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Will You Stand for Me? Authentic Cariño and Transformative Rites of Passage in an Urban High School

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This case study documents a small, urban high school that implements firewalks, innovative rites of passage in which low-income, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth publicly reflect on their personal and academic development. Drawing from anthropological scholarship on rites of passage and scholarship on color-conscious care, I examine firewalks through a model of authentic cariño, which incorporates interpersonal and institutional care and emphasizes the dynamic interplay of familial, intellectual, and critical care. Based on analyses of school culture and firewalk enactment, I argue that authentic cariño is essential to nondominant students' success and that rituals like firewalks productively help youth negotiate emergent cultural identities and develop collective social conscience, reflexivity, and agency.

KEYWORDS: care, Latino/as, rites of passage, social justice, urban high school

For more than a half-century, an array of stakeholders has bemoaned Latino/a underachievement in U.S. schools. Longitudinal displays of Latino/as' high dropout rates, poor test scores, and low rates of college graduation signal the seeming permanence of this crisis (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). The culprit most often cited is the historic legacy of racism/colonialism/oppression, which manifests in educational institutions as deficit thinking and assimilationist school practices, especially culturally discontinuous instruction (Valencia, 2002). The resulting "subtractive schooling" (Valenzuela, 1999) begs the question of what "additive" schooling for Latino/as might look like (cf. Bartlett & García, 2011).

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This case study documents how an urban high school created "additive" educational experiences for Latino/a students in part by instituting rites of passage rituals known as "firewalks," which required each sophomore and senior to testify publicly and individually regarding their personal and academic development. Since the 1980s, various healers and inspirational speakers have popularized firewalk rituals, where participants walk over hot coals in order to "unleash the power within" and transform their lives. The firewalks described here are symbolic rituals where a student faces a circle of caring peers and adults and contemplates his or her journey toward graduation and beyond in a safe, confidential, but "brutally honest" environment. The rite ends when the audience stands to indicate their confidence that the firewalker has reflected deeply and demonstrated the habits needed for advancement. If witnesses choose to not stand, the firewalk continues until a remediation plan is negotiated.

This article examines these rituals through the lens of authentic *cariño* (heartfelt care). Synthesizing disparate strands of scholarship on color-conscious and critical educational care, I advance an integrated and holistic theory of authentic cariño, which incorporates both interpersonal and institutional care and emphasizes the dynamic interplay of familial, intellectual, and critical care. Three questions anchor this study: (a) How are rites of passage structured within an innovating high school? (b) How do Latino/a youth experience these rites? and (c) In what ways do these rites foster or constrain the enactment of particular forms of care? The principal argument of this article can be summarized in two statements. First, authentic cariño is the cornerstone of additive education; it is an essential element to the well-being and academic success of poor and working-class youth of color. Second, thoughtfully conceived, schoolwide rituals like firewalks enhance authentic cariño at an institutional level while fostering nondominant students' healthy identity development, collective social conscience, reflexivity, and agency.

Theoretical Framework

Two bodies of literature inform this study. Anthropological scholarship regarding rites of passage provides clarity on firewalks as socially constructed, formal rituals. This section also examines adolescent rites of passages in U.S. settings. In order to elucidate the particular rites of passage enacted in the focal community, I draw on literature on additive schooling for Latino/a youth with a focus on color-conscious conceptions of educational care to advance a grounded model of authentic cariño.

Ritual and Rites of Passage

Anthropologists, sociologists, and ritologists have debated the meaning of cultural rituals for over a century. While acknowledging this debate, for the sake of clarity and brevity, I concentrate here on ritual as a formal,

ceremonial, social practice with a clear beginning and end that symbolically expresses the complex (and sometimes even contradictory) values of a culture. By bounding ritual in this manner, I depart from McLaren (1999), whose classic *Schooling as Ritual Performance* examines how everyday classroom rituals shaped students' learning and ideological orientations. Despite this divergence, I concur with McLaren that:

> Ritual understanding involves knowledge somaticized metaphorically and symbolically . . . rituals serve as swords sheathed in the symbolic scabbard of social life; they both challenge and defend the sovereign power of dominant cultural meanings . . . rituals shape the discourses of critique and possibility. Seen in this light, rituals are not less than means to cultural power. (p. 258)

Understanding the power of ritual and persuaded by McLaren's claim that "ritual has been—and remains—the least analyzed component of school culture" (p. 12), I focus on rites of passage.

van Gennep (1909/1960) characterized rites of passage as universal rituals, entailing three stages: (a) separation, in which participants leave the familiar behind either literally or symbolically; (b) liminality, a betwixt and between phase, where the routines of daily life fall away and participants experience transformation; and (c) reintegration wherein participants rejoin community with different status, identity, and/or purpose. Durkheim (1915/1965) and Turner (1969/1991) extended this model. Durkheim stressed the role of ritual as a mechanism to preserve the status quo and foster social solidarity, order, and conformity. In contrast, Turner explored how "in *rites de passage*, men are released from structure into communitas" (p. 129)—a spontaneous, intense experience of human interconnection that "transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency" (p. 128). Thus, Turner emphasized rites of passage as catalysts for "anti-structure" or social transformation. While rituals are frequently juxtaposed as either system maintaining or system transforming, Islam and Zyphur (2009) contend that these ends need not be mutually exclusive. In the context of organizations (e.g., schools), secular rituals may be enacted to foster common social values and solidarity within the organization with hopes of engendering social change beyond the organization. Additionally, ritual participants influenced by the society's dominant macro-culture can express hegemonic values during rites purportedly aimed at transformative ends. In sum, rituals are dynamic social processes capable of engendering both conformity/integration and resistance/critique.

Rites of passage marking the transition from childhood to adulthood represent a distinct ritual form. Research on adolescent rites of passage outside the family or church in postindustrial societies is limited. Literature searches using various configurations of the terms *rites of passage,*

adolescence, ritual, school, coming of age, youth, and *childhood to adulthood* and filtered to include Grades 6–12 in U.S. settings yielded less than two dozen peer-reviewed articles. Of these, 10 focused specifically on rites designed for African American youth.

In an exploratory study of 20 Afrocentric rites of passage programs, Warfield-Coppock (1992) defines the adolescent rite of passage as "a supervised developmental and educational process whose goal is to assist young people in attaining knowledge and accepting responsibilities, privileges, and duties of an adult member of a society" (p. 472). Scholars (Brookins, 1996; Piert, 2007; Warfield-Coppock, 1992) emphasize the special importance of coming of age rituals for youth of color, contending that healthy ethnic identity development is essential for survival and wellness in a racist, sexist, and capitalist society. These researchers claim that socialization processes in traditional U.S. schools alienate youth of color by communicating "dysfunctional and genocidal" messages (Warfield-Coppock, 1992, p. 471). Given this context, Warfield-Coppock argues that rites of passage prepare youth of color "physically, mentally, and spiritually for active resistance and struggle against the seductive lure of the American Way" (p. 474).

Adolescent rites of passage transpire in many settings and employ extremely varied approaches. Warfield-Coppock (1992) identified six settings: community, agency, church, therapy, family, or school based. Teachers, counselors, or community members usually run the latter as after-school, extracurricular activities. Programmatic diversity is evident in studies documenting rites of passage in an Afrocentric summer camp (Ginwright, 2010), a wilderness expedition (Andrews, 1999), a nine-month Afrocentric program for young men (Harvey & Rauch, 1997), as well as two school-based initiatives (Fleisher, 2005; Piert, 2007). Fleisher (2005) described a Senior Passage academic course in which students investigated psychological, anthropological, and sociological rites of passage theories and designed/performed a graduation ceremony. Piert (2007) studied an Afrocentric program where students gathered in single-sex groups, consulted family elders, and participated in culminating ceremonies.

With the exception of Ginwright's (2010) thickly descriptive portrait of Camp Akili, these cases lacked in situ accounts of rites of passage rituals as enacted and often failed to specify programmatic features or give adequate voice to adolescent participants. All accounts, though, extolled the salutary impact of adolescent rites of passage identifying outcomes like:

> improved cultural awareness and knowledge, more responsible behaviors, improved self-esteem, improved self-concept, improved socializing with peers, improved sense of maleness or femaleness, improved relationships with elders . . . and with members of the opposite sex, improved school behavior and academic performance, heightened interest in attending postsecondary educational or

> vocational opportunities, and more responsible job attitudes and behaviors. (Warfield-Coppock, 1992, p. 479)

Additionally, these accounts converged around the idea that the absence of formal rites of passage in modern societies leaves youth without meaningful ways to mark transitions and may contribute to alienation and disorientation. Emblematic of this stance, McLaren (1999) advocates reinvigorating rituals in schools "to spawn liminal zones of learning in the form of either spontaneous or institutionalized communitas" (p. 240). Another shared programmatic thread was their origin within communities of care interested in supporting youths' transition to adulthood. Given this commonality, I turn now to examining care.

Authentic Care

The literature on "color(full)" authentic care, which illuminates how low-income, racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse students benefit from caring cultures, arises from the progressive scholarly traditions of feminism, womanism, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Noddings, 1984; Rolón-Dow, 2005; Thompson, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999). These approaches situate themselves in an awareness of racism, classism, and sexism in U.S. society and share a culturally responsive orientation that seeks to amplify the assets students of color possess from their heritage communities and thereby remedy the shortcomings of unjust institutions, which have historically underserved this population. I also draw on Walker (1993) to distinguish between interpersonal and institutional care.

> In using the term interpersonal caring, I refer to the direct attention an individual gives to meet the psychological, sociological, and academic needs of another individual or individuals. This type of caring may be contrasted with "institutional caring," which also seeks to meet psychological, sociological, and academic needs but provides for those needs to be met directly or indirectly through explicit school policies. In general, institutional caring focuses on the good of the group. (p. 64)

This distinction merits attention if care is to permeate the culture of a whole school rather than exist solely within the purview of particular classrooms or special programs.

Authentic care is a phrase popularized by Angela Valenzuela (1999), whose ethnography of Mexican American students in a Texas high school uncovered two types of caring—authentic and aesthetic. She describes how "schools are structured around aesthetic caring whose essence lies in an attention to things and ideas . . . rather than centering students' learning around a moral ethic of caring that nurtures and values relationships" (p. 22).

She argues that many Mexican-descent youth experience school as "impersonal, irrelevant, and lifeless" and long for genuine connection to teachers who care about them (p. 22). Her argument is that once students feel cared for, they can care about school. Students' pro-school orientations, though, are more likely to develop if curriculum and instruction is culturally relevant and attends to the Latino ideal of becoming *bien educado/a*,[1] which stresses the importance of becoming a caring, responsible, moral human with a communal ethic. In this context, *educación* entails the development of the whole child and encompasses much more than book learning.

Rivera-McCutchen (2012) complicates Valenzuela's (1999) position with her case study of Bridges Institute, an urban high school where students received intensive interpersonal care from teachers but did not experience rigorous academic opportunities. Bridges's culture of low expectations meant that graduates "felt good about themselves but ultimately felt underprepared for further studies" (p. 670). By disconnecting care from high academic expectations, Bridges delivered its own form of subtractive education. Ultimately, Valenzuela documents the subtractive effects of a school where authentic cariño is absent, and Rivera-McCutchen illustrates the crippling effects of care absent academic press. Other scholars (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2010; Hildago & Duncan-Andrade, 2009) provide insight into how critical educators and youth advocates have pursued authentic care.

Critical Care

In their study of two Latino community-based schools, Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) elaborate "critical care," which entails explicitly affirming students' home and community contexts; pursuing rigorous, culturally relevant curricula; and promoting high-quality student-teacher relationships. Interpersonal care surfaces vividly in their portrayals of *familia y communidad* within these schools. The infusion of the Latino/a cultural value of *personalismo* (warm, familial relations) into these settings reflects a desire to build on students' home experiences where close nuclear and extended family relations engender commitments to mutual aid and collective care. By embracing *personalismo*, "staff transcend the boundaries of traditional schooling and create social conditions and relationships that are more aligned with students' cultural orientations and which overlap with extended family life" (p. 421). In this manner, teachers enacted *hard care*, "supportive instrumental relationships and high academic expectations" (p. 413). By demanding high-quality academic work and offering considerable assistance after school within the context of nonauthoritarian and supportive adult-student friendships, these educators avoided *soft care*, which occurs when well-intentioned instructors like the ones in Rivera-McCutchen (2012) fall prey to the "*Ay Bendito*" or *pobrecito* (poor little kid) syndrome and express

care through emotion-laden pity, lowered expectations, and "compensatory' practice[s] aimed at ameliorating the perceived shortcomings of students' communities of origin" (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006, p. 412).

While Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) indicate that *personalismo* was an "informal curricular practice" (p. 423) contributing to an environment where "students also supported each other's learning" (p. 422), their account does not elaborate peer-to-peer expressions of care or formal structures that encouraged the practice of hard care. Institutional care within these schools seems largely predicated on a culturally relevant, project-based curriculum that prepared "students to analyze and transform their lives, the lives of others and the communities in which they reside from critical perspectives through the lenses of racial/ethnic, cultural and politically nationalist affirmation" (p. 418). Other features of institutional care within these schools were nonpunitive discipline policies, a holistic individualized process conflict resolution process, clear mission statements, and guiding principles. Through these various means, critical care enhanced both academic and personal outcomes for students.

Critical Hope

Authentic care also surfaced in the Step Into College (STC) initiative in which 10th graders conducted "Doc Ur Block" community-based action research projects aimed at fomenting social change (Hidalgo & Duncan-Andrade, 2009). These projects unfolded in a classroom grounded in interpersonal care, "cariño and love" (Hidalgo & Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 266) and "helped students re-envision themselves, their communities, and their roles in creating and contributing to counter-narratives that promote hope and self-determination" (Hidalgo & Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 270). Drawing on experiences at STC and other settings, Duncan-Andrade (2009) theorizes the importance of "critical hope," conceptualized as the mutually constitutive interplay of material, Socratic, and audacious hope. Material hope entails harnessing the resources teachers and students possess regardless of the inadequate conditions they face in schools and communities. In practice, material hope plays out in social justice pedagogy where curriculum is meaningfully connected to students' lives and interrogates the material conditions of urban life. Socratic hope refers to the courage necessary to ask questions of the status quo and of one's own relationship to the status quo. Socratic hope embraces the view that "the unexamined life is not worth living" while also acknowledging that such inquiry often involves pain. Duncan-Andrade contends that this pain "may pave the path to justice" (p. 188). Finally, audacious hope focuses on collective struggle and the transformation that occurs when people share victories and pain in community.

Radical Healing

Ginwright (2010) argues that the pain experienced by urban youth of color, who cope daily with the toxicity of the inner city, must be addressed through "radical healing." He asserts that youth who have internalized oppression (shame and hatred of ethnic/racial identities) from the injustices of colonialism, institutional racism, and poverty must recover from psycho-social trauma if they are ever to participate effectively in social change and achieve wellness for themselves and their communities. His stance complicates the notion of soft care, which faults deficit-based, compensatory enactments of care that provide a "haven in a heartless world" in order to protect youth and restore their innocence (Thompson, 1998, p. 533). Ginwright contends that youth need safe havens—not to retreat to innocence, experience acritical glorification, or be saved/fixed—but rather healing spaces where they can productively reflect on their lives and engage in "communal truth-telling" (Thompson, 1998, p. 538). He critiques schools for lacking mechanisms of institutional care to provide such spaces. Ginwright outlines four components of radical healing: (a) strong caring relationships with youth, (b) community/coalition building, (c) healthy ethnic identities, and (d) political activism.

Ginwright (2010) showcases several radical healing settings, among them a summer camp and a young men's group. In these forums, African American youth engage in rituals where they drop their tough, protective exteriors and honestly share their truths, questions, and dreams. He writes:

> I use the term "ritual" to convey the notion that carefully choreographed experiences such as experiential activities or workshops, discussions, or visualizations can serve as powerful gateways to self, social, and spiritual awareness. These rituals . . . foster communal healing . . . [and] awaken young people's political consciousness, build ethnic identity, and form healthy relationships . . . these events bring together people in profound ways because our fragile exteriors are stripped away to reveal our raw humanity. (p. 88)

This description suggests that radical healing rituals entail a kind of soft care where Latino/a youth are compassionately and gently given sufficient safety to expose their "raw humanity" and thereby become soft/real/authentic with themselves and each other. Not only is this kind of socioemotional soft care very different from the pity associated with the *pobrecito* syndrome, but Ginwright contends that the resulting socioemotional vulnerability catalyzes hope and empowers youth to exercise agency to build the kinds of communities where they want to live.

While the constructs of authentic care, critical care, critical hope, and radical healing clearly share important and overlapping themes, their existence in separate spheres dilutes their potential. By synthesizing them into an integrated, holistic, and grounded model of *authentic cariño*, scholars and educators gain a better understanding of how to realize "additive" schooling.

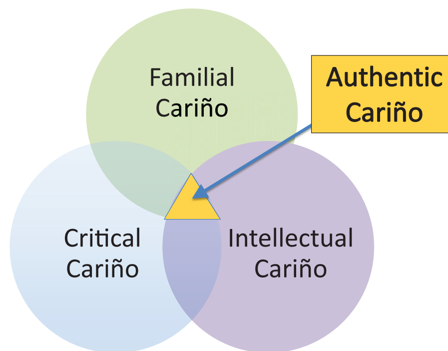

Figure 1. **A model of authentic cariño.**

Toward a Model of Authentic Cariño

The term *authentic cariño* emphasizes a vision of caring grounded in Latino cultural values (*educación, communidad, familia, personalismo*) and honors the legacy of Noddings (1984) and Valenzuela (1999). The qualifier *authentic* not only contrasts with *aesthetic* but also conveys a "complete apprehension of the 'other'" guided by a profound understanding of "the material, physical, psychological, and spiritual needs of youth" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 110). Duncan-Andrade (2006) highlights the allure of cariño, explaining:

> Cariño is often translated as caring, affection, or love, but much is lost in this translation. Cariño is more a concept than a word. It is the foundation of relationships among the poor and working classes—often the only thing left to give, in families raising children on substandard wages. (p. 451)

In my own research, the resonance of *authentic cariño* also surfaced during member checks with research participants, who indicated that this construct captured their ideals for equitable schooling. The choice of this terminology is not intended to suggest that Latinos share a uniform cultural perspective on *cariño, communidad, educación, familia*, or *personalismo* but rather to underscore that this model is a departure from universalistic, colorblind conceptions of care (Thompson, 1998).

Authentic cariño, which can exist within particular classrooms or across an entire school, may be understood as a construct with three components—familial care, intellectual care, and critical care. Figure 1 depicts how these components intersect to produce authentic cariño.

Familial cariño draws on *personalismo* to encompass a relational orientation toward learning wherein teachers genuinely care about students'

entire well-being. A teacher captures this dimension when she says that educators have to treat students "as if they have your [/their] last name" (Rolón-Dow, 2005, p. 103). Familial cariño hinges on establishing reciprocity, trust, and connectedness between and among students and teachers and is well depicted in Ginwright's (2010) accounts of radical healing. Peer-to-peer bonding and support is especially important in order to address the "'social de-capitalization' or limited presence of academically oriented networks" among nondominant youth (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 31). In the ideal, familial cariño seems likely also to include ties to students' biological families. Several scholars mention settings engaging parents as educational partners. Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) allude to family history projects, Piert (2007) details the involvement of family elders as mentors, and Bartlett and García (2011) document Dominican mothers who regarded themselves as part of the "*familia*" of a successful New York City high school. While the metaphor of school as *familia* may evoke patriarchy for feminists, familial *cariño* as conceived here highlights how schools can embrace and share in nonoppressive ways the family's role of nurturing the *educación* of youth. In this way, schools and staff take seriously the role of fostering students' moral, social, and personal development.

Intellectual cariño requires that educators care about students' intellectual development, aiming to foster their habits of mind and engagement with big ideas. Unlike the low expectations at Bridges Institute (Rivera-McCutchen, 2012), schools where intellectual cariño matters are places where academic challenge is paired with appropriate supports. The rigorous and culturally relevant curricula described by Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) and Hidalgo and Duncan-Andrade (2009) are expressions of intellectual cariño. Importantly, the rationale for developing minds includes the instrumental goals of academic achievement and college admission but also encompasses what Duncan-Andrade (2009) calls "Socratic sensibility," a capacity for metacognitive and existential reflection as well as lifelong learning. Schools where intellectual cariño flourishes exemplify cultures of engaged learning (Athanases, Achinstein, Curry, & Ogawa, 2016), where youth not only acquire knowledge and skills but also expand their perspectives in ways that enhance their capacity to make meaning and change.

Finally, critical cariño refers to caring undertaken with historical and political consciousness of students' communities and a desire to interrupt inequity. Critical care, critical hope, and radical healing coalesce to accentuate the importance of grounding schools in social justice. Curriculum infused with critical cariño enables students to examine how ethnicity, social class, and gender shape history and their own lives. Critical cariño approaches cultivate students' critical consciousness in an effort to resist and transform the dominant social order. Additionally, they involve explicit attention to cultures of power with an aim toward helping students master dominant discourses while still valuing and sustaining their home cultures (Rivera-

McCutchen, 2012). In alignment with critiques of narrowly defined conceptions of resistance (Hildago & Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994; Valenzuela, 1999), critical cariño appreciates both youth who take "positive courses of action to achieve socially accepted goals and . . . [thereby] break down constraining barriers" (Mehan et al., 1994, p. 113) as well as those engaging in overt political action to transform oppressive power relations.

Few empirical accounts of school-wide authentic cariño and school-based adolescent coming of age rituals exist. This article fills this gap by examining the enactment of firewalks in a school grounded in authentic cariño. Through these images of possibility, I seek to illuminate ways schools may better serve urban Latino/a youth.

Methods

The data reported here come from a four-year "critical case study" (Flyvbjerg, 2001) of Mario Molina High (MHS), a small, urban, public California high school.[2] My exploratory investigation of firewalks arose during a broader project examining organizational structures and instructional interactions associated with Latino/a students' engagement in academically challenging work. Data include 43 semi-structured interviews with leaders, teachers, students, and parents; a faculty survey; school documents; and 220 hours of observations of school, classroom, and community activities. Constructivist grounded theory and case study design were employed to obtain an emic understanding of meanings, processes, and contexts and to anchor emergent theoretical claims in interpretations of raw data (Charmaz, 2006; Merriam, 1988).

Of particular relevance to this article are fieldnotes from the firewalks of five sophomores and three seniors as well as a four-day field trip to Yosemite National Park, during which sophomores undertook firewalk preparation. Obtaining access to these closed and confidential rituals proved challenging. While several facilitators refused access, citing concerns about an outsider shifting dynamics, five facilitators secured students' consent and allowed observations. Students authorized audio recordings on three occasions, but due to poor sound quality recordings were only selectively transcribed. Interviews with the principal, a youth coach, and three student focus groups provided additional perspectives. Because these observations and interviews transpired in English, no translation was necessary. Finally, firewalk schedules, facilitation handouts, and student handouts afforded insight into the institutional role of these rituals.

The private nature of rites of passage makes the observational data noteworthy. Given restricted access, researchers have relied heavily on participant interviews rather than on "detailed visual and aural descriptions" of enacted rituals (Quantz, 1999, p. 493). My study attempts to remedy the

inadequate attention paid to the performative aspects of ritual while also remaining mindful of the complexity of ritual. Moore and Myerhoff (1977) caution that any given ritual "invariably alludes to more than it says, and has many meanings at once" (p. 5). They further assert "analyses of rituals can never be exhaustive or definitive because participants themselves cannot explain some of the effects of ritual upon them" (p. 13).

Data analysis occurred iteratively. I read fieldnotes, interviews, and documents identifying a range of themes and descriptive codes. I also formulated meta-matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One focused on conversation analysis, delineating the questions posed to firewalkers, audience contributions, turn-taking patterns, and adult facilitator roles. Another, a content analysis, involved coding speech within a firewalk conversation and placing relevant excerpts under topical headings. In tandem with these analyses, I consulted relevant literature to identify conceptual tools to enhance data interpretation and better understand the distinguishing features of MHS's firewalks. Finally, I wrote analytic memos examining participants' framing of topics, critical moments of firewalks, and links to authentic cariño.

This research was undertaken by a culturally and linguistically diverse team (including seven Latino/as, two Asians, and three Whites), who shared a commitment to educational equity. Together we regularly interrogated our subjectivities and negotiated divergent interpretations. Personally, I, like McKamey (2011), reflected on how my White, upper-middle-class, and gendered perspectives on caring as well as my experiences as a high school teacher and teacher educator shaped my work. Given my interest in reciprocal relations with participants (Curry, 2012), I chaperoned field trips, videoed teachers for National Board Certification, organized the library, volunteered as a writing coach, and attended community gatherings. These activities fortified my understanding of the school as well as my friendships with MHS staff and students.

School Context

MHS, a science/health-focused Title 1 public high school located in northern California, is driven by a mission to alter the inequities and injustices experienced by students and families living in the low-income, racially and culturally diverse communities it serves. In particular, MHS concentrates on developing bilingual health professionals to diversify health care institutions and improve public health. Founded in 2001 with significant local input, MHS views itself as a "full service community school" and operates with robust community-based partnerships, including an onsite county-funded health clinic, school-based counseling offered through a partnership with a graduate school, an award-winning extended day program, and a college counseling center (Achinstein, Athanases, Curry, Ogawa, & de Oliveira,

2013; Achinstein, Curry, Ogawa, & Athanases, 2014). The school embraces personalization and rigorous, project-based academics, striving to develop students' habits of mind, life, and work.

Of MHS's 262 students, 87% received free/reduced-price lunch, 76% were Latino/a (predominantly Mexican descent), and 33% were English learners. Among the 17 teachers, 8 were teachers of color: 6 Asian, 2 mixed race (African American/Mexican and East Indian/White), and 1 Latino/a. Teachers were predominantly prepared in university teacher education master's/credential programs. The school's 2012 State Annual Performance Index was 719 out of 1,000.[3] From 2010 to 2012, MHS's Latino/a cohort graduation rate averaged 69% while the district averaged 50%. An average of 59% of MHS's Latino/a graduates from 2007 to 2011 fulfilled University of California and California State University required "A-G" courses compared to the district average of 43%. In its online accountability report card, MHS reported leading the district for 5 years in A-G completion rates and college attendance rates. During the year firewalks were observed, 84% of graduates were college-bound. MHS resides in a large, urban, high-minority, high-poverty district, where leadership and budget crises have prompted dramatic restructuring. When this research occurred, 80% of the district's high schools faced No Child Left Behind sanctions. Within this chaotic context, MHS's relatively higher performance afforded it some measure of autonomy.

Findings

Authentic Cariño Pervades the Cultura of MHS

Firewalks were representative of a wide range of innovative practices at MHS. In order to understand these rites, readers must appreciate the unique context in which they transpired. As documented elsewhere (Achinstein et al., 2013, 2014; Curry, 2013), MHS students experienced "additive schooling, an approach that builds on and extends the social, cultural, and linguistic assets brought by multilingual, diverse student populations, and aims to prepare bicultural and bilingual students to negotiate their complex worlds" (Bartlett & García, 2011, pp. 21–22). MHS embraced social justice through its mission to disrupt societal inequity and injustice and was a place where authentic cariño flourished at an institutional level. Walking on campus, visitors immediately encounter signs of the school's multi-ethnic and progressive ethos. Colorful murals of Aztec symbols, Chinese dragons, and Native American wisdom ("I choose to live by choice, not by chance; to make changes, not excuses; to be motivated to excel, not compete; to listen to the inner voice, not the random opinions of others.") adorn the stairwells. Doors painted with images of activists and rebels—Ghandi, Cesar Chavez, Rosa Parks, Leila Khaled, and Tiburcio Vásquez—open into classrooms decorated with students' work ("People are afraid to say what [crime] they've

seen. When we're afraid, we're not free and things will never get better''), inspirational quotes (''None of us is as smart as all of us together''), political posters (''Justice for Oscar Grant,'' ''Foreclose the 1%! Occupy the banks!''[4]), Mexican flags, college banners, and photo collages of smiling students. This bricolage communicates MHS's political awareness and connection to students and their heritage communities.

The schools' culture of authentic cariño surfaced most prominently in: (a) a whole child orientation, (b) high expectations for learning, and (c) a commitment to community health; these features align with (a) familial, (b) intellectual, and (c) critical cariño. First, MHS educators enacted familial cariño through their focus on developing the whole child, not only students' academic selves. Mr. Avila, a Spanish teacher, explained this value:

> We want to, and I believe this with my whole heart . . . we want to interrupt those social injustices in education, in our community, so that we can make—we don't just want to make students to go to college, but we also want to make great people out of them.

This commitment to ''make great people'' reflected the school's interest in helping students become *bien educado*[5]—caring, thoughtful citizens with moral and social consciences. Two institutional structures instantiated this value, namely, an advisory program and a set of guiding principles underscoring the importance of habits of life, mind, and work.

MHS's advisory program involved cross-grade cohort groups meeting daily with a teacher to engage in team building, collective reflection, silent reading, and study halls. Advisories provided forums for sustained dialogue about community and personal issues as well as spaces for creative play. Because students usually had the same advisor and co-advisees for four years, advisories were characterized by *personalismo* (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006) where members were well known and enmeshed in authentic relationships. One senior explained that advisory members knew ''about my family, my struggles, my weaknesses and my strengths . . . [so] you cannot hide.'' A humanities teacher elaborated:

> We want you to care about each other. That's why we have mixed grade level advisories. It's really important, cooperation, community, we want you to be a part of your community, we want you to make your community better in some way than how you found it. We want you to realize that you are part of something larger than just yourself and your own desires, and . . . the road was paved for you by someone else and now it's your responsibility to . . . teach back and give back to other kids.

This excerpt, which highlights MHS's emphasis on mutual support, especially between students, contrasts with the alienation and isolation

experienced by nondominant youth in subtractive educational settings (McLaren, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

In addition to advisories, MHS reinforced its whole child orientation through the promotion of habits of life, mind, and work. A "habit chart" was posted in most classrooms and outlined habits of life (compassion, courage, integrity, and curiosity), work (focus, organization, revision, cooperation, and effort), and mind (discussed later). These habits frequently appeared in daily learning targets, evaluation rubrics for academic projects, advisory lesson plans, and professional development agendas. References to the habits saturated the discourse of MHS and communicated the school's enthusiasm for honoring students' full humanity.

Intellectual cariño manifested in high academic expectations for all students and goals to interrupt patterns of underachievement among youth of color. The principal launched each school year with a speech outlining state and national graduation rates disaggregated by race and compared these statistics with MHS performance. He praised students for beating the odds and implored them to continue this tradition. Despite using achievement data to motivate students, the school scorned the nationwide emphasis on testing. One document explains:

> We believe that standardized tests are not the only way to measure a student's learning. Of course we want MHS students to be prepared to take those tests and do well on them, but we also want MHS students to be transformed into life-long learners who are engaged and excited about learning. Tests do not transform students, learning does!

Learning at MHS emphasized habits of mind (inquiry, perspectives, evidence, logical reasoning and analysis, and reflection/metacognition). All students participated in an untracked college preparatory "A-G" sequence, while a "no D policy" set high standards, boosted students' eligibility for four-year universities, and prevented GPA decline. Courses revolved around rigorous alternative assessments called certifications requiring students to demonstrate mastery over content and skills as well as capstone projects known as sophomore and senior defenses, where students showcased their learning to community panels. Through these curricular approaches, which explored potent topics like war, activism, police brutality, food justice, AIDS, and poverty, MHS embraced sociocritical perspectives and delivered on its oft repeated slogan that "Reading and writing are revolutionary."

Beyond rigorous critical pedagogy, the school embraced critical cariño through its mission to diversify health professions and improve community health. This focus emanated from the dual recognition that (a) community health is linked to collective well-being, economic prosperity, and civic participation and (b) inequitable systems perpetuating health disparities must be dismantled. As one community partner explained to students:

> In order to get the best health care possible, people need to be able to go to people who look like them, who they can relate to. . . . We can change the health care profession . . . when people like yourself, when they become medical professionals and when they come back home to work, they heal their communities and that's why we're here.

This goal to nurture health professionals contrasts sharply with portrayals of schools as sites of reproduction grooming nondominant youth for working-class drudgery within capitalist economies (MacLeod, 1987; McLaren, 1999; Willis, 1977). Importantly, the school's aspiration to cultivate doctors and nurses was framed not only as a means to individual economic mobility but also as a path to community well-being. The attention to students' occupational futures as evidenced in a robust internship program and college counseling also represented a departure from subtractive schools where students are "socialized toward the ideal of someday attending college but insufficiently socialized into an understanding of the tools and knowledge they would need to reach such a goal" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 151). In sum, MHS's commitment to diversify the medical field represents an example of critical cariño since students were encouraged to see themselves as change agents capable of transforming health care and their communities.

Firewalks, which were milestone events and graduation requirements, unfolded against the backdrop of this pervasive authentic cariño culture. Initially instituted as a culminating activity for seniors, the faculty added a sophomore firewalk when they realized seniors were struggling to articulate themselves effectively. With this revision, MHS sought to scaffold students' self-reflection and self-presentation over the course of high school. The stated goal of firewalks was for students to demonstrate what they had learned about themselves and honestly reflect on their growth as students and community members. Firewalks occurred in small groups (13–15 students) and were facilitated by teachers (individually or in pairs), who encouraged participants to support and challenge each firewalker to be emotionally vulnerable and deeply metacognitive regarding his or her values, habits, successes, struggles, and goals. One youth coach characterized firewalks as "peer-driven" rites where youth "declare who they are" and where the audience decided if firewalkers exemplified MHS's values. All observers had a say in whether a student graduated or progressed to junior year; on occasion, a poor performance held students back from promotion.

Firewalk lesson plans included an image of feet walking over a bed of red, glowing coals. This metaphor, while not often discussed explicitly, held symbolic power, evoking the potential for purification, healing, and transcendence. In MHS lore, this rite was associated with scrutinizing one's character and actions to ensure becoming *bien educado/a*. Students

anticipated the process with anxiety but also recognized the affirming power of these rituals. In the following sections, I describe firewalk enactment to illuminate how MHS orchestrated these rites of passage and how youth experienced them. Next, I examine the ways in which firewalks fostered and constrained particular forms of care.

Sophomore Firewalks—A Dress Rehearsal

Sophomore firewalks occurred at the end of the year when classes had ended and students spent three weeks earning art or physical education credit. All sophomores visited Yosemite for four days, an excursion that maps onto van Gennep's (1909/1960) separation phase in that students left familiar environs and entered a liminal period in the wilderness, sleeping in tents and undertaking physical and socioemotional challenges within firewalk groups. These activities, which exposed students to opportunities often only available to more privileged youth, required students to take risks. According to Andrews (1999), rites of passage in such settings encourage participants to contemplate the wilderness and complexity within themselves while becoming more cognizant of connections to nature and humanity.

Trip organizers anchored each day in Yosemite around the habits of mind, life, and work that students must exhibit in firewalks. The second day focused on cooperation and community and included activities where students performed trust falls, navigated a rope spider web, and wrote letters to a classmate. Facilitators explicitly situated these activities within the context of firewalks. For example, Ms. Whitmore, a science teacher, invited dyads to share what they admired about their partner and later share a personal struggle. Giving instructions, she said:

> This is your firewalk circle. If you don't feel comfortable with this yet, you can sit in silence for one minute and look at the beautiful surroundings, but know that you will be pushed in your firewalk. You'll be firewalked together. This is an intro to that firewalk. I encourage you to be honest and vulnerable with somebody else.

In a similar manner, Mr. Avila prefaced the trust fall by saying:

> This activity is a good way for you to show some trust in people and in your classmates, but it's really hard. This is your firewalk group. It's all about trust. You have to make sure that you trust each other.

Students undertook these challenges with seriousness and emotion (occasionally crying) and also engaged in post-activity debriefings to share insights.

On the last day, students hiked seven miles to Nevada Falls (a 2,700 foot elevation gain). Trip leaders framed reaching the top as a metaphor for

graduation and insisted that they "leave no sophomore behind." It was everyone's job to make sure that everyone completed the hike and that they as a community graduated together. The trek proved arduous for some, especially those in poor shoes and those who skipped breakfast. Some hikers carried backpacks for stragglers. In one instance, a student named Leticia told a tearful and lagging Araceli, "If you don't make it to the top, then I am a failure. You can do this." Eventually, the entire class reached the summit. Swept up in euphoric elation and class pride, students partook in an impromptu memorial for a student recently killed in a drive-by shooting and ended by raising their fists in solidarity. The physicality of the Yosemite activities calls to mind McLaren's (1999) emphasis on the somatic dimension of ritual processes whereby participants viscerally construct knowledge through their bodies and meaning becomes "enfleshed" (p. 206). McLaren argues that bodies are "sites of cultural inscription" (p. 274) and that liberatory pedagogies "enable students to construct meanings that are lived in the body, felt in the bones, and situated within the larger body politic in the form of public meta-narratives (as distinct from master narratives) aimed at increasing social justice" (p. 277). Through Yosemite, sophomores incorporated into their flesh the idea that vulnerability, risk taking, solidarity, and care were behaviors that yielded heightened meaning.

Firewalks commenced three days after the trip. In a classroom, students sat in a circle, a configuration symbolizing "communication and equality, inclusion and affirmation, commitment and community" (Andrews, 1999, p. 37). The day's schedule featured eight firewalks staggered over 30-minute increments. Reflection prompts included: "Habits you struggle with. Habits you excel with. How have you demonstrated that you are ready to be a junior? How will you become 'legendary' in your final years of high school?" Sessions began with a firewalker making a statement and then the audience (students and teacher) posing questions. Many questions were repeated across firewalks, for example: What inspires you? Do you have any regrets from the first two years of high school? How have you showed leadership? What are your college plans? What career do you want to pursue? Where do you think you will be in five years? Do you feel like you have enough support from friends? Family? and What's your favorite class? These questions nurtured students' Socratic sensibility (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) by requiring them to examine their lives and sometimes uncover painful truths. On average, sophomore firewalkers were asked 21 questions.

After questioning, the facilitator asked witnesses to stand if they felt the firewalker had been "real" and was ready to become a junior. Standing took on symbolic resonance since it required a silent and physical expression (or enfleshment) of support for the firewalker. Standing conveyed, "I have been moved by you. I respect you. I honor you. I celebrate you." Additionally, the circle became a tighter container in this moment, which contributed to

a palpable ethos of unity and communitas. Once standing, students verbally took turns affirming the firewalker.

In two of the five sophomore firewalks, some audience members opted to not stand. In one case, Randy was encouraged to reexamine his choice of friends ("Let them know you need something different. You can't be distracted." "I know you're capable of finding a new set of friends because I did that."). In another case, students responded to Leticia (the student who coaxed Araceli to Nevada Falls) by urging her to overcome challenges—parents who expected her to cook, clean, and do child care; an unsafe neighborhood; undocumented legal status; an uncle with cancer; and so on—and focus on academics as a path to a different life. Some students asked her to complete late assignments and seek teachers for help ("If you really want to pass, you shouldn't be on Facebook, you should be studying." "You have to be more communicative with your teachers and your advisor about what's going on.") Another student offered support:

> I want to be there for you no matter what, you can push me away, but you're my advisee, so we're close. I have your back 100%. If you need help with any subject, I will give it to you. I will google my life away for you. I swear to God. We love you very much.

This student's public expression of love for her co-advisee is a radical declaration within an institution where emotional displays are often off limits and the masculinist discourse of rationality and intellectuality prevails. Moreover, these words reveal how firewalks nurtured peer-to-peer social capital. A disconsolate Leticia, though, hardly acknowledged this caring offer. Realizing her distress, Mr. Avila moved quickly to wrap up the conversation, noting:

> We all fall down and then we get up. . . . A lot of students struggle here with difficult homes and they want to run away and I tell them, "There's a way to get out of the house. Go to college, get away from the problems. . . . You have the power in your hands."

In exchanges like these, teachers and peers practiced hard caring (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006), pushing firewalkers toward self-awareness and actions needed to become juniors.

Once successfully "firewalked," these students were no longer considered sophomores but rather juniors ready for additional responsibilities like workplace internships and increasingly rigorous coursework. Thus, firewalkers entered the third rite of passage phase, returning to MHS with a new status and presumably a deeper sense of self. Overall, the sophomore firewalk was a rite of intensification, which reinforced the school's values and fostered strong class bonds while also offering youth guidance and support to negotiate their emergent identities.

Checklist for Senior Firewalk Speeches	Score (1=Yikes! – 5=Great!)
Effective Communication ❑ *I can deliver my speech in academic language free of grammatical, spelling, and organizational errors.* ❑ *I can include at least 2 different rhetorical devices to make my speech more engaging and meaningful.*	1 2 3 4 5
Evidence ❑ *I can provide compelling, and specific examples to share my high school experience.*	1 2 3 4 5
Reflection & Metacognition ❑ *I can effectively communicate my high school experience with honesty.* ❑ *I can articulate the larger significance of what I learned and how it will help me in the future.*	1 2 3 4 5

Figure 2. **Mario Molina High senior firewalk opening statements rubric.**
Source. Mario Molina High student handout, 2012.

Senior Firewalks—The Real Deal

While sophomore firewalks were 30 minutes, senior firewalks were hour-long events held within advisory classrooms during the final weeks of school on days with special bell schedules. In preparation, seniors completed self-assessments evaluating their habits of life and work. They also outlined future plans, strengths, struggles, and growth. Finally, they composed opening statements in accordance with a rubric that reflects high academic challenge (see Figure 2).

Audience participants also prepared by brainstorming the academic and personal strengths and weaknesses of each senior in their advisory. They were told, "You will be helping our seniors graduate! This is your last opportunity to push our seniors before they leave MHS and enter life. Your input and questions are valuable in making the firewalk an important part of their graduation." This emphasis on mutual responsibility and collective solidarity distinguishes these rituals from the instructional rites McLaren (1999) observed, which "militate[d] against the development of intense peer bonds" (p. 188) and discouraged social capital between students.

In order to orient freshmen, advisories simulated firewalks with advisors taking the "hot seat." By engaging students as interrogators of an authority figure (the teacher/advisor), the resulting role inversion primed participants to relinquish hierarchical status scripts and experience themselves as agents responsible for each other's learning. Preparation also involved dialogue

regarding norms of confidentiality, participation expectations, the ritual sequence, and recollection of memorable firewalks. Advisors stressed personal accountability and guided students to honestly assess seniors. The advisors' script recommended that they say:

> When you stand, you stand for real. You have a responsibility to the seniors to be honest, thoughtful and reflective. Each of you holds a stake as to whether-or-not this senior graduates. If you do not stand for a senior, you have the *responsibility* to explain why you are not standing. Know that your voice is going to be heard if you don't stand for that senior. On the other side, if you stand just to make it easy, then you are taking away a powerful learning opportunity for them before they graduate.

Seniors showed up to firewalks "dressed for success," sporting professional attire as if they were anticipating job interviews. Their outward appearance separated them from other students, signaling their readiness to enter a new life phase. The ritual unfolded in a tight circle with observers sitting in chairs almost knee to knee with several reserved chairs in the middle. The firewalker occupied a central chair, while seniors, who the firewalker had selected to push the conversation, filled remaining seats. Facilitators opened the ritual by reminding participants of their roles and confidentiality commitments and then invited the firewalker to speak. Upon completion, juniors scored them along the rubric (see Figure 2).

Next, questioning began. On average, firewalkers were asked 18 questions. While generic questions used in the sophomore firewalks resurfaced, each senior also faced deeply personal questions. Testifying to the power of these questions, one junior remarked, "They ask you questions that are real, things that you're gonna have to face in your life. It's an eye-opener. It actually gets you seeing how your life is gonna be, not just thinking that it's gonna be easy." For example, Patricia was asked why she compared herself to her high-achieving brother and succumbed to self-doubt. Andreas, who lost friends to gun violence during high school and nearly dropped out, was asked about coping with loss and attending college while still living in a violent environment. Reina was pressed to ponder anger management and episodes of depression stemming from homelessness, an absent father, an estranged mother, and the death of her grandmother. The emotionally intense and highly individualized nature of each firewalk demonstrates how these rituals responded sensitively to the psycho-social needs arising from each senior's particular experiences. These were not scripted, regimented rites but rather organic dialogues in which observers listened actively and lovingly to affirm firewalkers' honest self-appraisals. As firewalkers confronted questions that communicated high expectations, the circle enacted hard caring. The vulnerability required by firewalks also provided a path for youth to deepen advisory relationships.

The ritual concluded with the opportunity to stand. In Patricia and Andreas's cases, the entire circle stood, spoke affirmations (e.g., "You're so smart!" "You will be the first in your family to graduate!" "You've made great progress!"), clapped, and then partook in a celebratory "jelly roll" hug where all participants joyfully wrapped themselves around the firewalker. This physical demonstration of support and affection evokes again McLaren's (1999) notion of enfleshment as well as Turner's (1969/1991) communitas. In this manner, the consummation of the firewalk validated the power of being real, being reflexive, and being in community while also symbolically transmitting the idea that an individual senior's achievement was in actuality a communal victory.

Not all firewalks, though, resolved in blissful harmony. In Reina's case, two adults and one junior remained seated. Ms. Barrett, Reina's ninth-grade English teacher, explained:

> I love you. I've seen tremendous growth in you. I am proud of you, but . . . you contradicted yourself. You said you could rise above conflict, but you're gripped by this new conflict [with Angela]. I wouldn't be the person you want me to be for you, if I stood up right now. I hope you can find a way to move forward. I'm glad you're getting counseling. I totally believe in you and that's why I am sitting.

Ms. Barrett's open declaration of love as well as her belief in Reina's capacity to "move forward" highlights the presence of profound interpersonal care in firewalks.

After hearing the concerns of others still seated, Reina's advisor, Ms. Dupont, offered Reina the opportunity to advocate for herself. A senior proposed Reina commit to a conflict resolution session with Angela and also identify something positive about Angela. Reina's agreement with this plan prompted both adults to stand, leaving the junior still seated. He shared his concerns:

> You said you don't have the units you need yet. You also need to work on this conflict resolution stuff. . . . I know you can do it, but I want to see you put in the effort. I think you should firewalk again next year after you've fulfilled your credits. I know you are working on your anger, but I want you to have a different point of view where you are no longer saying people better watch out to not get on your bad side. You also need to work harder in school.

With passion and conviction, Reina rose from her chair, moved toward her critic, and replied:

> If I didn't put effort in, I wouldn't be here. I could've been kicked out. I passed my senior defense. Mr. G was like, "I knew you had it in you!" He was surprised I didn't pass with distinction. If you look at my transcript [gesturing to an invisible transcript and shaking it before her peer], even though it's all messed up, you would see I could've taken the easy way out, but I chose to come back here and work hard.

With this brief speech, Reina convinced the lone holdout to stand.

Her advisor spoke last:

> I'm standing for you first because your senior defense was the best . . . I saw. It was like a nurse was in the room! It was awesome! You can do whatever you want to do and that is a great strength. Second you passed the CAHSEE.[6] Third, the reason I pushed you on the Angela thing is it's important to address things instead of ignoring them . . . you need to be able to talk with people when you're upset with them.

These words affirmed Reina while still pressing her to work on conflict resolution. Ms. Dupont's remark, "You can do whatever you want to do," honored the resilience and transformation Reina had demonstrated in overcoming experiences with rape, gangs, and drugs, even as it also reflected meritocratic views dominant in U.S. society. Importantly, Reina's own testimony acknowledged several institutional care structures (an extended restorative justice process and school-based mental health clinicians) as well as classmates and school-based adults like Ms. Dupont that supported her through high school. She considered herself fortunate for "always having had a group to count on." Her firewalk thus conveyed to audience members the importance of both institutional and interpersonal sources of support. Furthermore, in sharing lived experiences of sexuality, addiction, and urban violence, Reina broke silences, transgressed traditional school discourse, and exhibited profound vulnerability, thereby modeling to younger peers ways to resist and confront oppressive systems that may threaten to push them out of school. In sum, senior firewalks bound the school community together, communicated MHS's highest aspirations, and allowed students to grapple with their futures and identities.

Firewalks as Expressions of Care

The foregoing accounts of firewalks feature many expressions of care. This section unpacks those interactions, exploring how firewalk enactment fostered and constrained familial, intellectual, and critical care. While familial cariño emerged most robustly, dimensions of intellectual and critical cariño were also present. Furthermore, as official school requirements, firewalks were institutional care structures, which promoted interpersonal care not only between students and teachers but perhaps most importantly (and uniquely) among cross-grade peers.

Familial Cariño: Cultivating a Collective Social Conscience

Firewalks built on bonds established in class trips and advisory, fostering high levels of interpersonal trust and care where members of the circle saw their progress and survival as linked and interdependent. In this way,

firewalks contributed to students' educación or "sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility" (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23). When sophomores coaxed peers up to Nevada Falls and took joint responsibility for seeing each other through to graduation, mutual aid and collective care was evident. Similarly, when students took seriously their obligation to stand only when truly persuaded by a firewalker, they sought to discern what choice would best serve the firewalker's growth and well-being. Graciela, a junior, illustrated this aspect of familial cariño when remembering her decision to not stand for a friend.

> It's difficult at times, 'cause I had a friend of mine in the hot seat. I didn't feel that she was ready to move on, but then she was my friend. . . . So it was difficult to know if I should stand or not . . . I didn't stand . . . then I told her why, "You said this or that." If I stood up, she will feel that I thought she was doing the correct thing, when I didn't really think so. I think it helped her in a way. She's in college now.

Graciela's account illuminates how firewalks promoted peer-to-peer accountability animated by a concern for the welfare of others. The act of standing (or not) elevated both students' sense of mutual responsibility and their understanding that constructive, loving feedback aids growth of the whole person.

Evidence that students perceived their peers' critiques as caring and transformational surfaced in students' recollections of firewalks as catalysts for reconciling present conduct with future dreams. Marisol, a junior, reported:

> If you're doing bad stuff, let's say they know that you're doing drugs or something, they'll be like, "What would your mom think if she knows that you're doing this or that?" Like, when you think about it, you'll think about the bad things that you do, what they know about you that your mom doesn't know, and you'll cry, because you know that you want a future for yourself and you're, like, doing the wrong thing.

These remarks show how firewalks permitted youth to express expectations for others in caring, empowering ways. Moreover, the rite's performance in an intimate circle of witnesses contributed toward a sense of comradeship that heightened students' collective social conscience.

Marisol's reference to "bad" behaviors unknown to her parents raises questions about the role of families in these rites. While sophomore families were invited to write letters called "palancas" (a Spanish word meaning "lever") to lift up students in Yosemite, families were not fully informed about firewalks. Unlike the program documented by Piert (2007) that involved home-based activities connected to rites of passage, MHS families played no such role. Interestingly, the apparent disjuncture between

firewalks and families enabled some students like Leticia and Reina to openly discuss difficult home experiences and receive support. It is unlikely, however, that their parents would appreciate having their families' "dirty laundry" displayed so publicly, even if such discussions occurred in confidential settings. Most typically, though, firewalkers invoked family members as motivators for educational achievement and mature conduct, as was the case with Marisol, who altered her behavior after contemplating how "doing the wrong thing" would disappoint her mother and harm her future. Thus, firewalks seemed to strengthen students' desire to honor families through academic success.

The profound intimacy of these forums, which encouraged explicit disclosures of personal challenges, carried inherent dangers capable of eroding the very peer-peer and teacher-student trust engendered by familial cariño. Indeed, the principal reported that a nationally known school reformer had observed firewalks and was "appalled." She raised concerns about students blocking graduation and/or promotion and the deeply personal, socioemotional content of these sessions. She worried about the capacity of participants to manage psychologically intense issues as well as medical/health privacy. While facilitators encouraged firewalkers with serious problems (homelessness, addiction, violence, self-injury/cutting, grief, etc.) to seek professional help and could direct them to the campus health clinic, onsite mental health clinicians, and other community partners, this critic speculated that firewalks themselves might be traumatic experiences for some youth. These reservations are partly dispelled by research showing that interventions sharing the firewalk's reliance on self-help/mutual aid with minimal professional involvement have been found effective at promoting children's wellness (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001). Certainly though, MHS's successful implementation of firewalk rituals hinged on the presence of institutionalized authentic cariño as evidenced in its advisory structure, onsite health support services, and social justice mission.

Intellectual Cariño: Cultivating Reflexivity and a Socratic Sensibility

Preparation and participation in firewalks demanded intellectual activity and engagement. By requiring students to grapple with personally meaningful problems and issues, firewalks legitimized academic inquiry into the self and nurtured Socratic introspection. Seniors applied logical reasoning and evidence substantiation when they completed analytic reflection exercises to assess their habits of life and work, formulated plans for future growth, and drafted speeches to share in firewalk circles. In a similar fashion, audience members displayed habits of mind as they analyzed the academic and character strengths/weaknesses of their senior co-advisees. The performance of firewalks also entailed critical thinking. Audience members had

to formulate incisive questions to push peers toward self-discovery and evaluate the firewalker's readiness for advancement; meanwhile, firewalk initiates had to respond thoughtfully and spontaneously to questions, logically arguing the merits of their case. The dialogue (and occasional debate) engendered by these rituals encouraged students to view themselves as knowers and thinkers engaged in an ongoing quest to learn more about themselves, each other, and the world.

Additionally, firewalks afforded opportunities to validate students' intellectual work and academic identities. In glimpses of peers cautioning Randy against friends distracting him from studying and of others coaching Leticia to curtail her Facebook time and seek teachers' help, it is clear that these students belonged to a pro-school, academically oriented peer network where they cared about learning and achievement. Reina's pride in and praise for her senior defense, as well as students' closing affirmations to firewalkers for being smart, metacognitive, and the first in their families to graduate, reflected students' internalization of MHS's high academic expectations. Commenting on how her firewalk shaped her school trajectory, Esperanza explained:

> Firewalks are a big part of our school. . . . For example, I had bad grades . . . so I had to talk about it. I had to reflect on why I have my grades and if, like, my life at home or any of my friends are affecting me. People give you opinions and advice. I think that helps you a lot so that you change the way you see yourself and the way you do things. I actually changed a lot from sophomore year . . . I just realized I can't be fooling around. I have to fix my grades. I think that's a big part of our school that's good . . . I just realized that I want a future for myself, I don't want to be stuck here forever. I want to go to college and I want to get a degree.

Esperanza credited her firewalk with helping her claim a student identity.

For other students, firewalks offered chances to recognize untapped gifts. In his firewalk, Andreas's advisor shared:

> You didn't think you were a good writer. I fought hard to keep you in the college writing class because I got the sense that you were just coming to recognize your talent. I hope you embrace that part of yourself more and more. . . . My favorite part of being a writing teacher is you get a snapshot into someone's soul and I want desperately for you to see what I saw in you yourself.

Ms. Howard's testimony demonstrates how adults played key roles in firewalks and provided perspectives that further enriched the expression of intellectual cariño. Through these rituals, students and adults constructed knowledge together, recognizing self-knowledge and reflexivity as important resources for making change in self and others.

Critical Cariño: Cultivating Change Agents

At first blush, firewalks may seem bereft of interactions that seed "active resistance and struggle against the seductive lure of the American Way" (Warfield-Coppock, 1992, p. 494). To the extent that firewalk ceremonies are adult-imposed rituals that students are coerced to participate in if they want to graduate, these rites run the risk of being contrived ritual performances that communicate obedience to dominant power structures. Furthermore, firewalks through their symbolic endorsement of dominant, meritocratic paradigms as evidenced in "dressing for success," the reification of a college education as the ticket to becoming valued, and bootstrap remarks like "You can do whatever you want to do!" or "The power is in your hands!" may be viewed as mechanisms propping up the status quo and co-opting students into false consciousness. These potential constraints are substantiated by content analyses, which revealed no explicit, critical reframing of student narratives to interrogate the historicized, socio-political structures shaping their lives and communities.

Despite this absence, firewalks embodied some elements of critical cariño. By centering students' lived realities, these rituals generated some awareness of oppressive structures that impact communities of color. In the telling of and listening to each other's often vulnerable stories, students became sensitized to the painful realities of others. Camila shared how firewalks heightened her awareness of the plight of the undocumented:

> In our advisory, there's different people. So some people have access to—they're from here, they were born here, and they have financial aid and all that stuff, and it's sad for people who don't, who are immigrants. And that's when those questions that they get asked, like, "How are you gonna pay for that?" it's just very, like, serious questions that makes 'em think a lot. And they start crying, because they know that they don't have the same opportunities that people who were born here do.

Camila's sadness for undocumented peers reveals how these conversations afforded opportunities for students to understand the experiences of others and gain awareness of the "unequal distribution of care along racial lines" (Rolón-Dow, 2005, p. 98). Given Valenzuela's (1999) finding that limited cross-generational communication among immigrant youth fueled harmful misperceptions, Camila's remarks also highlight how firewalks forged intergenerational understanding and bonds of solidarity potentially conducive to social activism.

Her testimony, though, begs additional questions regarding firewalks' attention to students' cultural identities and heritage communities. While MHS students are predominantly Latino/a, the presence of non-Latino/a students in firewalks appears to have constrained explicit attention to race and ethnicity. Except for a few fleeting references (one firewalker was urged to

improve his Spanish, another bragged about code-switching, and another expressed a desire to be a "first generation Cambodian neurosurgeon"), firewalks failed to "provide [youth] information relevant to social, cultural, economic and political realities of *their reference group* [italics added]" (Brookins, 1996, p. 399). These rites, even as they aligned with students' familial cultural orientations (e.g., *familia, communidad, personalismo, educación*, etc.) and attended to lived realities, missed opportunities to promote students' ethnic identity and fully achieve color-conscious care.[7]

Despite this constraint, critical cariño found expression in firewalks in at least three other ways. First, firewalks created spaces for students to envision themselves as doctors and nurses acting as change agents to improve community health and diversify the medical profession; these dreams fueled students' hopes for a future that departed from the status quo. The majority of students (6/8) shared health career aspirations and discussed plans to attend college (7/8). Each student's career ambition was treated as a realistic possibility. This positive orientation exemplifies "audacious hope" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009) and contrasts with portraits of schools where teachers with deficit perspectives hold dim visions for students' futures and imagine them only as blue-collar laborers who need to learn "punctuality, docility, and reliability" (McLaren, 1999, p. 139). In line with MHS's interest in fostering an ethic of civic responsibility, many firewalkers mentioned serving others in their community. The most noteworthy expression of this trend was Rithisak, who said: "I hope to become legendary. I want to become a popular activist. I want to be known as someone who helped make changes." By envisioning futures as college-educated medical professionals who would help others and improve their communities, these students co-constructed and exchanged affirmative counternarratives (Hildago & Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Rolón-Dow, 2005) that ran against dominant stories about urban youth being unlikely to transcend poverty, unemployment, and violence. In this manner, these students exhibited "accommodation without assimilation" (Mehan et al., 1994) and "internal transformational resistance . . . [where] students appear to conform, for instance doing well in school in order to come back to their community (or a community like theirs) and use their knowledge of dominant institutions to implement social change" (Hildago & Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 265).

Second, critical cariño emerged in firewalks when adult mentors shared dominant cultural capital and offered explicit guidance on navigating cultures of power. Suggestions on college funding, college survival, and employment searches were delivered in unsentimental, practical ways that demythologized dominant institutions. For example, Ms. Schmidt told a sophomore,

> I would not stand up for you if this firewalk was a job interview. I would not hire you. . . . You have to toot your own horn and recognize what you've done. Next time you have this firewalk as a senior,

> you don't answer any questions with "I don't know." Sell yourself. Recognize your growth and how awesome you are.

In a similar vein, Ms. Howard urged her senior advisees to go to professors' office hours, sign emails with full names so professors remembered them, seek assignment extensions (only when absolutely necessary) before due dates, and locate sources of support (study groups and cultural affinity groups) within universities. The advice of these mentors supplied students with practical knowledge to confront systems that have historically marginalized youth of color.

Third, if one adopts Ginwright's (2010) argument that radical healing is necessary to incubate resistance, firewalks might be viewed as an important catalyst for social change and critical consciousness. MHS's choice to institutionalize firewalks reflects awareness that urban youth, who contend daily with the ravages of urban poverty (violence, lack of resources, and chronic stress), need opportunities for collective truth-telling. When nondominant students share their experiences in safe communal spaces, they come to recognize their interrelatedness, see more clearly the systematic injustices that oppress them, and release pain and trauma in ways that enable them to move forward with love and hope. By contributing to this kind of communal healing, firewalks nurtured students' dispositions to care deeply about humanity and justice.

Firewalks as Sites of Institutionalized Authentic Cariño and Communitas

Given the presence of familial, intellectual, and critical care on both institutional and interpersonal levels in firewalks, these rituals provide a valuable (yet not flawless) example of how rituals grounded in authentic cariño can shape students' schooling and lives in additive ways. The communal gratification and jubilation flowing from the performance of these rituals evokes communitas, which Turner (1969/1991) characterized as a spontaneous, sacred, almost magical experience of intense human bonding where hierarchical statuses dissolve and moral purpose reigns supreme. Turner's observation that rite of passage participants return to the world revitalized by communitas is borne out in the reflections of MHS students, one of whom confided that the tradition of firewalks was "very serious . . . because you see it and you're like, 'Wow, I'm gonna be doing that. I'm gonna be sitting where they are some day.'" The annual repetition of these rites became a touchstone for students to revisit their goals and recommit to the habits of life, mind, and work. By prompting students to imagine accounting for themselves in their own firewalks, these rites of passage "provided blueprints for both 'thinking' and 'doing' . . . [through which] students were structured to think of the world in certain ways; [and] they were motivated to act upon their world according to prescribed symbols" (McLaren, 1999, p. 218).

The blueprints they carried forward with them included an appreciation for the potent power of community invigorated by human relations rooted in authentic cariño. Having been seen, heard, and honored in firewalks circles, these students grasped that:

> We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated, we are lacking. So travelling to each other's worlds . . . enable[s] us to *be* through *loving* each other. (Lugones, 1987, p. 8)

Because firewalks allowed participants to travel to "each other's worlds" and faithfully witness others' existence, these forums validated Latino/a youth and ground them in love—in authentic cariño. This outcome runs against society's tendency to ignore these youth and leave them with a "numbing detachment from others and a self-destructive disposition to the world" (West, 1993, p. 14) and suggests that firewalks hold liberatory potential. Turner (1969/1991) speaks to this probability:

> Communitas cannot stand alone if the material and organizational needs of human beings are to be adequately met. Maximization of communitas provokes maximization of structure, which in its turn produces revolutionary strivings for renewed communitas. (p. 129)

The experience of communitas within firewalks, then, may stir participants' "revolutionary strivings," spurring them to infuse authentic cariño into schools, health care systems, and other societal structures, thereby advancing human struggles for justice.

This liberatory potential, however, may be tempered by the possibility that zealous enactments of authentic cariño habituate nondominant students to intensive levels of peer and adult support that may be lacking in future settings. As one teacher fretted,

> I just worry a little bit about the wonderful home we've built for kids here and how wonderfully supportive it is. I think it's great that our graduates come back to visit us all the time, but I also worry that that means that there's a failure to launch.

Voicing a similar apprehension, another teacher observed, "We just want to love them . . . to carry them to where they need to go. But then when they get there, we're not carrying them any more, so they fall when they're not in our comforting arms any longer." Attuned to these concerns, advisors in all three senior firewalk observations specifically probed students about their plans to locate and build new networks of support as they embarked on their college journeys. Despite these efforts, questions remain about the extent to which MHS's enactment of authentic cariño and firewalk rituals

in particular might better support students to fulfill their ambitious visions for themselves.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis offers a compelling portrait of a school enacting authentic cariño and uncovers the potential residing in school-based rites of passage consciously designed to promote students' social, emotional, and academic growth. At MHS, authentic cariño was an institutional phenomenon strengthened by structures such as advisory and firewalks, which moved care beyond dyadic, apolitical, interpersonal interactions toward pervasive, responsive, and personalized relationships anchored in communal responsibility and empowerment. This shift is noteworthy given critiques of schools as impersonal bureaucracies alienating youth of color through the delivery of decontextualized aesthetic forms of care.

Authentic cariño's fusion of familial, intellectual, and critical care is vital for several reasons. First, this integrative approach enables educators to know their students as whole beings with particular interests, histories, passions, and community roots. This enhanced knowledge of learners equips teachers to enact responsive curriculum and also militates against deficit views of children. Second, the holism of this model addresses students' minds, bodies, *and* hearts. Freire (1998) argues that revolutionary "consciousness is a totality—reason, feelings, emotions, desires" (p. 94) that becomes animated through the body's lived relationships with others. Many efforts to reforms schools concentrate on technocratic, rational solutions or focus exclusively on cognitive development and/or intellectual enlightenment; these approaches perpetuate the separation of mind, body, and heart. Authentic cariño reconceives learning as an emotional, intellectual, political, and enfleshed process undertaken by human beings striving to bring meaning to themselves, their families, and their communities. When students are immersed in environments of authentic cariño, learning and schooling matter to them. When schools achieve authentic cariño, students and teachers share a sense of mutual solidarity and psychically and emotionally invest not only in pro-school behaviors but also in broader struggles for liberation.

This research also underscores the ability of school-based rituals to animate a school's cultural values, enhance authentic cariño, and guide students' identity development. MHS's firewalks (unlike wilderness trips or camps) did not remove students from their environment in order to create a momentary experience of communitas and self-reflection. Instead, these rituals were embedded in the daily, lived realities of *all* MHS adolescents, not just a fortunate few who found themselves in special programs or classrooms. The presence of authentic cariño in these rites imbued them with deep meaning. Firewalks exemplified familial cariño because they unfolded

in intimate circles where members knew one another well and were invested in each other's well-being. Intellectual cariño surfaced in the attention paid to students' academic progress and the expectation that students seriously analyze life and contemplate existential questions like "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" Charged with displaying a "love of learning," students grappled with what it meant to think critically, develop habits of mind, and express themselves articulately. Additionally, firewalks expressed critical cariño by centering students' lived realities, validating students as change agents, transmitting dominant cultural capital, and providing spaces for radical healing. The insights youth gleaned from these rituals enabled them to mindfully and passionately embrace a hopeful vision for themselves and their communities.

Ultimately, authentic cariño is a cultural practice—a practice that is not reserved for educators to enact for students but rather a shared social practice that transpires in relationships with and among youth and adults. When authentic cariño is achieved and familial, intellectual, and critical care are all present, schools position themselves to serve Latino/a youth in ways that support their full development and success and thus deliver a truly "additive" education. The institutionalization of authentic cariño within schools is, of course, only one part of a broader struggle to transform the inequalities and injustices of our capitalist society. The broader struggle to end poverty, marginalization, and disadvantage stands to benefit from an increased presence of youth who have been immersed in authentic cariño and feel in their bones the urgency and importance of constructing a caring and just society.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study holds implications for researchers and educators. Researchers should continue to explore additive schooling practices that serve youth from nondominant communities. They may want to examine the ways that authentic cariño plays out in different cultural/ethnic groups beyond Latino/a youth as well as how reforms anchored in authentic cariño unfold in other settings, especially large, comprehensive high schools. Efforts to understand how to prepare educators to enact authentic cariño are also needed. A longitudinal study could trace how youth schooled in an environment of authentic cariño fare socioemotionally, educationally, and professionally as they enter adulthood. Finally, further research on the place of transformative rituals in the lives of urban youth could also offer important contributions to the field.

Educators may want to consider the ways that firewalks and other rituals provide a means to counter the narrow focus on academics and test-based accountability, thereby rebalancing schools toward more holistic learning experiences that attend to students' socioemotional growth. When instituting such rites, practitioners may also want to address some of the tensions

identified in this article, specifically the role of parents, ethnic/racial identity development, political conscientization, therapeutic resources, medical confidentiality/privacy, and grade promotion. While retaining the organic dialogue and peer-driven nature of firewalks is critical, educators may want to explore ways to encourage youth to distill and document the insights gained from firewalk participation over the course of four years as a means of strengthening students' visions of themselves and their futures. In order to ensure some measure of consistency across firewalks, staff (especially new hires) may benefit from annual discussions regarding the history, purpose, and evolution of these rites as institutional structures designed specifically to enhance the schooling experiences of students of color. Finally, educators must strive to preserve and heighten the liberatory potential of authentic cariño by ensuring that students' capacities to advance strategically toward their audaciously hopeful dreams are not impaired by "comforting arms" that have stretched too far.

Notes

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[1]Antrop-González and De Jesús (2006) point out that the terms *educación* and *ser educado/a* within Latin America and U.S.-based Latino communities have been associated with social class and race-based bias and used to convey the racial inferiority of African and indigenous descent peoples. They argue, though, that "within the U.S. schooling context, Valenzuela's usage of the term provides a useful distinction in understanding Latino communities' orientations toward education and expectations from public schools" (p. 431).

[2]All people and places have been assigned pseudonyms per confidentiality agreements.

[3]California's Academic Performance Indicator (API) quantifies and aggregates school performance and growth using a variety of measures. The target score is 800.

[4]The first slogan refers to Oscar Grant, an unarmed African American man fatally shot by police in Oakland, California, in 2009. The second slogan emanated from a worldwide protest movement born in 2011, which opposed the social and economic inequality associated with global capitalism and the concentration of wealth among the top 1% of income earners.

[5]The Mario Molina High (MHS) community did not use the phrase *bien educado/a*, but their emphasis on nurturing the whole child and fostering students' ethical development in conjunction with social responsibility aligns significantly with the spirit of *educación* and *ser bien educado/a*.

[6]The CAHSEE is the California High School Exit Exam.

[7]MHS did not rely solely on firewalks to develop students' ethnic identities; culturally relevant curriculum, town halls, and community-based inputs contributed substantially to this objective.

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