story, highlights in his voiceover the fact that Oscar preferred to do the interview in English, although his first language is Spanish. He reflects upon this by stating that preferring to speak English is a common decision for immigrants who arrive at a young age to the United States. Caitlin Box’s story “We are Fighters: The Story of a DACA Recipient” complicates this specific reflection through the story of her anonymous collaborator—an immigrant from El Salvador and UMBC student. Caitlin shares how “Andrés” found learning English to be very difficult, although he considers his skills improved, he now prefers to speak Spanglish: “[...] language is something important for Andrés. He prefers to speak Spanglish, although he says that there are ideologies and stereotypes that come with Spanish and English.”

By inviting students to explore their own stories of immigration—whether or not they focused on this topic specifically—we could reimagine ways to do community-engaged research by rejecting to dissociate our students’ identities from the communities to

which they belong. Through this process, they allowed us to engage with the communities that most mattered to them. While we didn't explicitly teach about interculturality or intercultural competence, students talked about intercultural communication when discussing the process and the stories. In our reflection and analysis of *Intercultural Tales*, we found that our project aligns with how critical intercultural communication chooses to intervene in academic knowledge and knowledge production to center the voices that as academics we have traditionally chosen not to include. While we celebrate having institutional support and student engagement that makes *Intercultural Tales* an ongoing project, we recognize interculturality is not merely a subject of theoretical debate. The increasing numbers of Spanish speakers and the expansion of domains of use contrast sharply with the implementation of educational policies and language ideologies that promote monolingualism.* This debate on how to interpret and attribute value to Spanish use in the United States translates into conflicting and contradictory attitudes toward language use and development of individuals and communities.

The multilingual historical memory of the United States deepens our understanding of its multilingual present, which does not coincide with currently common fears and rejections regarding Spanish language use. The lack of alignment between what our fields say we value and what our curricula shows is a reminder of the work ahead. Silva Gruez (2004) recognizes that the field of American Studies has changed since its inception and it has oriented toward vernacular experiences and public life, but that hierarchies of language use remain virtually unchanged (pp. 85–92). We find similar attitudes in Modern Languages and Spanish and Portuguese departments around the country, where the offering of Spanish courses tends to highlight hierarchy of registers: “[t]he defense of national literature, especially peninsular Spanish literature, which has traditionally fueled US Hispanism, clashed with the much

more socially and politically committed project of many cold war-era Latin Americanists. This split continues to be an important factor in determining the shape of upper division and graduate curricula in Spanish Departments” (Irwin & Szurmuk 2009, p. 43). This is the case in MLLI, where offerings of Peninsular history and culture courses are about the same in number as Latin America course offerings. Students often complain about the fact that they must take two courses dedicated to Spain and only two courses dedicated to all the Latin American countries. This disproportionate focus does not even consider Latinx communities and its languages communities in the United States. Our heritage speaker students, for example, are from Central America, South America, and Mexico, which reflects Maryland's Latinx population. Our curriculum still lacks courses about Central America or Latinxs in the United States that better reflect family histories of the university's heritage students.

Intercultural Tales' stories demonstrate various approaches to immigration and interculturality by using language to show knowledge and understanding of multiple cultures. *Intercultural Tales* has facilitated our movement toward a feminist pedagogy “centered on seeing the classroom as a community of learners (rather than treating faculty as the ultimate and only experts). Learning can be based on cooperation and collaboration, rather than on a star system and competition” (Thompson, 2017, p. 3). Students co-created communities of learning by narrating their own journeys—whether spatially relocating from one place to the other, as exemplified by Chagüi, Rosa, Heejin, and Andrés, or by growing up in the United States and living interculturality with all its different implications, as Hannah, Alison, and Isabel share. These narratives collectively voice the complexities of students' intercultural experiences and portray the realities of communities represented in our classes and thus across our campus, city, and state.

CONCLUSION

The mutual learning process of Intercultural Tales has taught us that there is much more to learn. Storytelling reveals learning as a mutual and collaborative process instead of a unidirectional one. The process of digital storytelling within our classes, and as part of this project, revealed the potential of collective and collaborative pedagogies for community building and engagement that do not reinforce the belief that the university is detached from local communities. A common trend in most of the stories is a narrative arc that centers survival, not oppression: “[w]e forget that surviving is itself a moral act in a situation of oppression. Living to tell about it means the worst is over; the healing has begun” (Thompson, 2017, p. 89). The act of storytelling and the process of digital storytelling production are not replacements for therapeutic or cathartic spaces, but can be an intentional practice of choosing what to share. The collaborative process of digital storytelling makes possible the sharing of nuanced knowledge and of lived experiences of oppression and survival. In the process, we intentionally choose collaborative research, teaching for justice, and moving at the speed of trust, even though it is not encouraged or highly rewarded in academic settings.

We are in the process of creating an interactive archive to which students and members of Maryland’s immigrant communities can contribute, inspired by projects such as Rutgers University Newark’s *Newest Americans*. We hope to collect and publish our students’ stories, whether developed individually or in collaboration, and make them accessible on our website and through social media. Listening and learning has been a valued practice in our teaching experiences throughout this project, enhanced by the many ways our students envision their communities. Students’ willingness to create authentic stories that challenge current racist and anti-immigrant discourses by engaging with multi-generational and multilingual communities is a critical testament to the

important role critical interculturality plays in the United States. Through this project, we and our students collectively learned from our own immigrant communities on campus and beyond. Now it is imperative that our curricula reflect this learning as well.

We view teaching as critical pedagogy, a practice of making the political and the ideological visible, and a performative act that invites students to become autoethnographers and wield their own experiences against the forces of oppression (Denzin, pp. 389–39). Embracing digital storytelling as pedagogy promotes not only digital literacy but also critical intercultural communication as part of language learning (e.g., for classes taught in Spanish) and critical approaches to globalization (e.g., in Global Studies). In the digital storytelling process, students have examined their lived experiences critically to share personal stories of immigration, including those of family and friends, as valuable know-ledge. Digital stories are public stories. Regardless of whether storytellers decide to share them on the Intercultural Tales website (online participation is voluntary for students), publicly screening the stories creates engagement with diverse personal stories, deepening audience members’ knowledge of Maryland’s immigrant communities. Increasing immigration’s visibility as part of the local and global contexts is one of many tools to challenge stereotypes about immigrants. Although sharing stories is not a solution to the criminalization of immigrants, it invites more nuanced reflections about the heterogeneity of the immigrant experience in the United States.

What happens when we form a learning community in the classroom that creates and shares narratives that have a wider audience than the instructor? We create communities of learning supported by feminist and critical pedagogies that center justice and value students’ knowledge as community members, and immigrants. To promote collaboration and community we require students to screen stories before the deadline, in a process of collective feedback, and even

from students in other classes, before submitting their work to be formally evaluated. We practice a generous way to offer suggestions to others while recognizing what we can learn from them in turn. We recognize and promote skills that go beyond digital literacy and can be translated into solidarity inside and outside the classroom. Recognizing each other's humanity is not an abstract process. It requires a commitment to question pedagogies that reproduce the hierarchies we critique. Teaching and learning are inextricable from struggles against the dehumanization of immigrants and minorities.

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Notes:

ⁱ The project “Intercultural Tales: Learning with Maryland’s Immigrant Communities” is consistent with any corresponding protocols reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board.

ⁱ In the chapter entitled “Faculty Reflections at the Intersection of Digital Storytelling and Community Engagement” (2017), our UMBC colleagues Bev Bickel, Bill Shewbridge, Romy Hübler, and Ana Oskoz explore four digital storytelling projects led by faculty in collaboration with four different communities in Maryland.

ⁱ <https://www.storycenter.org/staff>

ⁱ These decisions were discussed with our students in the classroom. Thus, as some of our students’ communities were targeted by the 2016 election, they focused their stories of immigration on topics they felt comfortable sharing and/or were important for them.

^v As Ahmet Atay and Satoshi Toyosaki (2018) have argued about this conceptualization of the field, “[...] critical communication pedagogy is a dialogic, self-reflexive, performative, decolonizing approach that aims to highlight oppressive systems, even in our own thinking and teaching, promotes civility, and commits to social justice and activism to create positive change” (p. viii).

^v In an article about this project (of which Tania Lizarazo is first author), facilitators reflect on the adaptation of the digital storytelling method in response to the inability to create collective workshops with LGBTQ farmworkers. The resulting process was a slow, one-on-one process of facilitator-storyteller interaction.

^v While we hoped to be mindful of accessibility, choosing to make stories bilingual meant that only Spanish stories have captions. Our hope is in the future to provide a transcription for all of the stories, in English and Spanish, to make them truly accessible for a broader audience.

^v The stories can be found at <https://www.interculturaltales.org/>

ⁱ Spanish in the United States has been associated with lower-income wage earners and working-class members of society. However, the growing number of Spanish speakers has made it the second most spoken language in the country, while growing economic opportunities associated with Spanish have resulted in a higher status for and new domains of its use.

^x Thania Muñoz Davaslioglu asks students for a final self-reflection in which they write about their personal experience putting together their digital story; these self-reflections also guided broadly our analysis of the stories presented in this paper.

^x In 1998, Silicon Valley millionaire Ron Unz spearheaded the passage of California’s Proposition 227, designed to ban bilingual education as an instructional method.