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## Testimonios of Two Latinas In the Academe

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# TESTIMONIOS OF TWO LATINAS IN THE ACADEME

BY MARIA GABRIELA BRIDGES<sup>1</sup>

The ineptitude that exists in equating White feminism with Women of Color feminism dates to the times of legal slavery in this country. White women would exalt in their position of superiority by not acknowledging the children born of rape from white masters to black, enslaved women. These children were not seen as legitimate white children and their purpose was to further perpetrate the exploitation, servitude, and atrocities committed by White colonizers. White women have always held a higher position in society, even in more modern times when interracial marriages have been made legal. The purpose of the woman of color was to socially elevate White woman by humiliating and degrading the woman of color- and the mistrust still exists today. To the uninitiated and naïve outsiders to the feminist movements, still mostly men—White women and Women of Color appear to be fighting for the same cause- yet the barriers and yokes of oppression are inherently different (hooks, 2017).

The creation, and purpose of the existence of the academe is undeniably accepted in historical accounts- for the advancement of White, wealthy, males; teaching is still conducted today for their benefit in the academe. This still describes who it most benefits today. Women of Color, especially mother-scholars of color, struggle to find acceptance as students, staff, and faculty in the academe. When Women of Color persevere, break down barriers, and pave their own advancement, they want to smooth the road for other marginalized populations and grant equal access to higher education. Women of Color in leadership positions- positions intended for White, wealthy, men- use their position

to serve others and continue to transform the Ivory Tower (Kiyama & Gonzales, 2019). Representative of the white, hegemonic structure, “the master”, is present in the academe and society at large. “The master” is also in many ways’ white women, white feminists, and white “allies”. The master does not understand the struggles that Women of Color face, or the way Women of Color are oppressed. Women of Color cannot break free from the master by trying to advance within the structure in place, but rather create a new structure of cultural value and culturally relevant pedagogy that reflects the values of Indigeneity and liberation (Lorde, 2018).

Latinas are not afforded as many opportunities to pursue higher education and are less likely than white women to secure internships and assistantships despite the cultural and linguistic diversity that Latina women bring to the academe. New Latina doctoral graduates find the tenure-track process isolating and have no one to turn to for guidance, as most Latina tenure-track faculty are first-generation scholars- with many parents who were not even permitted to finish grade school. Mentorship and collegiality are fundamental for success in the academe among Women of Color (Olivia and Nevarez, 2019).

Self-care and time for academic studies are almost non-existent in the life of young Latina scholars. The demand of the gender roles and expectations within the Latino family is oppressive and non-conducive to the aspirations of women’s wanting to pursue higher education. Cooking, cleaning, ironing, and caregiving for parents, grandparents, siblings, spouses and children are common expectations that must be met before the Latina woman is allowed “free time” for self-care and education. Testimonios emphasize the many familial duties that impede women from becoming successful outside of the home. Testimonios also explore how oppression does not come from within the home, but also from those external to the culture through discrimination, tokenization, and colorism (Lopez, 2001). Designated spaces and language are necessary and appropriate for the advancement of the women of Nепantla- the women of the in between. Women of Color and the further marginalization of Women of Color because of their subscriptions to the subcultures dealing with the deviance from the normal, expected- such as deviance from traditional gender and familial roles, hopes and aspirations of scholarship and academic acknowledgment, and the intermixing of languages that is native to the

Borderlands- are in search of a safe space to reveal their self-identity and values. Through the use of ethnography, autohistoria, and autoteoria, marginalized and oppressed Chicana women are given a sitio y lengua to self-identify and self-express their true self (Hurtado, 2020).

As an intertwining *trenza* of Chicana Feminist Theory and Critical Race Theory, multiple intersections that mother-scholars of color experience in academia and outside of academia- as a new theory is called “Chicana M(other)work”. Chicana M(other)work is a crossroads of the many hats that mother-scholars of color wear- mother, scholar, educator, researcher, caregiver, lover, community advocate, worker, breadwinner, janitor, and the many “other” roles that are labor-intensive and often uncompensated monetarily or even mentally acknowledged. An entire anthology is dedicated to document the extensive roles mother-scholars of color have and bring awareness to the oppression that occurs inside and outside of the academe both deliberately and unintentionally. The experiences of the many women documented in this anthology are self-validated as an academic, scholar, mother of color, woman- who is to say that this is not their reality, their truth and their experience (Caballero et al, 2019).

Through autoethnographic testimonio, researchers introspectively document their journeys; mothers of color in academia, university staff members, and students who strive to reach their goal of being called “doctora”. Autoethnography can be used to reflect upon the barriers, support systems, and oppressions that occur in the academe that either hinder or promote advancement as a student or employee. Within the bounds of the repressive academe, certain researchers will use triangulation, critical analysis, and reflection to bring meaning to their work and apply it in their professional position in a widely acceptable fashion (Cardoza, 2017). The use of testimonio within the Latino cultures of the Americas is a tool used for the empowerment of oppressed and marginalized peoples. This tool uplifts voices, creates resistance, and empowers others facing the same oppressive structures. This tool is now also used in the academe as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to address the social injustices within the academe. Testimonio is widely used and accepted by faculty of color as a phenomenological, narrative, and counter-narrative tool that is sociopolitical in nature. The cultural applications of testimonio transcend from community to academe (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012).

Platicas have also been explored as a form of a pedagogical and methodological approach to inquiry for the purpose of extracting data from participants in a culturally sensitive and respectful way. Platicas, as well as testimonios are traditions that are second nature, and automatic to the brown Latina mind. These traditions are passed down generation to generation and as shielded as the Latina woman is in the home, she is able to transgress chauvinistic, societal oppressions through the use of platicas and testimonios. In many ways, platica is traditional- yet radical and subtle. The use of platicas is conventional and appropriate for research dealing with social justice and empowerment of marginalized populations (Fierros, & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

In testimonios, the traditional role of the Latina is questioned and challenged, as Latinas are choosing to pursue higher education. Using testimonio as method of exploration of how culture promotes advancement, but also hinders advancement in cases of poverty and abuse within Latino families (Mercado-Garza, 2012). Through writing, Women of Color can uplift each other's voices through sisterhood to persevere and resist white, hegemony and even xenophobia within communities of color. Journaling and letter writing can document the struggles of Latina women and create parallel realities to women of color outside of the Latina culture. (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015).

### Strategies of Inquiry

The purpose of this study is for the discovery of the motivation of two Latina women who chose to pursue a doctoral degree and work in the academe. The discovery of motivation of these two Mother-Scholars of Color is excavated through the ethnographic practices of testimonio and platica (Fierros, & Delgado Bernal, 2016). Each of these two Latina women have unique experiences, barriers, and support systems that have allowed them to become resilient and successful in their field of work.

The findings of this ethnographic work can be used to illuminate the conditions that Women of Color in academia face as minorities, mothers, scholars, community members, and also to inform administrators with hiring authority of the benefits of hiring these women as an inspiration to young women minorities with similar life experiences (Olivia and Nevarez, 2019). Moreover, also benefiting from this study are post-

secondary faculty intending to encompass critical thinking, discussions and dialogue in their classrooms, especially those teaching ethnic studies, disability studies, and gender studies.

This work is conducted from a Transformative Qualitative Ethnographic paradigm, focused in Critical Theories and their intersections. Specifically, I interpret the experiences by intertwining Feminist Critical Theory and Chicana M(other)work theory to match the data sources and researcher perspective (Caballero et al, 2019).

## Research Questions

Therefore, to drive this study the following guiding questions will frame the research:

1. What motivates Latina women to pursue doctoral degrees?
2. What motivates Latina women to pursue a career in academia?

## Procedures

### SAMPLING

Convenience sampling was conducted for the reasons of accessibility to participants during an international pandemic, presently established rapport, and knowledge of participants' professional activities and community work. The two participants have interacted professionally with the researcher at multiple campus and community events. No other non-professional interactions have occurred between the participants and the researcher.

### SAMPLE SIZE

The researcher conducted this study with a sample size of two participants due to the extensive nature of documenting and analyzing ethnographic work. The researcher chose the two participants from a minority-serving institution in the Southwest region of the United States, because each has obtained tenure and hold appointments in administrative positions.

## DATA COLLECTION

The researcher first invited her participants through an email exchange to participate in a *platica* with the purpose of discussing and sharing the motivation of pursuing a doctoral degree and working in academia. The participants agreed to participate through Zoom at a time convenient to both participants. The participants arrived promptly to the Zoom *platica* and were informed of the anonymity that they would be provided as participants of this study and agreed to the terms of anonymity. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect the identities of the professors that participated in the study. One academic chose the pseudonym, Dr. Silvestre, and the other gave no preference and will be referred to as Dr. Gonzalez. One participant asked which language the *platica* would be conducted in and the researcher acknowledged that English, Spanish, or a combination thereof, was appropriate as the researcher is fluent in these languages. Guiding questions were provided to the participants before the Zoom *platica* to help shape the effectiveness of the time allotted. These questions have been added as an appendix to this document. Both participants contributed a *testimonio*, a narrative of their experiences within her culture and subcultures, of their individual experiences in academia, in their family, in their work, in their everyday lives that contribute to their personal phenomena during the time allotted. The researcher chose this form of qualitative data to research the phenomena of the participants because of the deep, rich, cultural, and empowering value of *testimonio* and *platica* within the Latina community that allows for the expressive experiential storytelling of the intrapersonal and interpersonal self.

## Analysis of Testimonios

The researcher first transcribed the recorded Zoom *platica* session, then analyzed all data through coding materials into themes and subthemes. The researcher is aware that each woman will have had distinct experiences and will have internalized these experiences in their own way. The researcher also understands that each of these *testimonios* is the unique experience of each woman and that validity of each of these *testimonio* should not be a goal of the research, as it further marginalizes the story

of each woman already minoritized and marginalized by academia and other social elements.

### Testimonio #1: Dr. Gonzalez

It was all pretty much by accident. I would say I didn't have any grand plans ever of getting a PhD. I didn't even know what a PhD was. As I was graduating high school, I thought I wanted to be a coach or the first female sports analysts on ESPN. I remember the first career I wanted was to be the first woman in the major league baseball, even though I was never on a baseball team, but I did play baseball and catch with my dad and we watched the Yankees together. But I also did feel that I wanted to be an educator of some sort because I wanted not only to be a coach, but also a PE teacher. Always as a little girl, I would play school with my sister.

My dad and my grandmother are from Cuba. They came to the United States when my dad was about 13, but they lived in Puerto Rico first and then the United States. And my dad had a really hard time growing up because he didn't know the language. He was coming to a place that was very white. People don't think of Miami as white now, but Miami beach is a white, Jewish city. He had a very difficult time growing up. My grandmother also didn't speak any English and his parents were not wealthy people. My grandfather was a waiter and my grandmother cleaned hotel rooms and she was a cleaner at a hospital. So that's how he grew up. And that's how I grew up.

And then my grandmother ended up leaving her job to help take care of us, because my dad raised us as a single dad. She was the one that would pick us up after school, feed us and we all lived together for a long time during my childhood. My grandmother knew education was important, even though she didn't have one- she only went to the second grade. She would pick up all these free workbooks that the schools would have around at the end of the year and bring them home. I used those to pretend I was teaching my sister or just do them just for fun. I always had this notion of, to be some sort of educator and that never changed. As I was finishing my bachelor's degree in Spanish. The only reason I got a bachelor's degree in Spanish was so that I could graduate very quickly. I figured out I could graduate in three years that way. In my last semester there was this older woman who must've been in her



fifties, she was retired, was also getting her bachelor's in Spanish and she was going to go get her master's degree. She was talking about this assistantship and I was like, well, what is that? And she's like, well, they're going to pay for my school, and I get to teach. And I was like, Oh, I want, I want one of those.

So, I went, and I just applied to the schools that still had open deadlines and I got accepted for my masters. And then I started teaching and I really enjoyed it. I think I was pretty good at it. My students enjoyed me. Then after that I taught high school for a year and I hadn't finished my masters yet. I still had to take my exams. I took my exams and I realized I really enjoyed teaching at the university more than the high school. So, I wanted to go get my PhD purely because I wanted to teach at the university. I don't have these grand research ambitions that other people might have.

In high school I was a very good student and I got A's and B's and even in my undergraduate, I did everything I could to not take a literature course, because I hate reading. But then I had to take one literature course. So, I took it and I read something that I liked for the first time and I loved it. It was this story called "La muñeca menor" by Rosario Ferre, this Puerto Rican author. I could identify with like all of this. And I really loved it.

When I taught high school, I taught in Nacadoches, Texas and it was very white, very racist. I was not treated well. For example, I taught 75%, not 100%, but I only got paid 50% of the salary. I wasn't given my own classroom- I was given a cart. Then I had to go to different classrooms, even though I'm sure they could have found a way to do it. I loved being in the classroom, just like now I love being in the classroom.

This is my favorite part of being a professor. Right. if you ask me, why am I prefer this? Because I teach, I love to teach. I love being in the classroom. I like connecting with students and I love them being able to, to engage in something new. Right. and I get to do that either as a Spanish professor. Cause there's nothing like language that shows an immediate, you know, acquisition of new knowledge. And then in Mexican American studies or Latino studies, you kind of have the same thing because the students have really never been exposed for the most part, a lot of these ideas. And once they are, they don't are not just like acquiring new knowledge by through exposure, new material, but then they start to build their own new knowledge base.

The other part is I was very aware early on in my life that I did want to have a family that I wanted to raise. And as someone who didn't grow up with a mom, you know, I wanted to be there for my kids as much as possible. So, I knew that being a professor would give me a lot of flexibility with my time. I don't have flexibility with my time, but I do have flexibility with my schedule. And so being a professor allows me, for example, to go to my kids' games in the day, or maybe they have a competition, I can go to their competition. If I can volunteer at their school for reading, for example, I've done in the past, I can do that. I can take them to doctor's appointments and not worry. I knew the job would give me the kind of scheduling flexibility I would need.

I know that I did not anticipate the amount of stress that it would be as being Latina at the university, and I think that stress is evident at any university. And some people might say it's more at a predominantly white institution, but at least at our institution, I think that it is an extreme amount of stress because I, for one find myself that I identify greatly with our students and I feel that I feel the need to advocate for them in a way. No one ever advocated for me-there's so many inequities that our students face that it's very challenging. And I don't mean the kind of stuff that other professors talk about. Like, it's not that they're not prepared cause they're fine. They're prepared. These are like the best students I've ever had. I've taught at the university of Michigan, the university of Oklahoma I've taught in San Jose and St. Louis. And I can by far say that these are the best students- they do work, they read, they are extremely intelligent where some of those other universities, they, if they don't read it's because they were like partying. They were having fun here. Usually if they don't read it's because they were working all night, they were taking care of family, or they only have only one car to share. So that's why I also enjoy being here.

But at the same time, the research stuff causes me a lot more stress than I ever anticipated having in my life. That's the part that I didn't expect. I do it because I have to and when I'm doing it, I enjoy it, but I don't have time to do it. So, it makes it even more stressful. I wish I had the time and the resources to do it like at other universities. And then I could enjoy it more and contribute more, I think. I do what I have to do in order to meet the criteria of the university in order to remain as a faculty member in order to get promoted. There's a lot more I wish I could do, but I can't, because I think that as a Latino faculty member, we

have so many more things to deal with than the other faculty members. My children ask me why I don't quit if I am so stressed. They think it's boring to be a teacher. It's not boring in the classroom. I tell them it is the stuff you see me do at home that is boring. They think about careers that I never even thought of. One of them wants to be a film producer, she wants to make films, the other one wants to be a makeup artist or, or a special effect, makeup artists for film also. They can think about something beyond doctor, teacher, lawyer, right or these mainstream careers. They get to imagine stuff that I never could have imagined. I tell them I don't care what you do after college but get your education.

My grandmother didn't even get to see me graduate high school. She passed away when I was 13 and then my grandfather passed away when I was 15. I remember when I did get my PhD, my dad confessed to me that he wanted me to go away for college because he is a diabetic since he was 12 years old and he thought he would pass away young. Of course, he's still alive- he's probably better off than me. He said he wanted to know that we could take care of ourselves because my mom, she didn't raise me, and she was in our lives from time to time and she's one of five girls and none of them graduated high school- they, they all got GEDs. My dad said I had to go to college, but secretly he was grateful I graduated high school. I was stunned when he told me this. So, my dad is super proud, super, super proud. Cause he can't believe, you know, everything that's happened.

### Testimonio #2: Dr. Silvestre

I was born and raised in Mexico in the state of Mexico. And my mom is from a town that is called Yanga, Veracruz, it's the first town that was free of slavery. My dad is from the Mixtec Sierra in Oaxaca. So, I have Mixtec blood, and my abuelita was very indigenous looking. So, I got the hair and the color skin color, and she is darker than me, but brown, brown. And she did not speak the language of the Mixtec, but she grew up there. I actually grew up close to Mexico City and the house where we lived was very close to the dumping area. Two blocks from where I was living, sometimes the trash would be burning and we would have to be like hiding basically, because you can die there because it's very toxic. There is lots of mud and frogs right in there and all kinds of disease. I grew up in the streets, basically playing with boys and girls. We didn't

know about all the terrible things that happened. And we did not see who was wealthy or who was like lighter color, because we were all in that same trash, dumping area. We are all very poor, very poor and my granny didn't have schooling, but she sold vegetables, tomatoes, candy, and she was able to do the math and was a salesperson. My grandpa was 30 years older than my granny, so just she was basically raising kids and taking care of her husband and then the grandkids. She had a very, very strong personality, and she's my hero. My family was very Catholic, but never imposed on me the religion, which I appreciated very much. Of course, we follow lots of the traditions of the Catholic religion because I was growing up like that, but always had respect for all kinds of religions.

All the girls started having boyfriends, and getting married, but I was not jealous of their lives. I was not because they didn't finish the school. And they always criticize that I wanted to go to school. And the reason I chose to study biology because my dad would drive us to Oaxaca to see the birds and plants and I just wanted to take care of those kinds of things. Nature was my thing and so was conservation biology and the planet. So, I got my first college degree, my family was upset when I decided to be a biologist, my dad was thinking I could be like I don't know something that can bring good economy to the family, like a better position, but I was the one that wanted to be this cool, the first female biologist ever. One of my uncles called me very upset and said, don't you see the situation of your family? Do you want to study biology? There's not future or money in that career. I always tried to do what was best for my family, but then I said, but this is my life. I know what's the first time that I thought I have to do what I want to do.

But then I got my first scholarship and then my dad liked that. And I was very happy that my dad saw that I could do something, and it was nice to have more than one pair of shoes. Then I decided to do a master's degree, and then I had wanted to do my PhD. It was my dream to do a PhD in the United States. And everybody said no, and they laughed at me. My accent is very strong, and people might not even understand when I talk, so I was so scared. But anyway, I wanted to do a PhD in the United States which didn't make so much sense because I was scared of speaking English. I was rejected at the beginning because I didn't have a scholarship, but I got a scholarship from Mexico to go to come to United

States and they accepted me under the condition that I needed to learn English in one year. So, it was like an immersion like un clavado asi para aprender ingles. and be able to do so. In addition of all my classes in my PhD, I also had to take English like the listening, the reading, the speaking, and I had like five or six classes and I cry a lot. I wanted to come back to my house. I was missing them. I miss my food.

I had an excellent opportunity in St. Louis, Missouri because lots of people were from different places- Venezuela, Brazil. We used to meet and have like an interchange of dishes, and we all had very strong accents in the English, it was a very good experience. And I received the criticism from family about me being single, and never have a family, but I wanted to do research. And I really wanted to, I didn't see where I was going to end up. I just wanted to be a PhD. And then I started to look for postdocs. When I saw the advertisement, I applied, I got the position. I was not a PhD yet, but I was going to be, basically, the story looks like a love story, but it was not like that because human resources are horrible. It's not that romantic.

My husband played a huge role on me staying and applying for a job in the United States. I was originally going to go back to Mexico and do conservation biology, but I stayed after my PhD and did two postdocs. I feel like my dad is totally proud of me. It's like, there is not even a memory that once he was mad, because I wanted to be a biologist.

I keep learning from my students is so amazing, and I enjoy teaching bilingual classes. I think being an outsider from the area, I saw a difference in several things even in language. So, some of the students never even speak in Spanish with me, but they look like me. They look brown like me, but they don't speak in Spanish. I just thought that everybody that looks like me is going to speak Spanish. I have also seen an increase of other students of color, and I like the inclusion and diversity.

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

Prior to coding the researcher of this study believed that familial, cultural, and societal expectations would have impacted and shaped the experiences of these two women greatly. While this was partially accurate, other factors that influenced these two women were prevalent

and documented in the themes and subthemes of this data analysis and interpretation.

### Themes and Subthemes

1. Family value placed on Education
  - Poverty
  - Language
  - Multigenerational Homes

Both Dr. Gonzalez and Dr. Silvestre emphasized the value that their fathers placed on education as a motivator to pursue higher education. Both women grew up in impoverished conditions, Spanish as the home language, and within multigenerational homes. These subthemes are important aspects to their motivation to pursue higher education because of the yearning to live in better conditions, be self-sufficient, and bring honor to their parents and grandparents through their scholarship.

2. Relationship with Spouse
  - Both married towards end of their scholastic preparation
  - Consider themselves financially self-sufficient
  - Consider Spouses as Allies

Both women married towards the end of their doctoral academic studies, consider themselves self-sufficient, have separate identities from their spouses, and see their spouses as allies. The allyship that each woman described of their husband was that of emotional support and as equal caregiver of their multiple children.

3. Upward Mobility
  - Childhood Poverty as a Motivator
  - Complacency with Salary

Childhood poverty, as discussed in the first theme, was a motivator for seeking higher education. However, both women describe their childhood homes as humble and their fathers as hardworking, and of working class. Both women sought to elevate their family socioeconomic status to a higher position. Both women appear to be complacent with their salaries and consider themselves successful.

#### 4. Lack of Mentorship

- Have sought promotion within institution for mentoring opportunities
- Neither discussed a university figure who was a mentor

Neither women discussed having a mentor friend to turn to during their tenure process nor during their doctoral studies. Both women hold positions with administrative duties to include official mentoring of junior faculty and of graduate and undergraduate students.

### Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Generalizability

This study is the autoethnographic testimonios of two Latina professors with doctoral degrees working within academia as professors and administrators. Each of these two women presented me with their testimonios and their truth of how all of the events they described were their own. Each woman of color in academia face unique challenges and are not burdened by one manner of oppression. The themes and subthemes that were identified in this study were measured for trustworthiness and credibility through discussion with another researcher that studies gender and ethnic issues within the Latino culture. The process for which we discussed upon which themes and subthemes were prevalent- was the process of crystallization. In crystallization, the researcher views the data collected from multiple angles where the light reflects, and refracts different images and perceptions presented in the data (Vik & Bute, 2009). The data is not generalizable to all Women of Color in academia, nor Latina women in academia, because all women have unique experiences throughout their lives and journey in academia. However, the documentation of these two women's experiences can serve as a motivation to women in academia who may face similar challenges, obstacles, and may learn from the experiences of these women.

### Discussion and Implications

The data collected for this study were illuminating to the researcher and hopefully to the reader as well. It is the intention of the researcher to collect more testimonios of Latina women in academia in the future to

continue documenting the unique struggles and support systems that Latinas depend on to persevere in the academe.

## Notes

1. MARIA GABRIELA BRIDGES is a native of South Texas, raised in Abram, Texas and now resides in Edinburg, Texas. She is a doctoral candidate at UTRGV School of Rehabilitation Services and Counseling and is currently writing her doctoral dissertation titled: "From Nепantla To Aztlan: Testimonios of Faculty Mothers of Color with Disabilities". Her work centers around Indigenous methods of research and their application to cultural interpretations of chronic illness and disability. She is a devoted wife, mother, daughter, scholar, and community member. Her work in the community includes serving on the Board of Directors for Valley Association for Independent Living and volunteering with grassroot organizations such as Craft Cultura to bring awareness to the socio-cultural determinants of health. Her husband, Ernesto, and two sons, Nelson and Ezra, are also actively involved in the same community projects

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