

CHAPTER 17

NUESTRAS RAÍCES GROUND US

Reflecting Comunidad and Cultura in Who We Are as Latin@ Faculty

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In 2012, we embarked on a journey to examine the experiences of junior faculty of color as they navigated the academy. As five novice female scholars of color (first author as a Latina postdoctoral fellow, second author as a Latina assistant professor, third and fifth authors as African American assistant

professors, and fourth author as a multiracial assistant professor of Guatemalan, Chinese, and Italian descent), we captured the *testimonios*, or testimonies (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012) of our counterparts to give voice to their triumphs and struggles. In the process, many of our experiences in and with academia were validated as we heard participants share intimate details of how they balanced their personal and professional lives, identities, and values. Participants also served as sources of knowledge and inspiration, as they divulged strategies to stay true to their own cultural ways of being while making strides in the tenure-track game. While each of the 57 participants we interviewed had a compelling story, we dedicate this chapter to the testimonies of six Latino/a junior faculty members (3 females, 3 males) who work in various disciplines at four-year universities across the country.

The testimonies of Efrain, Carlos, Beto, Angelica, Lucia, and Rosa revealed how they embraced their *Latinidad* to navigate their professional roles. We found they purposefully engaged in work that was social justice oriented and used their research to address equity issues for Latinas/os. Their scholarship also served as a source of strength amidst difficult times in academia, reminding them of their greater role and responsibility as Latino/a scholars to pave the way for future generations as others had done for them. They also drew upon the familial nature of their culture to develop a network of allies within and outside their institutions. While we did not anticipate our lives would be so intertwined with the stories of our participants, it was hard to separate the profound similarities. We found their lives paralleled our own and became a reflection of what we had personally experienced or life lessons that would come as we followed in similar paths to theirs. We also discovered the degree to which we, like our faculty of color participants, continued to live partially in the shadows often never fully acknowledging the painful experiences we faced while making our own way in the academy. During this research project, we often looked to each other for support as we tearfully transcribed an interview or comforted a participant. Fortunately, we documented our experiences throughout this process; therefore, our stories are woven into this chapter as we acknowledge our own hybridity as researchers and scholars of color, sometimes straining and other times thriving on the margins of academia. For some of us, “it was comforting to hear some of the similar issues they were struggling with, and that I was not alone in my confusion about the politics of the tenure-track process.” On the other hand, we also came to the stark realization that “[a]s so many things in academia, the personal is separated from the professional” and “objectivity is valued . . . as a removal from self, from biases, from prior experience, from the soul.” Yet through our project we “redefined the research process as a collective by humanizing it, refusing to succumb to a false objectivity in resource.” In “our recognition of one another’s struggles and specifically our affirmations of the

challenges in living and breathing academia in all of its imposing Whiteness, maleness, heterosexism, classism, and capitalistic notions of success, our work has given us the space to breathe.”

WORKING FROM HYBRIDITY: EMBRACING NUESTRAS IDENTIDADES Y CULTURA

In the process of “becoming” there are two choices: to be completely stripped of all prior collection of experiences to become anew or to embrace a hybrid identity that acknowledges the future while never forgetting the past. The six Latina/o faculty members we honor here were acutely aware of their *Latinidad* and drew on their strong ethnic identities to navigate their professional roles in academia. *Latinidad* describes “a common pan-Latina/o solidarity that among Latinos is materialized in ways that invokes an understanding of identity, place, and belonging” (San Miguel, 2011, p. 4). While these six faculty faced varying degrees of racial microaggressions (Solórzano, 1998) within their institutions, and even in the larger communities in which their universities were situated, they embraced their hybridity as Latino/a faculty in a higher education system that remains structured to accommodate the values and norms of the middle-class White majority.

Efrain started his career at a predominately White institution and described the experiences he faced, arming himself with a “bulletproof vest” to tackle his first year:

The racial conversations and the racist remarks... those microaggressions and those other areas that we talk about in the academy, I live them. I've had people make snide comments, kind of undertones and stuff and I know better than to ignore and a lot of folks told me, you're not going to like that area; it's a predominantly White institution and so is the community... There are a lot of really powerful political struggles and fights in my program. I've put on my bulletproof vest and I stay out of it. The first year I didn't speak up very much. When I did it's because it was totally appropriate or something, but now I have a different relationship and dynamic. I've let my work speak for me, so now my colleagues approach me a little bit differently because I'm doing things that they didn't do.

Efrain was strategic in utilizing both his silence and his voice to survive, which provided him a level of protection letting him focus on his scholarship. At the same time, Efrain expressed how culturally, he was not used to working in isolation and recognized the need to build *comunidad* (community) in academia, “I think the community part that I was looking for has to be built and that's what I've been trying to do.” He did this by seeking

mentorship and building collegial relationships with other Latina/o scholars outside his own discipline and through professional organizations.

The powerful, political struggles Efrain highlighted validated some of our experiences, particularly Cortez's as she dealt with some unforeseen politics in her journey:

I thought my experiences were isolated and that there was no one I could turn to about what was happening to me. I felt abandoned by the very people I trusted and I could not believe how quickly they found ways to discredit, humiliate, and mistreat me. When I began to hear this was commonplace among other Latin@ faculty I did not know whether to be shocked or disappointed that there is little place to discuss these issues for fear of disrupting the status quo or keeping things P.C.

Like Efrain, who built his own *comunidad* within academia, Cortez had us. We became her *comunidad* and we provided that culturally relevant, safe space of connection.

Unfortunately, the microaggressions participants described came not only from White peers, but at times from faculty of color. This was the case for Angelica, who ventured into her first year at a fairly isolated institution in a rural town with little to no social scene. Consequently, Angelica spent much of her time writing and committed to getting published. While she was focused on establishing a record of productivity, she faced some roadblocks because of petty politics with senior, tenured faculty of color:

I've had challenges with colleagues. Specifically, colleagues of color—Here, unfortunately . . . I mean, [they] pretty much tried to pull the rug out from under me and get me in trouble and all this stuff. Because, I think they saw me, or see me as a threat. Which doesn't make any sense, but—because we're not competing for anything, right? They already have tenure. But it's, that's been really difficult for me. There are folks that really befriended me and took me in, pretty much, the first semester. Then, when they saw that I was pumping out publications and getting grants and doing study abroad, they didn't like that. They kind of set me up in a way where I would, they tried to make me look bad in front of my chair. . . . That's been really challenging, it's kind of the disappointment of working with people that you think are your mentors.

Angelica similarly drew on her *comunidad* at other institutions to deal with this situation. She also admitted how her own research, which focused heavily on issues of racial equity in education, helped ground her and provided her solace. "My writing has been a real source of strength for me. I use my writing to help me make it through and help me make sense of the situation here. Particularly doing work with Latinas and other students of color, that has been so wonderful."

The difficulty we experienced in capturing some of these stories was being witness to the lack of maturity or respect among grown adults. This was something that Alsandor reflected on during the course of the project: “You would think that these are excerpts you are hearing from high school students, but for some there clearly seems to be a loss of sensitivity, rationale, or humanity when you all of a sudden earn your PhD.” However, what we found was the possibility of retaliation that could occur at a macro-level when Latino/a faculty spoke or wrote of injustices, as Carlos shared:

At my University, you know, faculty [in other departments] have been sanctioned by their department heads for saying something, by putting out their official university title when writing an op-ed because it gets misinterpreted at the institution as a whole and it comes down hard. . . . [However,] I could not have landed at a better place, in terms of that kind of support [that I get in my department].

Working at an institution in Arizona provided for a very distinct, racially hostile environment for Carlos outside his institution. As a critical scholar studying Latino/a-focused educational issues, the political climate of Arizona could have curtailed Carlos’ action-oriented research. Yet his commitment to the larger cause for Latina/o educational equity only kindled his *ganas*. Similar to Angelica, Carlos found strength through his Latino/a-centered scholarship. Carlos was also fortunate to have the support of his chair, who encouraged him to speak of his research on Latino/a issues through various outlets (news media, presentations, publications).

We found Latina/o pre-tenured faculty also tended to bear the burden of educating or tolerating the cultural incompetence of their peers, but once again, faculty relied on their cultural intuition and ways of being to navigate such instances. For example, Lucia was conscious and proud of her *Latinidad* but found her peers had different expectations of her as a Latina scholar.

To be honest I think I surprise them. I’ll totally be honest about that. I think generally as a faculty, I’m good, but I cannot disentangle the undercurrent of deficit thinking that goes hand in hand with me being a person of color. And I often, they don’t say you’re “articulate” but they say things like that. Like “Wow, it’s really good to work with you on this committee because you speak so well.” . . . So, my success as a faculty member of color is no mistake for me, because I am always conscious, always, of how I represent, how I’m represented, and how I represent who we are.

Lucia was not rattled by the deficit thinking she often encountered on behalf of her colleagues, and instead recalled the guidance and *consejos* of

some of her Latino/a mentors. She particularly heeded the advice of one mentor, a prominent Latino scholar in education:

He taught me that, that I could be *me* in whatever I did. And he always taught me that what was most valuable about my research was how I approached it, how I thought about it, and that gave me a lot of confidence. On the flip side, I would also say that I was inspired to pursue the faculty because also I knew faculty who were jerks, who talked incessantly about themselves, and about social justice, and they really didn't do the work. . . . And I knew that I, you know, I'm not perfect, but I knew that I could do the job and I knew that I could do it well.

Beto echoed Lucia's philosophy of staying true to oneself as a means of traversing the academic terrain. His drive came from connecting his life experiences to his work with students. Raised by parents who were farmworkers and possessed only a 6th-grade education, Beto's journey to and in the professoriate was personal. His early memories of college began with his mom registering him for children's courses at the local community college, knowing that she always had an expectation of him to go to college. Being a mentor and guiding Latino/a students through the educational pipeline was a responsibility Beto did not take lightly. "Our work is always going to be there as advocates, as Latinos, as scholars, professors. . . . There's always going to be a need everywhere and that's something, one thing I did learn very well from my other mentors." More importantly, it's remembering that "at the end of the day if we can't make that connection, back to connecting the dots of the experience of children and the educational system to our role, then I find that it's problematic."

The *testimonios* of our six Latino/a faculty also revealed how living and working in a state of hybridity tested their boundaries and sense of worth. Efrain summed up this state of being when he described the moment he solidified his position. He recalled walking into the dean's office with a short letter of demands acknowledging that all he needed were the tools to work. Similar to his migrant parents who traveled across the country only knowing their lived experiences, he walked into the dean's office not as a seasoned professor, but as a novice Latino faculty member who, culturally and professionally as a former public school administrator, was not accustomed to negotiating his salary as was expected in the academy.

The contract and negotiation, I was still a little intimidated being in public schools and in that type of role [to negotiate]. . . . So I put some stuff in writing so I was prepared; I had my little letter of what I thought I would need and it was very minimal. I don't think I was brave enough or I had the confidence enough to really challenge the Dean or the college; I guess I just wanted the job, you know? . . . I reflect on that now how we [Latinos/as] don't determine

our worth or our value as academics, but on the other hand it's kind of like I wanted to be respectful and part of my growing up and heritage and culture is like that, so it was an odd balance.

Ultimately, Latina/o faculty embraced their cultural identities, values, and ways of being to meet the academic demands of teaching, research, and service.

RESISTING AND NAVIGATING TOGETHER: BUILDING A FAMILIA OF ALLIES

The role *familia* played in the personal lives of Latino/a faculty was evident, but they drew upon the strength of their familial nature to develop a network of faculty of color and White allies within and outside their institutions. Latina/o faculty also recognized the vital nature of being true to themselves along the way. This was evident in some of the testimonies already shared. As we witnessed how these Latino/a faculty members found strength in the bonds they formed with other colleagues, mentors, and even students, we began to reflect on our ability to build *familia* within our own group. “What can I say about my team, my friends, *colegas*, *hermanas*, my *sistas*’, deciding to befriend [all authors] has been one of the best decisions I ever made, ever. Period.” We found the personal and professional benefits immeasurable, as Martinez admitted:

First, I will say that we have definitely been productive in terms of the research project, conducting close to 60 interviews nationwide, and getting multiple conference papers and publications accepted so far with others in the process of being submitted and even other ideas yet to come. And while all of this productivity is definitely vital to our tenure and promotion, and/or to our research and publication record, I think the nontangibles are what have been the most beneficial.

While our support network first formed organically in graduate school, Rosa was intentional about creating a space for Latinos/as to connect. When she first attended a national research conference she felt isolated and decided it was important to build a network and *familia* for her and other Latina/o scholars:

It was terrible; I was really upset and I'm like, I'm bringing my friend the next time because you know it was just interesting to observe what that conference was like. There was a lot of interesting posturing that was happening where people would pay attention to me if I said that I was—people always ask who is your advisor, right, and if it was someone that was like famous enough for

them then they would spend time talking to me, and if not it seemed to me like there was a pecking order, which really upset me. So I was like I've got to figure a way to make this conference more hospitable.

Rosa learned from this experience about the types of people she wanted to surround herself with, like-minded faculty who would provide the type of support and encouragement that only *familia* could.

I mean it's just interesting about who I surround myself with, so if it's going to be—obviously there is going to be some faculty of color but I have to say that it's not just obviously; like they have to be people who care about social justice and I cannot always assume; you can't always assume because you're a faculty of color that you're going to hear anything about that. I'd rather just kind of be with allies who kind of get it. . . . So in the fall I'll go to [conference] and I've started to do this—I got together with this group of Latino scholar collectives and basically all the Latinos that we know who attend [conference] will go to dinner and it's powerful; we have like twenty-five people who get to spend time together and we talk about whatever we want to talk about and have fun and have food, you know.

Rosa's testimony resonated with Martinez, as she recalled a time when she found strength in learning to be true to herself, despite the pressure of feeling everyone else was “selling their soul” to fit in within the academic world. She reflected on the “mental breakdown” she had experienced at a conference after witnessing her Latina peers take on a competitive, individualistic, and seemingly fake persona for the sake of networking. As difficult as the experience was, it shed light on the type of institution she wanted to work at and it made her realize that she would not compromise her own sense of being for a tenure-track faculty position:

At [conference] I felt like I was gonna have to sell my soul to be faculty and felt like I couldn't stay true to myself. [At current institution] I feel like I've been able to do that. I feel like I've, and I mean, I don't know if that speaks to the program I'm in, that they allow for that space and the fact that I came in, you know, even with my job interview, like, I came in with my research agenda, which was very Latino/a focused, and so, they knew upfront, you know. So I don't, I don't feel like I've had to compromise the soul of who I am, in being a Latina and that's very important to me and also doing research and working with students and families of color.

The concept of *familia* also bled into the ways Latina/o faculty connected with their communities and defined their work. As a Latino faculty member, Beto believed his personal and professional roles and values were undoubtedly interconnected and that it was important to build an “ethic of

caring” for all the Latinos/as and communities of color coming along after him and all those who are in the profession:

As a Latino faculty member you begin to really see how things are interrelated and interconnected. You begin to see why it is important to not only be a professor. You begin to see the connection as to why our service, our research, and our teaching and the alignment of all of that is important. And then moving up the ranks is even more important in the sense of advocating not only for our students, but our own colleagues. You begin to see the importance of being involved in [national conferences] and those circles because it is a network and there are politics. When it comes to supporting other faculty of color, reviewing tenure packages, getting letters of support from other colleagues, when you see the importance of supporting other colleagues in their publication and research, those networks, [you] begin to realize that’s why. It’s not just moving up for the sake of having this ego and saying I’m tenured and that’s it. I kind of feel like right now what’s driving my ambition is the greater responsibility to others. And really that’s that ethic of caring for others that has driven me since the get go.

More importantly, Beto saw that the bond of community transcended all other things and that in the end “we are doing this for our families”:

That idea that we are doing this for our families, for our communities, it’s that connection. We understand that there is [sic] some real systemic challenges that we face and most of our work is about social justice and changing, when you look at demographics and where Latinos or black scholars or advocates are working, even the degrees we generally seek out, we tend to be attracted more to service type of roles and careers, and I don’t think that’s a coincidence. I think that has to do with wanting to improve the conditions of our own families, our own communities and that’s that connection I do see with my colleagues.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As the five of us worked on this chapter, we considered the significance of sharing the *testimonios* of Efrain, Carlos, Beto, Angelica, Lucia, and Rosa along with aspects of our own journeys in the academy. We recognized their/our stories were likely not new, but we felt compelled to share them as a means of advocacy and resistance and to guide others on the same path. We believe that while we live in a hybrid space where conflicting cultures and uncertainty can be painful, it can also provide for the development of “tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity,” as renowned poet, scholar, and Chicana feminist activist Gloria Anzaldúa described (p. 1987,

p. 379). To that end, we proudly embrace our struggles so we can fully appreciate how far we have come and how far we will continue to go.

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