

AGENCY, LIBERATION, AND INTERSECTIONALITY AMONG LATINA SCHOLARS: NARRATIVES FROM A CROSS-INSTITUTIONAL WRITING COLLECTIVE

Nancy Alvarez
St. John's University
nancy.r.alvarez@gmail.com

Cristina Salazar
Teachers College, Columbia University
cps2127@tc.edu

Francia N. Brito
Teachers College, Columbia University
francianbrito@gmail.com

Karina Aguilar
New York Medical College
karina.aguilar.moreno@gmail.com

Introduction

Among United States residents, the number of doctoral degrees conferred to Latinx students represents a small percentage compared to other groups. For example, from 2009–2010, the percentage of degrees conferred to Latinx students was 5 percent compared to 74 percent for White students, 11 percent for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 7 percent for African Americans, and 0.7 percent for Indian/Alaska Natives. During the same period, the proportion of doctoral degrees conferred to females was 55 percent for Latinas compared to 65 percent for African American students, 56 percent for Asian/Pacific students, 54 percent for American Indian/Alaska Native students, and 51 percent for White female students (National Center for Education Statistics). Historically, underrepresented minority (URM) students encounter a plethora of issues that influence their educational experiences, yet there is a scarcity of scholarship that elucidates the quality of experience of women of color (WOC) pursuing doctorate degrees (Aryan and Guzman). As multi-marginalized, first-generation college students, we continuously struggle to find a place within higher education. Our educational pathways to becoming doctoral recipients have occurred primarily within the context of alienation, significantly influencing our need to connect with other WOC who have also felt isolated and disconnected. Consequently, we needed to find each other because knowing that there were other Latinas in doctoral programs, and actually getting to know them, validated our existence within academia.

In this paper, we are using storytelling as a method of sharing our experiences as members of our writing collective. As WOC, we are used to offering counter-stories, which Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso define as “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the

majoritarian stories of racial privilege,” (32) but for this piece, we decided to share our narratives without feeling a need to directly respond to how “others” create and foster their own writing groups. In order to tell our stories in a way that feels authentic and true, we are sharing excerpts of multiple written works that we’ve collected, such as text from an original Facebook post, an email, and parts of our own narratives broken apart and reweven into this paper.

Formation of a Cross-Institutional Collective

The formation of a cross-institutional writing group that supports women at the intersection of socially located identities and various stages of doctoral programs was influenced by the dominant discourses and ways of being that it attempts to challenge and transform. By recognizing the barriers that women of color encounter as scholars (Martinez et al), this informal space allowed for us to deliberately deconstruct the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, class, culture, and gender that impact the educational experiences of WOC in doctoral programs. The pathway to a doctoral degree can present multiple difficulties for the students who, lacking an understanding of the process, can find themselves struggling throughout their trajectories with both personal and professional challenges (Golde and Dore). The challenges that our intersectional identities embody are also compounded by larger issues, such as a lack of representation and institutional support.

With all of this in mind, Francia formed our group by posting in a Facebook group for Latinas in doctoral programs in August of 2015. Her post was straightforward and friendly:

Amigas! Though we are all at different phases of our journey, this group has served as an

unbelievable source of encouragement, motivation, and strength to keep pushing through! I would love to generalize that into some face-to-face time! Are any of you residing in NYC interested in getting together for some writing time or anything in-between?

The writers of this piece, as well as several other doctoral students, quickly reached out to Francia. We were all eager to belong to a group that would embrace our identities fully as Latinas, because we realized that was exactly what had been missing throughout our doctoral journeys. The private Facebook group was already serving its purpose as a place for support and motivation, but the idea of belonging to a local writing group felt like we were finally going to work with people who would respect our languages, cultures, backgrounds, homes, families, experiences, and academic interests in pursuing matters affecting Latinx communities. We knew that we were in need of a supportive graduate network, but we didn't understand how much we could benefit from such a group until we met for dinner two weeks later. There was no awkwardness in the way we all hugged each other upon first meeting. The conversation flowed naturally, in both English and Spanish, as if we were all old friends. We set up some parameters for the weeks ahead and then walked out of the restaurant together, excited about the possible friendships that would bloom from the group and the certain dissertations that would soon be written. Following our meet-and-greet dinner, Francia emailed the group the following:

I also thought to reserve the room an extra 3 hours so that we can use it as a collaborative forum to

- Engender Trans and/or Interdisciplinary thinking/discussion about our work/dissertations (we are all at different stages)
- Prep for upcoming presentations/proposal hearings/dissertation defenses.
- Use each other as sounding boards to work through any ideas or approaches to “the work” that you may have
- Work through any “messiness” that we may encounter.
- Share our work.
- Generate/modify research questions and or other methodology.
- And, anything else or even nothing at all, as determined by the needs of the group.

Would it be okay with everyone, that if they bring something to eat for themselves to bring something to share with one extra person? We do this to further create a sense of community, so that we have some extra food or snacks to share and without creating a sense of burden on one person.

Our first meeting occurred on a sunny Sunday morning in September in the library at Teachers College, and Francia made sure to reserve a room at the library every Sunday thereafter. We each arrived with coffee and snacks, excited about the work that lied ahead. We had already agreed that we did not have to share our writing with each other and left that as an option. We briefly discussed what we hoped to gain from our weekly gatherings, and also set some writing goals for the day ahead.

Karina: I had spent too many months trying to figure out what I was going to write my dissertation on. The process felt long, drawn out, and lonely. I did not have anyone with whom to discuss my ideas in a scholarly manner.

This was a common theme among us. As the only doctoral students in our families, and sometimes within our social circles, we needed the space to express our concerns about writing dissertation proposals and obtaining IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval with people who understood the struggle and could sympathize without having to justify why such matters required so much venting. A bonus is being able to discuss these issues using the languages that feel most authentic and personal to us—a mixture of Englishes and Spanishes.

Language is a common topic of conversation at our meetings. We are constantly vigilant of our standard academic English skills—both written and oral. There's freedom in our oral communication with each other, but when we quiet down and face the written word, our confidence dims.

Cristina: My previous personal experience includes participation in different groups for academic writing. I have also taken part in writing boot camps, I have worked individually with writing coaches and consumed books and software applications that provide strategies to improve your academic writing. I have had different degrees of success with those experiences, but none of my previous endeavors helped me with a

particular challenge I face: English is my second language, and therefore, an ever-present apprehension has accompanied me throughout my doctoral degree: academic writing always felt like a specific practice that required a skill-set that felt out of my reach.

For all of us, English is our second language. Being able to discuss our apprehension towards academic English has helped quiet some of the negative self-talk that sometimes prevents our ability to perform on paper. Inquiries to each other about how to approach an advisor or if the way that we phrased something makes sense, helps us build confidence. Knowing that there are other doctoral students with similar concerns brings us relief and further strengthens our sense of community.

We soon realized that the group could offer more to us than just a place to talk about writing. What we really needed was validation that our work was important and that we could actually do it; we could actually earn our doctoral degrees! Believing in each other helped us believe in ourselves.

Francia: The summer of 2015 was an extremely difficult one for me. Feelings of isolation, self-doubt and disconnection were further compounded by the intractable nature of looming deadlines. It had been three years since my journey to becoming a doctoral student started. I transversed through the landscape of the academic culture in higher education unsupported as an Afro-Latina, a writer and a scholar—bereft of a sense of belonging. The dominant ways of knowing and knowledge production inherent in higher education settings imprinted in me a false representation of what constitutes a successful writer and scholar—undermining my confidence.

By the following Sunday, we each felt a bit more excited about our work and a bit more like we belonged in that conference room in the library of Teachers College. We soon began to wonder how we could encourage other WOC in doctoral programs to seek community.

Storytelling as a Site for Liberation

*You were always my mirror,
What I mean is, I had to look at you to see me.*
—Julio Cortazar, 1984

Building on what Yosso refers to as cultural capital, specifically our linguistic capital, sharing our

various languages united us within the group, but the scars of being multilingual within an academic setting remain fresh. As Yosso notes, “Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. In addition, these children most often have been engaged participants in a storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, stories (cuentos) and proverbs (dichos)” (78). Storytelling quickly became a way for us to connect and build trust. We realized that sharing our stories with each other liberated us from the fear we embodied while navigating through predominantly White spaces and academic institutional norms. We were lacking in self-efficacy and agency, and experienced Imposter Syndrome. We were in need of affective support, and community; one that fostered in us the ability to navigate social and institutional structures that were not built with us in mind. It’s easy to dismiss Imposter Syndrome as something that happens to ALL students at some point in their academic journey. Students may experience feelings of inadequacy during several points in their academic career. But our version of Imposter Syndrome ran much deeper. Some of us have wondered if the only reason why we had been admitted into our program was to fulfill a diversity quota. While some of us have experienced indifferent academic environments where members of our cohorts dismiss our concerns or feelings of injustice, prejudice or bias. All of these reasons, and others, have contributed to the silencing of our voices, in both English and Spanish. Therefore, we decided to share our stories with one another and deliberately work on ways to disrupt social and structural barriers that affect our experiences within and across the academy.

Realizing that we could speak on these issues freely, and recognizing our own experiences within each other’s stories, helped us designate our group meetings as a safe space.

Cristina: During our first meeting, I recall a sense of relief and joy: these were all brilliant women of color and they all were sharing their personal and academic challenges. The importance of their openness in that first encounter is perhaps what I would like to emphasize: I do believe that in my case, their willingness to share their trajectory in that informal setting allowed me to feel empowered to talk about my own struggles and to state my interest in the potential writing group.

Francia: Drawing strength from Anzaldúa’s

words, we unpacked “how hard it is for us to think that we can choose to become writers, much less feel and believe that we can” (166). This space encourages intellectual development and the ability to think and write critically. To push beyond the boundaries and structural barriers of the academy, is “to commit ourselves to the work of transforming the academy so that it will be a place where cultural diversity informs every aspect of our learning, we must embrace struggle and sacrifice. We cannot easily be discouraged” (hooks 33).

Our collective provided us with a sanctuary where we, as female scholars of color, could be validated, empowered and supported. Forging connections with students who understood our struggles specific to WOC educational pathways proved to be essential in engendering emotional support, building social capital, and reclaiming our ways of being and knowing. We developed a better understanding of intersecting identities by engaging in critical conversations about the challenges that women of color face across race, ethnicity, culture, class and gender, and the ways in which those social processes intersect and influence the female student experience.

Building Agency through Social Networks

As a way to increase access to material resources and to build agency and social capital we intentionally developed social networks outside of our home institutions. We created access to formal and informal networks and information sharing that supports academic abilities and competencies. We collectively invited students to be a part of this healing space by reaching out through various social platforms, by personal invitation and/or by sharing an invitation to faculty members to be shared with students that they identify as needing a support group. Having each other as resources, while also sharing material resources from our various universities, has helped strengthen our sense of community while disrupting dominant ways of knowing and knowledge production—and our ability to thrive throughout the academic pipeline.

Francia: Through the intercollegiate structure of this collective we learn how to access resources and information. We share self-care, coping and survival strategies. We cry, we laugh, and we support one another across academic endeavors. Through ongoing critical conversations, we explore the complexity of

our experiences, while integrating our commonalities and differences.

When one of us can't find a journal article in our university's library, we ask each other to search within our own library systems. When one of us needs help with software, we can ask our tech expert, Cristina, for advice and a list of resources. Our individual research also overlaps in interesting ways, so there is always a book recommendation or a link to an article easily dispensed by any of us. We share information about calls for papers/proposals, conferences held at our home institutions, and even information that we've gathered through social media.

Karina: Meeting with this group of women allows me to feel acknowledged and included. This group provides a safe space as we move through the last sprint of the doctoral program; we have practiced difficult conversations before a one-on-one with our advisors, we have brainstormed ideas that later became presentations and articles. The group has served as a soundboard before job interviews and dissertation proposals. This collaborative provides more to me in this phase of my doctoral formation than what I receive from my program. The exchange I have with the group reminds me that these women are the future of academia.

Cristina: While the support of my advisor has been valuable throughout my doctoral trajectory, there is a different type of support that I have encountered weekly in our writing group: the peer-based mentorship that is informal, spontaneous and tremendously generous has truly allowed me to envision not only my own work, but also envision my potential professional pathway.

Nancy: We are all committed to finishing our degrees and supporting each other until we all finish. Sundays have become sacred! We may not be pumping out chapters every Sunday, but the work that gets done is just as important. Sharing our achievements, struggles, and ideas is crucial in keeping each other motivated and accountable. When you know that others are feeling how you are feeling, it lightens the load just a little bit. It's easy to get lost in the narrative of “this is so hard for me” and in reality, this is so hard for ‘us.’ When you start thinking about ‘us’

instead of just ‘me,’ it makes you want to try harder.

Our advice for other WOC in doctoral programs is that you continue reaching out until you find your people, those who are willing to love you and support you as different academic and personal hurdles appear; and when you do find your people, challenge your own fear, your own complacency, so that you are also present and honest with them. Hold each other accountable and demystify the struggles of writing. Be present, listen, and write.

Conclusion

Since the creation of this group, we have added several new members—Marcelle, Jen, Dawn and Regina—and we now identify as a writing collaborative for women of color. Two of our group members, Marcelle and Jen, have successfully defended their dissertations and we couldn’t be prouder or more inspired by their accomplishments and courage. We plan to continue our Sunday meetings until each one of us becomes a doctor.

Cristina: I occasionally mention to other doctoral students my participation in this group, and there are mixed responses; a frequent question is ‘Why is it centered around women of color?’ And to that I would perhaps just answer that the experience of de-centering white patriarchy, and being able to support each other through a decolonized practice is tremendously valuable and transformative. Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us that we must write because bravery is all that is left when we need our words to make sense of the world. I have seen amazing proposals become dissertation projects and pilot studies in my time in the group. Our collective practice of storytelling, of making sense of our doctoral pathway has been, to me, the center of this transformative exercise.

This collective of interdisciplinary peers evolved into a space of resistance and liberation—one that allows us to safely engage in decolonizing dialogue that sanctions the production of diverse knowledge and epistemology. As we each navigate the landscape of institutions of higher learning, this informal space was founded out of a necessity to materialize a system of shared support that engenders agency; counteracts the loneliness of the writing and doctoral process, and allows us to reclaim our individual and collective ways of being and knowing. The voices in this paper are those of Latinas of various national origins, and although we occupy various intellectual, physical,

social milieu—the indispensable essence of our cultures and language, unite us. Engagement in this group has brought to our awareness the salience of the complexity of our heterogeneous and intersectional social locations and experiences within the academy. We seek to exemplify the possibility of mutuality between doctoral students of color, and/or those who represent nations outside of the United States, to build pathways across difference and identity by co-creating liberating spaces that support their scholarly and academic needs.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr. Anne Ellen Geller and Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz for their encouragement and invaluable support. We also thank the editors of Praxis and the anonymous reviewer for their feedback and support throughout the publication process. As we all journey through and within the academy, we are especially grateful to Dr. Marcelle Mentor, Dr. Jennifer Johnson, Dawn Goddard-Eckrich, and Regina Duthely for holding space and their willingness to be fully present—walking alongside each of us with compassion, support and without judgment.

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