

CAMINANTE, NO HAY PUENTES, SE HACEN PUENTES AL ANDAR: THE
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF A MEXICAN AMERICAN SCHOLAR

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this autoethnography is to explore a young Latina's educational pathways through a deep-rooted rewriting of the *self* as an illustration of experience to the greater literature. It contributes to the sociology of Latinxs by exploring my experiences as a Mexican American woman in a feminist reflexive. More specifically, it focuses on the personal, familial, and academic challenges Latinas face in their journey to higher education. In the 'autobiographical genre of writing,' is a study of culture that involves the *self* used to connect with the reader and allows my audience to share *mi camino*, my path.

With this method, I draw both from ethno-cultural theories and from sociological literature. This is the voice of authority to my *self*, my personal experiences, voices, and emotions. I write this piece and embed my reflections and memories in it to shed light on some of the perspectives that affect the identity of Latinas and the self-perceptions we structure in academia. This piece is a contribution by bringing in the concept of familial intimate labor to help answer theoretical questions of academic success, assimilation to the academic culture, familial expectations, and self-perceptions

In conclusion, this autoethnographic piece is a contribution to a dualistic form of feminist thought and reflexivity. I propose a way of looking at a young Latina's educational path and the writing of the *self* in terms of experience and because of a desire for social integration. The awareness of a collective consciousness is just the beginning of a powerful answer to many of our pressing social issues, it is a way of showing how reality is constructed, how knowledge is produced, and how identities are created; it is a way of reading the world.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family; *para mi madre, mi abuela, y mi abuelo*. They who raised me amidst challenging circumstances and have been my most important support group throughout my entire education. This piece of work is an embodiment of their hard work and the path we have gone through together so that I could go to school and to demonstrate how far I have come because of them. *Ustedes son mi más grande orgullo, mi más grande amor, y la perseverancia que me da ánimos a seguir adelante cada día¹*.

I would also like to dedicate this piece of work to all the working class students like myself, this script is for you; for all the courage we carry with us each and every single day to keep going, for all the times we have fallen down but have gotten back up, for all we do in the name of our family and those who believe in us, ...for all the barriers we have broken down and continue to challenge. It is with an upmost pride in my heritage and in my beginnings, that I write this scholarly work.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am an irregularity in higher education: a working-class, Mexican American, woman of color, first-generation college, and graduate student. This unique situation leaves me to wonder, how does one as an educational irregularity negotiate the different identities both that encourage us and oppress us? How do we as Latinas overcome the barriers and challenges to arrive at our goal?

As a minority group, Latinas in higher education must follow a path to success while negotiating intersectional identities, those of self-esteem, family, and the sense of belonging at not only the university level, but the university itself. This paper will focus on the Latina experience, mainly to shed light on the elements to academic success. Within these elements, there are several factors to consider; gender, racial and ethnic identity, and positive or negative self-perceptions. My work is derived from personal experience in a U.S./Mexico border educational setting and later in respected institutions of higher education. As a sociological researcher, it is important to look within and make the familiar strange, to have a sociological imagination about our own accounts (Mills 1959).

As Latinxs in higher education, now more than ever, we form part of a larger and essential group in the United States. A group that is not only a key group, but the strength, the diversity, and the future of this country. As a Latina researcher, my work focuses success pathways of minority groups, especially *mi gente*, my people. Within this group, women like myself exist whose story in academia could help answer theoretical questions of academic success, assimilation to the academic culture, familial expectations, and self-perceptions. As Barajas states, “young

Latinas...navigate successfully through and around negative stereotypes of Hispanics by maintaining positive definitions of themselves by emphasizing their group membership as Latinas” (2001: 869). Once at the university level, we attempt to reconcile multiple identities and numerous struggles at both the academic and personal level. At the same time, we may see our multiple identities as an opportunity to grow as women, to cherish our roots and pathways, and also to expand our horizons. We seize the prospect of becoming powerful against all the odds, against everyone who told us that we could not do it.

Not entirely critically analyzed is the dimensionality of family. This piece makes a contribution to the literature about how familial factors can be a double-edged sword in the pathway to academic development, especially for women from Latinx families who hold traditional values. This work critically considers and analyzes the different factors that young Latinas negotiate, and that derive from family structures, through a feminist reflexive stance. These factors include the possibility of both unconditional encouragement and support and gender oppression and repression in families. Latinxs in higher education, experience a spectrum of career development challenges and concerns. Some of these include language barriers, prejudice, discrimination, low academic achievement, low paying jobs, and poor self-perception compared to the greater student population (Arreondo et al. 2014). For young women, the lack of familial support intensifies the structural inequalities of race, class, and gender which re-inscribes and reinforces gender oppression.

Furthermore, assimilation into the general non-Hispanic white American academic way, assumes that we partially or entirely give up cultural values and ethnic identities in order to ‘fit in.’ When our family comes from another country and/or we are raised with different values and cultural backgrounds, we must learn to speak English in a country where other languages are not

as valued or openly spoken. This also entails the denigration of those other languages, cultures, values, and people who reside in our hearts. The overall effect of assimilation at universities may come with some negative consequences for students where we may see ourselves as ‘less than’ and where our sense of identity may be affected by viewing ourselves and our families as a constant racial minority (Feagin et al. 1996).

This paper provides an analysis of the pathways that I, as a Latina woman, took in the pursuit of higher education. In addition, the analysis includes the potential negotiation mechanisms used by Latinas like myself already enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Scholars with a focus on the Latinx community in higher education rarely focus on the gendered side of this academic path. Scholarship rarely considers minority women at the university level (Gandara 1982; Segura 1993). In sum, how does race, class, and gender affect the perceptions of self, family dynamics, and the university context? How does the familial context complicate Latinas’ educational path with both opportunities and barriers?

With this essay, I am not suggesting that all Latinas share all elements of my educational path or my struggles. I am acutely aware of the diversity of academic experiences and the discouraging plurality of minority and other underrepresented groups in American education. This script, after all, is a personal exploration of my past, one that shapes the hybrid woman that I am today, one who seeks truth and discovery. My goal is to recount one of many unseen trails of a Latina before higher education and what elements apply to working class, women of color, like myself.

The work of Gloria Anzaldúa’s, especially her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) in particular anchors my discussion. Anzaldúa’s Borderland’s theory is grounded on the duality and hybridity of a woman of color who physically and psychologically resides in

Mexico and the United States, both and none at the same time. The ultimate goal of Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory is to give life to a 'New Mestiza,' a woman who develops an inner consciousness. This inner consciousness allows her to understand herself as a border woman and living in two cultures: being true to her sociocultural and ethnic identity while taking part in a second socioculture and ethnic identity. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Anzaldúa lays out the basis of border theory, but it is not just an analysis of the geographical border where she grew up, but also the borders at various levels of class, gender and sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality.

I will use Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory as the framework and further theoretical expansion in this analytical autoethnography to give my experiences and my voyage a sociological grounding. As feminist autoethnographers, we are compelled to write because the world we create in the literature compensates for what reality does address. By writing, we compensate for what the world is lacking to understand; I write because life does not appease inequalities and my anger. I write to become closer with my *self* and with you, I write to preserve myself, to raise voices, to achieve self-autonomy. In a similar reflexive manner, I use autoethnography to look analytically at my personal journey through academic and familial struggles and the integration of race, ethnicity, class, gender, age; defied perspectives into one's sociological imagination. The most profound and liberating politics come from the cross-examination of our own social positions, an external narrative that comes from within and pleads to be freed.

II. METHODOLOGY: ON AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC WRITING

Autoethnographic writing is a form of personal qualitative methodology that allows the author to use his or her own experience and memories in social writing. Writing an autoethnography entails dwelling on one's own personal experience and knowledge of the self. It entails opening up a sacred space within us and recounting it through the lenses of social theory and literatures. An autoethnography is a sociological introspection of the self and a passion for understanding and making sense of our reality. To me, it is a form of preserving my *self*, my story, my voice, and of making one's constant courage immortal.

As I write this autoethnographically piece, I conjure up emotional and visual images about my past, my experiences with real people, engaged in actual events. I delve into my memory, recollecting myself back in the scenes that took place. I allow my nostalgia to run free and replay vivid pictures in my mind, much like a systematic introspection. I then search for words to describe the feelings running through me. I use my thoughts to select scenes and characteristics to process, keeping in mind my audience, to tell a coherent story that makes sense to everyone.

While using autoethnographic methods takes imagination, the responsibility is to connect the writing to memories of actual (Ellis 2004). Autoethnographic work allows me as a social actor and as a social scientist to evaluate not only my place in society, but also how my memories and self-understanding have been shaped by my social standing. This method encourages the sociological imagination and a deep evaluation of everything that makes us as individuals, as women, as part of the whole, a tree in the forest.

As a feminist autoethnographer, my writing relies on the merging of art and science. It relies on the evaluation of social science and my knowledge, where my feminism is a moderator

in my work, where I am allowed to be both a feminist and a social scientist. Hence, autoethnographic methods are crucial in the writing that bridges scientific and literary writing. Autoethnography helps one as an author move beyond rigid definitions of what happens. It privileges ‘multivocality’ and provides ‘representational space for the plural’ and sometimes, ‘contradictory narrative voices’ located with us as researchers, provoking a deeper ‘understanding of the often-silent tensions’ that lie underneath the (misunderstood, perhaps) behaviors of ourselves (Ettore 2016).

Autoethnography is effectively used in the field of sociology to narrate personal knowledge, social positions, experiences, and contribute as a deeper insight to the greater literature. Herman (2017) used autoethnographic methods by using personal narratives to analyze work across various fields and subfields. Working at the intersection of sociology and autoethnography, Herman shows the ability of autoethnographic and personal narrative approaches to generate important, innovative, and empowering understandings of difference and identity.

Autoethnographic methodology brings out the stories of work, of people at work, and ultimately helps bridge theory and lived experience together. Therefore, autoethnographic writing is the best methodology for this piece, a piece that attempts to merge lived experience and science, with this essay, it attempts to examine the social position of Latinas in higher education. The main insight that can be drawn from this form of methodology is that personal narratives work at the intersections of autoethnography and critical theory within a sociological context. As such, autoethnographic scholarship are sites of cultural practices and performances; of perseverance, of resistance, and struggle.

Even though qualitative autoethnographic work is often given little credit on the label of 'science,' this method of work is a unique lens through which we, as social scientists, as social actors, can examine behaviors and lived experiences. These narratives come from all forms of social stances, cultural meanings, and intersectionalities; they form part of a larger picture and speak for the past, present, and future. An autoethnography is a voice shaped by critical analysis of the self and society, it is a voice among many who plead to be heard. I raise my voice through this script, not out of self-importance, but so that all the voices like mine can be perceived and valued. What better way to find meaning than to identify and analyze our own thoughts and behaviors? To interrogate significance, meaning-making, and experiences in very personal issues such as the role of family, race, class, and gender. This is the best way to look at pressing social issues from within, such as the educational attainment of minority women; this stance is not only valid, but important!

Lastly, it is important to note that as the author of this piece, I struggled to make a choice of directly translating the Spanish within this essay. Both the field of sociology and this thesis itself are social projects of equality. I cannot stop but ask myself, why is a monolingual English the privileged norm? That is not my experience and that is not the experience of many, especially people from the borderlands. As a form of silent protest and in the name of those who worked hard to learn English as a second language, translations have been provided in the end notes section of this document.

III. BORDERLANDS THEORY: LA FRONTERA

Gloria Anzaldúa, a socio-ethnic feminist scholar, poet, and theorist, was a Mexican American woman who incorporated her lifelong emotions of social and cultural marginalization into her astonishing work. Anzaldúa developed theories about the marginal, in-between, and mixed cultures that develop along borders where she herself grew up. As a woman of color, Anzaldúa used her social, cultural, and sexual marginalization as a tool for the focus of her work; she argued the dilemmas of minority women. This ultimately constructs a feminist identity gained through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of the *self*. This results in a new *self* that transcends the imposed socio-political, economic and gender predeterminations.

Anzaldúa's Borderlands theoretical framework is a socio-ethno-cultural theory that comes from her socio-ethnic experiences and emphasizes the "hybridity" experienced by women of color. Anzaldúa calls these women the 'New Mestiza;' a woman who is split between being true to her ethnic and cultural values but who also adjusts to a set of other values, American values. Anzaldúa's "mestiza consciousness" is what she has created herself to be, an identity gained through digging deep into the philosophy of power and knowledge that makes up both individual and collective histories, struggles, abolitions, and survivals (Anzaldúa 1987). Through a feminist reflexive, we not only give voice to our collective histories and struggles, but we create a real personhood as one that is a self-constructed identity fabricated through one's own will.

This theory is focused on the U.S./Mexico border duality and the 'historical wound' of this duality. I believe this to be the basis of the struggle that Latina women face in higher education, in trying to assimilate not only to a professional and academic identity, but also, into an American and Anglo-centric culture, where their perception of themselves may be challenged. Employing

an analytical autoethnography of lived experiences, I intend to develop concepts and themes from Anzaldúa's theoretical framework to explain Latinas' experiences in education. Furthermore, her Borderlands theoretical framework serves to illustrate a deep understanding of how borders intersect and affect personal experiences. Anzaldúa writes her work through three types of borders: geopolitical, geo-economic, and emotional (Savi 2015).

The first border she mentions, where cultures merge into each other, entails the border that delineates the territories of Mexico and the United States, the geopolitical border. Anzaldúa's second border involves both the occupation of the same territory by people of different races and classes. This is her geopolitical and geo-economic analysis. The third border is the border between individuals, namely, the emotional borders. These borders, however, are not separate from one another but rather, they overlap each other (Savi 2015). Borders between racialized groups, as well as those between classes, are also emotional just as borders between individuals are also economic.

Anzaldúa states, "*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (2003: 103). Anzaldúa, metaphorically uses light and dark as the ability to identify with light and dark at the same time to illustrate that they are constitutive of each other, just as a *Mexicana* can be also an American. This results in an *amasamiento* that refuses to believe in the narrative of unity and therefore, allows for the narrative of the binary and even of a hybridity. My whole life I have lived between two worlds and across the different sets of borders of race, class, and gender. This has shaped the woman I am today and the woman I will always be... *Porque soy una mujer de dos mundos, híbrida, con una conciencia Mestiza. Llevo a México agarrado en una mano mientras navego con la otra.*²

IV. CAMINANTE, NO HAY PUENTES, SE HACEN PUENTES AL ANDAR

I was born in the border city of El Paso, Texas twenty-five years ago. My *Mamá*³, my *Abuela*⁴ and the rest of my family lived in Mexico, where I spent the first years of my life. I lived in a *colonia*⁵, in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city of Juárez, Chihuahua, where hot water and paved streets were scarce. There, I attended a Catholic primary school where I was taught how to be a good girl of faith, one that did not question but who obeyed. However, I have always been *hociconá*⁶, that is always questioning and talking back against the shackles of conservative values and religion. I did well in school but never truly understood traditional forms of discipline. This rebellion, I believe, is the result of my thirst for knowledge and truth, a rebellion against gender norms, against being the ‘good woman.’ This rebellion ignited a fire in my heart to quest for more than what was taught to me.

I am the first American citizen in my family. After the first grade in Catholic primary school, I, *Mamá* and *Abuela* decided that an education in the United States would bring me better opportunities in life, so I moved to an American school. I was registered at an elementary school in El Paso, and after that, I embarked in what would be the journey of my life. I cannot say I migrated to the States to reside and make things easy, my family could not afford it. Instead, holding tight to my *Abuela*’s hand, armed with a backpack and with lots of courage, she and I decided to cross the border every single day. It was the only way that I would be able to go to an American school. This would give me a shot at a better education and maybe, just maybe, a better life for me and for them.

Signing me up to at an American school without living in the United States was a challenge. *Abuela* would “borrow” the addresses of friends who lived around the school to claim that we were living in that neighborhood. We had to get creative in ways to prove that we lived in the States to fill out the paperwork and the residency information the school needed from children like me. *Abuela* would leave me at school early every morning and head to her job right after she left me. She also worked in El Paso, washing laundry at a hotel that payed minimum wages and had harsh working conditions. She worked there until she retired after 30 years. Like many Latina women, she worked arduous hours to help sustain her family, in this case, myself as well as her household in Mexico. She and I had great friendships with many other Mexican women who shared the same struggles and worked hard as did she to put food on the table.

My father was never truly in the picture ever since I was very young, but *Abuela* and *Abuelo* stepped in and helped *Mamá* raise me. They not only filled the void he left, but they have loved me like their own daughter to this day. My *Abuelos*⁷ and my *Mamá* were, and are, my *ganans*, my determination to keep moving forward. I strive to make them proud of all the bridges they have inspire me to build and to cross, and for always believing in me no matter how hard our circumstances happened to be.

Mamá had to be in Mexico, her life has always been in Mexico and it was where she worked to provide for me and where she made a living. She had always had her whole life in Mexico like everyone in my family. I was the one who went to the other side instead of staying. *Mamá* was able to cross to the States as a tourist, but nothing else. It was easier for *Abuela* and I to return to Mexico and come back to her. I feel as if *Mamá* has waited eagerly on the other side of the border for me to come back from school ever since then. I would cross back every day and shared my evenings and weekends with her. As time passed, *Abuelos* and I moved to the United States where

I worked hard to learn English and get myself through college, and so I did. The days of me going back to Mexico everyday became scarce, and with that, so were the days that I saw *Mamá*. My education robbed of my mother, the very opportunity I had chased tore me away from *Mamá* very young; a sacrifice greater than any other I have ever faced.

I got up at 4 am every weekday to make my journey to school. *Mamá* made breakfast, helped me get dressed, and dropped me and *Abuela* off at the international bridge where we walked across every day, rain or shine. It was not unusual to find a full bridge every morning; a bridge full of people who crossed over to work and go to school as well. People in the border find ways to survive while making the best of two worlds. Mexico is for living and finding a home, while the States is for working and finding an education. It is not unusual to find this mentality even outside of border towns; many Mexican Americans like myself will always carry Mexico as “home” in their hearts and we come back to that nostalgia time and time again. I may be born an American, but I was raised by Mexico. I carry my roots with pride, *mis raíces*⁸ that lay at the other side of this bridge. *Al otro lado de este puente psicológico, este puente que me parte en dos a donde quiera que yo voy.*⁹

The *Puente Internacional*¹⁰ was not only the physical bridge that connected my two worlds, but an emotional and psychological bridge as well. *Mi Español, mi gente, mi México, mi familia, y mi alma*¹¹ rested on one side. On the other, was America, English, opportunity, education, a chance to spread my wings, and where I became an American woman of color. Today I look back at how my life used to be. I see that little girl crossing that *Puente* fighting daily for an education neither the border patrol nor my underrepresentation would take away. Since then, I’ve been torn; I am no longer Mexican but never will be fully American. I am simply a historical wound, a healing

split. I, a *Mestiza*, continually tread out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time; a soul between two worlds, three, four, I am a woman without borders.

English was my greatest obstacle. I was a child learning a new language for school and holding on tightly to my *lengua*¹² so as not to forget. I was held back a grade for only speaking Spanish and still remember being intimidated and reprimanded at school for speaking it. That's when I understood I had to leave a part of me behind in order to succeed. *Mi Español*¹³ was reserved for my family, for *mi tierra*¹⁴ and to remind me from where I came.

Throughout my education, I spoke English at school and Spanish at home; I was one person on one side of the border, and another person on the other. I had two hearts beating inside my chest, two languages and two cultures. I was stuck in the middle of it all, *no soy de aquí ni soy de allá*¹⁵, I don't belong here nor there. I am a woman native to the lands of the United States-Mexico border. Gloria Anzaldúa refers to this as a "mestiza consciousness" and therefore, creates the Borderlands theory of the Mestiza consciousness. Borderlands theory attempts to explain the creation and continuity of United States and Mexico border from a historical, emotional, and autoethnographic perspective. Her work relates to a paradox because she identifies such borderlands as both a "site of death" and a place where a reborn and self-constructed hybrid identity is created; where new possibilities can emerge.

The Borderlands were the death of my native Spanish and the closeness to my family, but also a place where I was reborn into a duality. In her theoretical work, Anzaldúa creates the "new mestiza consciousness", whom she calls the "border woman," (1987: preface). As a result, geographic, personal, social, and political border constructs are shaped and reshaped by an assortment of ongoing influences. Borders and paths represent active living knowledges and their

ongoing influences and complexities are best described through their paradoxes, myths, symbols, forced injustices, and possibilities.

Today, I realize that my educational journey was not only a challenge, but also a privilege. As an American citizen, I had the privilege and the opportunity to fight for an education in the United States. I am very aware of the millions of people who risk their lives to cross the border to the States. Immigration laws only become more restrictive in this country, leaving many without a chance to fight for a better life. Without legal documentation, America can be a cruel and denigrating place for immigrants, where opportunity is not as widely available. In reality, it was a privilege to struggle the way I did, for it is not only this hardship that shapes who I am today, it makes me realize that I have the power and freedom to help others who lack this social mobility.

My grandparents attained their permanent residency in their sixties, this was when we all moved to the States to a small apartment in El Paso. I always saw this opportunity as a blessing for the three of us because this meant we did not have to cross the border every day. I realize now that even this small opportunity is denied to many for lack of proper documentation in this country. To me, being Mexican is more than an identity. It is a state of soul, not one of documentation or citizenship. People's will to thrive cannot be torn down or stopped by walls, prejudice, and hatred; *nos quieren enterrar pero no saben que somos semillas*.¹⁶

As the years went by, we moved around the city looking for more affordable housing. Since I started my first year of college, we found a small place in El Paso's *Segundo Barrio*¹⁷, or the city's "ghetto." The cultural overlap in this part of the city was always fascinating to me. *El Segundo* is a historic district right across the international bridges also known as South El Paso. *El Segundo Barrio* is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. It has also been called the "other Ellis Island" because so many people immigrate through the area and it has been one of the main

"ports of entry" into the United States from Mexico. *El Segundo* is also well known for its murals, its unique population, and its cultural character and it shares much of its history with Mexico. Despite its rich Hispanic cultural influence, this neighborhood was also one of the poorest and least maintained parts of the city. Regardless, *Abuela*, *Abuelo*, and I happily lived here through all my college years, making the best of it, and we made acquaintances with many people. My *Abuelos* still live here to this day.

I graduated with my bachelor's degree in psychology after 4 years of long hard work, made *mi familia*¹⁸ very proud, but was still hungry for more. Soon after, I got accepted into a doctoral program in sociology at a well-known Texas university and this is where I am today. The day I arrived here, I experienced culture shock for the first time. I went from living in Mexico and *El Segundo*, places surrounded by *mi gente*, *mi familia*¹⁹, and rich Latinx influence, to a predominately white and conservative part of Texas. I felt like an anomaly at the University. I looked around me and felt like an impostor. Here I was in one of the largest universities in the country, away from everyone I knew; a *Morena, Mexicana*²⁰ in a sea of white elites. I was terrified, and part of me still is, but I clung tightly to my courage and *mis raíces* and told myself, "*Yo soy capaz!*"²¹

V. VOCES ACADÉMICAS

"Cuando se nace pobre, estudiar es el mayor acto de rebeldía contra el sistema. El saber rompe las cadenas de la esclavitud." -Tomás Bulat²²

I began my graduate education as a Ph.D. student in sociology; training to be an academic, a published author. Two years into my career I decided that the academic world did not serve my purpose. I felt too eager to help students and *mujeres*²³ like me outside the ivory tower and to actively make a difference through more than theoretical writing. However, this thesis is a scholarly document to call my own, a piece to honor my educational path and to share it with those who also have struggled to get here. As a Latina in higher education, I felt like an anomaly and found that it is essential to find pathways to academic achievement, and coping mechanisms to navigate educational institutions.

According to 2017 census data, from 1996 to 2016 Hispanic students enrolled in schools from nursery school to college went from 8.8 million to 17.9 million. Hispanics now make up 22.7 percent of all students in the United States. College enrollment went up by 1.7 million from 2006 to 2016, compared to a 700,000 increase in the previous 10 years. That is, there has been a tripling of Hispanics in college over the past 20 years. Latinx students now form a large group of student bodies at universities. However, although Latinas have been part of this new group, gender remains a strong maker of disadvantage in academic achievement (Sierra 1990; Barajas 2011; De Anda 1984; Santos 2014). Sierra (1990) contended that Latinas faced a triple oppression of race, class, and gender in the collegiate environment. Forming part of a group already subjected to prejudice, Latinas are found to experience poorer self-perception, poorer academic achievement, and a need for financial and emotional support (Sierra 1990).

Little research has looked into the career development of Latina students and this is likely due to the long history of oppression experienced by this population and the traditionally low educational retention and achievement (Guerrero and Singh 2013). As women of color, we are a particular population in higher education who have specific set of challenges. Not only do we stand out from the rest in terms of skin color, language, accent, background, and social status, but we also face gendered challenges and ethnic dualities. Barajas (2011) looked at how race and gender shape Latinas' paths related to school success in college. Through interviews, field-work, and school records, Barajas finds that Latinas have to navigate negative stereotypes such as their not being interested in education and being different than the rest. Latinas navigate through these stereotypes by maintaining positive definitions of themselves and by emphasizing their ethnic group membership.

In this study, Barajas concluded that despite negative stereotypes faced in education, Latinas maintain a positive sense of racial and ethnic identity. These young women were able to carve a safe space in higher education through supportive groups and relationships with other Latinas. While both Latino and Latina experience a common sense of challenges, students faced prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion throughout their school years, young women were able to cope with negative stereotypes though supportive relationships with other Latinas. In early schooling, these young women learned to find cultural spaces that helped them become bicultural and helped them learn how to navigate between dominant and minority group cultures.

Developing a relationship of mentors and mentees also formed a strong connection between these relationships and support groups where racial pride is encouraged and essential for success in college and where prejudice against *Mexicanos*²⁴ ignored and used as a tool of persistence. Latino students, on the other hand, refrained in talking directly about race and

ethnicity, racism, and prejudice and focused on athletics to include themselves in the student body. Latinos talked about themselves in similar ways as their Latina counterparts; they emphasized they were hard workers. We adjust by having a deeper understanding from where we come and take pride in our educational journey. Consequently, academic success, for me, did not entail giving up ethnic identity and pride but rather enabled me to have a bicultural identity and a bicultural socialization.

Successful Latinx students do not assimilate in the ways predicted by the literature. According to Feagin, Vera and Imani (1996) white spaces in universities seem to embody a straight-line assimilation process for students of color. Within this process, assimilation to the general white and therefore American, way assumes to involve partially or entirely giving up cultural values and ethnic identities in order to ‘fit in.’ Additionally, low socioeconomic status and low levels of financial support for school were found to be barriers to Latinas’ academic performance. A reliance on student loans was shown to be a barrier to academic persistence. However, it is important to note that there are different structures that affect people, these structures can affect them in different ways and within different contexts. Meaning, Latinx student who come from a low socio-economic background are affected differently than Latinx students who come from wealthy families and may not consider themselves Latinx. Social class makes a difference. Gender is an additional factor that affects Latinxs in different ways. Latinas are more likely to be subject to traditional life roles than Latinos which affects the experiences and outcomes in education. However, a common denominator between working class Latinx students, is the low levels of financial support and the racial and ethnic disparities they feel compared to the larger student body (Feagin et. al 1996).

Learning to speak English in a country where other languages are not as openly spoken, sometimes entails the denigration of those other languages, cultures, values, and people. The overall effect of assimilation at universities may come with both positive and negative consequences Latinxs where they may see themselves as ‘less than’ and where their sense of identity, self-esteem and self-usefulness may be damaged by viewing themselves as a constant racial minority.

Once I arrived in graduate school, I quickly realized this place was not like home. The majority of the student body and faculty did not look like me, I did not hear Spanish anywhere, and for the first time in my life I felt as if I did not belong. Not only was the American political climate increasingly anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican, I also started hearing of hate crimes and discrimination in the United States more frequently. I kept my family in mind and kept telling myself that I did not come this far to give up. I deserved to be here as much as anyone else. However, how does one cope with this feeling of being an ethnic and academic imposter syndrome? How do we convince ourselves as women of color that education is ours for the taking as well? De Anda (1984) concluded that Latina young women, despite the negative atmosphere, rely on cultural translators who help them to succeed and to realize a bicultural identity. In other words, we find ways to subsist in the dominant group environment by preserving a positive sense of the value of our own cultures and our own identities.

Cherishing our culture and carving a space in higher education for ourselves when we feel like we don’t belong gives value to our paths and to our voices. In this autoethnography I relate my path to and through higher education and the sacrifices that had to be made. Mine is one of many stories that give value to those of us who made it this far and who have worked for our voice to be heard. Embracing my racial otherness and my bicultural self was something I did not expect

everyone to understand. Some things are too deep and socially complex to explain to others. However, my persistence to receive a degree in higher education degree never faltered. I had *Abuela* and *Mamá* in the back of my mind everyday, and overcoming educational social challenges was a part of my growth and my rebellion against the odds.

Some of my experiences were mirrored in a study by Zell (2010) who examined the psychological and personal experiences of Latinx college students and the impact on their persistence in achieving their education goals. Zell conducted 17 interviews for this study with community college students and generated eight themes: overcoming personal and social challenges, maturation, self-discovery and college adjustment, self-efficacy, continuously strategizing, sense of purpose, perception of faculty, and guided and groomed by family to succeed. Zell concluded that Latinos' experiences in college were marked not only by hardship and distress but also by personal rewards and growth.

One of these main factors was a sense of familial purpose, an important motivation that kept them persevering. These Latinx students represented a step toward making "meaningful contributions" to their families, to their community, and to society. Santos (2014) states, "in addition to family structures, parents are influential to Latinas' persistence in higher education, forms of capital such as cultural and social also influenced educational decisions. *La familia* in many cases, is a pivotal point in the perseverance of Latinx students. The emotional support and encouragement of one's family throughout educational careers can be one of our greatest reasons to keep going to make them proud of us. However, familial gendered expectations can affect young women differently.

VI. LA FAMILIA: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Zell (2010) emphasized the familial element in academic paths of Latinx students throughout the interviews. The study found that for those students who did get involved in extracurricular activities in college, they often waited until their last year. However, the majority conveyed that they “came to class and left.” This was because they invested energy in going to work to contribute to the family income and tried to stay focused on studies, not wanting to “distract themselves.” This situation leaves no room for activities outside school and work; extracurriculars are considered a privilege. Latinx college students who come from underprivileged backgrounds struggle in many ways when pursuing a higher education and often find themselves with a responsibility to take care of their families. Consequently, these students are not able to experience college and social life to the fullest. There is always the lingering responsibility to give back to family and to focus on what is important, meaning, one’s education and one’s paid employment while at school.

Considering that many working and middle class Latinx parents may not have attended American college or universities themselves, they may be unfamiliar with the American educational system. Parents may also have limited English language fluency, and/or may not have the necessary tools and knowledge to guide their daughters through the college enrollment process and/or understand the expectations of higher education. Hernández (2015) focuses on the narratives of 17 high-achieving Latinas. These young women revealed college choices for them was a constant balancing and negotiating of individual and family expectations, being too far from the family and receiving a good education for what they pay in tuition. This study’s analysis showed the influence of familism on the college choice of young Latinas as well as a constant

financial struggle that kept the most elite institutions out of reach. There is a significant level of influence that family plays in Latinas' education, especially mothers and fathers. This study concluded that familism often leads Latina students to choose colleges and universities that are close to home, therefore, constraining and limiting the choices of their education.

On the other hand, for first generation Latina college students, familial support has been shown to be an essential component of academic success and retention (Gloria and Castellanos 2012). The importance of family and peer support in higher education are of greater importance for first generation ethnic minority students where this support serves as a predictor of higher grades and greater adjustment. Nora and Cabrera (1996) looked at Latinas enrolled in doctoral degrees and the factors affecting their paths and levels of persistence. They noted that parental support in forms of emotional support and encouragement had the greatest influence on Latinx students in completing their educational goals.

Latinx students' journeys through higher education are shaped by many challenges and barriers such as economic disadvantage, under-representation, familial expectations, and adjusting struggles (Nora and Cabrera 1996). Hence, they argue, "the proposition that a lack of adjustment to predominantly white institutions and that perceptions of prejudice (racial climate) may lower the quality of college experiences of minority students has emerged as a competing explanation for the differences in persistence rates between minority and nonminority college students" (1996: 120). Many elements also positively influence Latinx students to remain in higher education. The persistence to achieve a higher degree and find employment and economic stability to help family is one of these elements.

The family is seen as a holistic institution, one that should be a priority for Latina women. *Familismo* is a cultural value that designates an orientation to and a constant connection with one's

family (Knight et al. 2010). The role of the family can be a source of support but also a source of stress and obligation. For young Latinas in higher education, a high sense of familism obligation could be related to increased responsibilities and stress while trying to academically succeed especially if they are living far from home and feel they are unable to physically help and support their parents and close family members.

In addition to economic pressures, Latina students, in particular, may be expected to fulfill familial and gender role obligations that conflict with the values and expectations of an American educational system, especially in higher education. These familial responsibilities imposed on Latinas may include caretaking of family members, emotional and financial support, and spending extended quality time with close relatives and family members; familial responsibilities which, in turn, are not as expected from Latino men (Tseng 2004). The discord between culture, family values, and life roles may further explain the disproportional drop-out rates through high school among Latina students (Arreondo et al. 2014). These studies have located and analyzed the barriers that continue to negatively impact the career outlook of Latina students in higher education.

As an undergraduate, I worked at numerous low wage jobs to not only pay for my books and other personal and educational expenses, but also to help my family and contribute to household expenses as best I could. I did not have much time for extracurricular activities outside of work or school, and of course, family. *La familia*²⁵ can be both a blessing and a curse, especially for young Latinas. As *mujeres*, we are seen with a different set of eyes than the way our male counterparts are viewed in the Latinx community. The cultural value of *respeto*²⁶, represents the duty of a position within a gender-specific hierarchical structure, these gender roles are characteristic in the concept of *familismo* (Castillo and Cano 2008) further described as being part of family structures.

I was always dearly protected and forewarned to be a good woman, not to venture into *la vida loca, la vida de la calle*²⁷. Within my family, I was guarded and constantly reminded of the higher standards that I as a woman should have; that importance of familial values and honor came before my own preferences. A woman of value should not be out too late or too often. Only *callejeras*²⁸ live that life, marriage and children should be the most celebrated parts of a woman's life, and that I should know how to cook and clean the house, or I would be seen as lazy, *floja y sucia*²⁹. I always challenged these collective cultural and religious male-derived beliefs. There exists a constant gendered protection and expectation for young women in Latinx families; this gendered patrolling usually tends to control personal life decisions and social roles. However, *la vida de la calle*³⁰ is perfectly acceptable for male Latinos to live. Our male counterparts are given a masculine freedom that we as women should not have, for that would make us less than or not as "valuable."

In my household, I was fortunate that my family to always be supportive of my goals, especially my education. However, when I told them that I was moving away for graduate school, they responded with concern. This concern was not unexpected. Families hold females responsible for their decency and purity. This usually comes with limiting experiences 'not meant for women' as well as moving a distance away from the family. Education, especially higher education, left me in a space where the conservative ways in which I was brought up no longer made sense. Traditional values, the quest for purity, and to be the 'good woman' never resonated with my way of seeing reality. As a feminist woman of color and as a scholar, I take pride in my work, in my struggle, and in my intellectual liberation. In the words of Diane Nash, American civil rights activist, and lead strategist of the student wing of the Civil Rights Movement, "Freedom, by definition, is people realizing that they are their own leaders."

Matos (2015) examined the complexity of Latina/o college students, focused on the familial factors of their success, and how they drew upon those factors to survive and thrive in higher educational settings. He points out that the educational aspirations of Latinx went beyond attaining a college education. Students also spoke of a need to give back to their parents for what they had been given. Others spoke of attaining a college degree for the purpose of bolstering and inspiring the family, of making them proud. In this study, students referenced aspirational and familial capital as being instrumental in their academic success and in their resilience in obtaining a college degree. Students stated that although their families may not have had access to higher education, their families expressed pride in their pursuit of a college degree.

However, rarely do academic studies look at the Latina student population in depth. For females, family can also be a form of repression when it comes to growing, maturing, and moving away for higher education. I am not stating that family absolutely hinders females, my autoethnographic account speaks against this. However, Latinx families can be more gender oppressive to females than to males. This form of gender discrimination in family dynamics shapes not only educational paths when Latinas, for example, need to move away to pursue education, but also affects Latinas' perseverance in higher education. There has not been not much attention payed towards this aspect in higher education and yet, this could be a pivotal point concerning minority women in higher education. Furthermore, it should be noted intimate labor, to be explained shortly, is performed by Latinas in order to negotiate both family structures and academic achievement while in college.

According to Parreñas & Boris (2010), intimate labor refers to the work of making, sustaining, nurturing, maintaining, and managing interpersonal ties, as well as the work of tending to the physical care needs of individuals that one cares about. Parreñas defines intimacy as a

specific association or relationship between two or more individuals, one that involves the sharing of knowledge and attention more completely than what is shared with only acquaintances. That is, taking care of those who are close to us is a form of labor. By combining care work, she examines intimate labor as material, affective, psychological, and an embodied social action (Parreñas and Boris 2010). The concept of intimate labor can be applied to familial expectations and values, especially for women, in what I am calling familial intimate labor.

As women of color, specifically Latinas, we are traditionally held more intimately accountable for family dynamics and functioning than men. As women, we are passed down a higher level of responsibility toward the family. Being close, obeying, nurturing, contributing to the family's well-being, and marriage are acts worth of respect: they are familial intimate labor. Hence, Latinas in higher education face a dilemma, especially if we are moving away from the family where our purpose and academic achievement may be at odds with familial expectations. Having to perform intimate labor in the care of family members from afar adds to the stress and pressure of college.

While living away from *la familia*, Latinas struggle to be independent. On one hand, we work hard to succeed in academia, we mature and crave independence to build a better life for ourselves. On the other hand, we cannot break the bond with the family and must take care of that familial connection. Maintaining that familial connection involved me explaining my life choices to the family, of assuring them that I am being proper, and that I am being successful; I must reassure them that leaving the family was not in vain. However, this form of gendered patrolling can make it hard for Latinas to leave and go to college and even stay in college.

Ever since I was young, I was aware of the place that society had given me and where I was expected to stand, as a woman of color in the States. Latinas in America stereotypically are

seen as subservient and often working low wage jobs. Once in higher education, I found myself constantly negotiating what I “should” be and how I should negotiate my identities to carve a space for myself. My family has given me all the encouragement and support they could give for me to build a career, but at the same time, the familial gendered expectations were present. In my experience, I see how we as *mujeres* are given a certain role in the family. I consider myself lucky to have had the support system I did have regarding my education. However, this is not always the case, and in some instances, family can be a hindering factor in the self-perception of Latinas when pursuing a higher education.

VII. LA MESTIZA: DIOSA QUE LLEVAMOS DENTRO

The concept of borderlands are not limited to the American Southwest. Borders are present wherever two or more cultures are juxtaposed, where people of different races inhabit the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes clash, where the space between two individuals becomes smaller and more intimate (Anzaldúa 1987). The Borderlands have shaped my whole life and I have been fortunate enough to have had a dual experience, one of having a foot on each side, having two hearts beat inside my chest, wherever I go. After years and numerous experiences throughout my education, my Mestiza consciousness and my concept of *self* has shifted in various ways.

My sense of self-perception has been deepened so that I can appreciate the richness of my roots, my *self*, and my culture as a Latina more vividly. I understand how social roles shaped my educational paths and the educational experiences of other *mujeres* like myself. The bridges I have crossed, constructed, and deconstructed are those that have shaped my *self*, *la mujer*, and the scholar that I am today. My mestiza consciousness is a synonym of re-birth, of knowledge, and it allows me to understand my own and other women's perseverance and struggles in education.

Borderlands has fundamentally impacted various academic fields such as Women's Studies and Border Studies. We find that Anzaldúa offers a critique and a theorizing that gives scholars a new lens for analysis. How does a Borderlands theoretical framework fit today's feminist thought? The purpose of mestiza consciousness is to illuminate of oppressor and oppressed, to give light to the complexity of social singularities, and to encourage a deep understanding of "the other." Through this lens, we learn to appreciate the deconstruction of the borders and the ideologies that surround us, those that shape our own and others' very existence.

VIII. AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS

When using autoethnographic scripts as a research tool, it is important also to consider its limitations. From a sociological perspective, this form of academic writing will generally not enable one to generalize to the greater target population from a solo autoethnographic account. However, it is also important to appreciate that giving authority to the voices and stories of scholars of color facilitates the understanding of how particular student identities are produced and, in this case, what educational paths look like for many women of color. The depth and richness of autoethnographic methods allows voices to be heard. Hence, recognizing the intersection of race, class, and gender struggles in American education cannot be fully researched fully without capturing the narratives of those who have lived through these experiences.

Furthermore, given that the researcher and the participant are the same individual, many scholars would treat and criticize this framework as a form of essentialism. Yet, as sociology scholars, the obligation to make scholarly contributions to the development of our own critical consciousness is essential to our understanding of not only ourselves, but others. In the act of voicing our experience, we are also reinterpreting the events we choose to depict regarding our lived knowledge. As Bochner and Ellis (2016) point out, we depict evocative autoethnography as a genre of writing designed to put meanings in motion so that readers of social science texts could not only receive but also feel the truths of first-person accounts of lived-through experiences. Thus, while autoethnographic accounts are often fragmented pieces of our own collective memory, these lived experiences and narratives serve to deepen our understanding of the ways in which social relations are embedded within educational paths for minority students.

IX. CONCLUSION

As a working class Mexican American woman, my path consisted of a constant struggle to pursue and succeed in education. This entailed many sacrifices, rebellions against gendered norms, courage, racial pride, and ethnic duality. This analytical autoethnography illuminates on one of many paths to academic success from start to finish and what domains and struggles I as a Latina learned to navigate. With this thesis, I am not suggesting that all Latina educational paths, support, and struggles are invariable, but rather, I am giving voice to the experiences of one of many women of color who overcame the barriers to attain an education. Hence, understanding complex life roles and the impact of family, culture, and values may help educational institutions and career professionals better to support career development for Latina students, especially for first-generation college students.

I have proposed a way of looking at young Latinas' educational paths and the writing of the *self* in terms of experience and the desire for social integration without leaving behind *nuestras raíces*³¹. Expanding on Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of hybridity within the Borderland theoretical framework and the "mestiza consciousness," one of the main themes of this piece is to interrogate the role that educational and familial institutions play in the creation of particular ideologies in working-class Latina students. One of the main contributions of this piece is the concept of familial intimate labor as a factor in higher educational opportunities and the retention of Latina students. This autoethnographic account serves to capture a feminist reflexivity that gives voice to the efforts of many young minority women in the path to higher education. These findings and this narrative also may have important implications for social policy. Despite the belief by some that class, gender, nor race have an impact on educational attainment in American society and the educational

system, and that affirmative action programs are a waste or even a form of repression towards the majority white population, social research demonstrates otherwise. Latinos and Latinas continue to face discriminatory treatment and prejudiced educational experiences in their careers and such policies are essential to give more underrepresented minority students and opportunities in education.

Many borders exist around the world, borders that divide people, cultures, terrain, and opportunity, but for every erected border, one would hope that there also exists a bridge. *El futuro le pertenece a la Mestiza porque el futuro depende en el romper las barreras y dualidades que nos dividen como humanidad, depende de saber caminar entre dos o más culturas*³². By changing the way we perceive reality, the way we see not only ourselves, but others, we could create a new and more accurate and useful consciousness. The work of this consciousness would be to transcend dualities and to aim to answer the social problems that divide us: the white and the colored, men and women of all genders. The solution lies in healing the split between us, that which originates at the very core of our lives and upbringings. This autoethnographic piece is a contribution to a dualistic form of feminist thought and reflexivity. The awareness of a collective consciousness is just the beginning of a powerful answer to many of our pressing social issues, a consciousness that we could bring to be the end of prejudice, discrimination, sexism, and lack of opportunity. My narrative and the stories of many minority women who have broken the barriers and dualities and succeeded in pursuit of an education serve as proof that *no hay puentes, se hacen puentes al andar*³³.

END NOTES

¹ You all are my dearest pride, mi dearest love, and the perseverance that gives me strength to keep going each and every day.

² Because I am a woman from two different worlds, hybrid, with a Mestiza consciousness. I bring Mexico with me in one hand while I navigate with the other.

³ Mother

⁴ Grandmother

⁵ Colony (a city's ghetto or impoverished area)

⁶ Talking back ("big mouth")

⁷ Grandparents

⁸ My roots

⁹ At the other side of this bridge, this psychological bridge that splits me in two.

¹⁰ The International bridge (between Mexico and the United States)

¹¹ My Spanish, my people, my Mexico, my soul

¹² Tongue (language)

¹³ My Spanish

¹⁴ My land (home)

¹⁵ I do not belong here, nor I belong over there

¹⁶ They want to bury us, but they don't know that we are seeds

¹⁷ The second neighborhood

¹⁸ My family

¹⁹ My people, my family

²⁰ Brown skin, Mexican woman

²¹ I am capable of doing this

²² "When one is born poor, studying is the mayor act of rebellion against the system. Knowledge breaks the chains of slavery." -Tomás Bulat

²³ Women (of Hispanic/Latinx origin)

²⁴ Mexicans

²⁵ The family

²⁶ Respect

²⁷ A promiscuous life, a life of the streets

²⁸ Women of the street

²⁹ Lazy and dirty

³⁰ The life of the streets

³¹ Our roots

³² The future belongs to the Mestiza because the future depends on the breaking of barriers and dualities that divide us as humanity, it depends on knowing how to walk between two or more cultures.

³³ There are no existing bridges, one makes bridges while walking.

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