

I SEE YOU: A DUAL TESTIMONIO OF THE LATINA DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This article is a dual testimonio of the doctoral experiences of two Latina doctoral candidates. It focuses on the context of the Hispanic community and the lack of Hispanic female representation in academia. It examines the influence of colonialism, sexism, racism, and socioeconomic disadvantages throughout their journey. These testimonios are a raw reflection of the struggle as a female, academic scholar, and human being within a boxed academic society.

KEYWORDS

Latina, Hispanic Culture, Academia, Testimonio

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF KEY LATINA CONCEPTS

The journey of completing a doctorate degree is filled with highs, lows, and many twists and turns. A Latina scholar's journey is nothing less but is a very different experience from those of her peers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) advises women account for 47% of the employed population over the age of 16 years old, of that only 18% identify as Hispanic or Latino/a. Statistically, full-time academic faculty of black or Hispanic descent make up 3% of the total faculty population, and if broken down by gender Hispanic females only make up less than 1% of full-time professor positions in the United States (NCES, 2020, 1). The lack of female and Hispanic representation, however, has not been a deterrent for us Latina scholars to pursue a doctorate degree. Our unique experiences come together for a greater success model within the embodiment of our Hispanic community and culture.

HISPANIC COMMUNITY

Hispanic culture is a vast mix of individuals from Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central or South America, Cuba, or other cultures where decedents recognize Spanish heritage or origins (U.S. Census, 2020). It is a unique blend of dialect, food, dance, and religion to which each region of “Hispanic” is different but similar. Sadly, it is still a culture with many social injustices, educational flaws, and socioeconomic hardships. In the United States, there is a higher percentage of Hispanics living at or below the poverty line than non-Hispanic Whites (Lisotto & Martin, 2021, 19). The socioeconomic hardships were only amplified by the recent COVID-19 pandemic as 19% of Hispanics were not covered by health insurance (Lisotto & Martin, 2021, 19). The combination of 24% of Hispanics working in the service industry, food insecurity and a high prevalence to type 2 diabetes among other illnesses further increased the vulnerability of this community to COVID-19 exposure (Lisotto & Martin, 2021, 19-20). The Hispanic community, however, remains strong in its identity and familial roots.

EDUCATION LEVEL OF HISPANIC FEMALE STUDENTS

When it comes to education, 82% of Hispanics stated having a college degree helps their overall well-being living in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2021). While education is proven to be a window to new and/or better career and economic opportunities it is still a path many Latinas juggle in addition to numerous personal obligations (i.e., spouse, children, careers, and extended family). The expectation of what a graduate degree can do for a Latina is endless, but the academic expectations can become overwhelming, dreadful, and stress-inducing. Even within the 21st century, there is a stunningly low female scholar population, to which only 3% of college faculty self-identify as Latina (Pew Research Center, 2021). Mirror images like ourselves are hard to come by in academia as a student or even a future faculty member.

TESTIMONIOS BACKGROUND

Family, respect, religion, and gender roles are important values held in many Hispanic households that are influential in the doctoral journey (Corona, et al., 2016, 63). Though every educational journey is different, there are common themes that continue to emerge for Hispanic/Latina women as they struggle with living in between the worlds of culture and academia. The five themes that emerged in a 2020 testimonial study of Latina doctoral students include the value of family, impact on mental health, navigating the ivory tower, education as resistance, and healing (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020, 379). These themes within familial dynamics played a role in balancing support, taking brave steps towards education, and ignoring cultural judgment when pushing against cultural gender roles (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020, 382-383). Partaking and completing the doctoral journey, according to the participants, provided the strength needed to push doors of opportunity open through resisting the sociopolitical rhetoric (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020, 385).

THESE ARE OUR TESTIMONIOS:

I am a woman who has always been immersed in my Puerto Rican culture. I grew up to be a first-generation mainland Puerto Rican female which has never been a walk in the parqué. The experience of my identity is one influenced by salsa music and piqué on our breakfast table “normal” things in my Abuelita’s haven where my family found refuge. While my physical features are light and euro-centric, the olive tone in my pigmentation is confusing to some or a questionable act to others. I am lucky, I have not experienced the extreme racial injustices of others in my culture who find their pigmentation a few shades different. Tainó, African, and Spanish run in my blood; our culture is alive yet hanging on by a thread. The Tainó culture is something that is still very much alive in the people of Puerto Rico. This still “colony” of land is our connection, it embodies us and has its own soul, as I look to Puerto Rico, I feel ways of knowing, we as humans, are connected through our surviving land. My work ethic connects me to colonialism while the indigenous side of surviving and “keeping your family alive” is harbored in my bloodline. El Tainó found ways to survive and adapt, I too have used their strength not to be the “statistic” I was once told I would become. The influences of mi Abuela and mi Madré are generational struggles I will not carry forward. As I forge my own way through a doctoral program meant for the “mans” world, colorless and dated, you find me. The young girl who was surrounded by struggles, but with a dream. A dream which has carried me to be more, do more, help more! The chains of oppression, egocentrism, racism, colonialism, sexism, and ageism are my drive to succeed in education and life. I resist these by using my gifts to teach financial literacy, reminding women of color they have power and should know their worth, and are able contributors to society. I am educated despite blatant racism; my eyes could not recognize as a young girl. I use my Tainá, Puerto Rican strength to remove the statistical influences that have surrounded the females in my family for generations. I use myself as the strongest weapon. I must change my own destiny. I do not see nor fit the “box” created for me, I see me a Latina, a Tainá, and “erudité” of knowledge. En mi, I see mi Madre and my Abuelita y mis amigas.

Raised on the west side of San Antonio, the s instead of a z in my maiden name are very important identifiers to this Latina with a “torn identity.” An identity seeded in the historical context of the familiarity of San Antonio and daring to venture out. Always, fully aware if “I do not work hard, I will wind up back there.” Torn between finding myself in two worlds, leaving my home to be confronted with “bad feedback,” people thinking I am better, marrying into a different world of “bougie” and yet still not belonging. The deeply seeded generational strive for wanting better and more held on by the dreams of my maternal grandfather who uprooted my family for the American dream which I hold “reverent and close to my heart.” Like my futuristic grandfather, I never look back, I look and learn. I pursue a Doctorate for “better opportunities in my career and in life.” My doctoral journey is fogged by imposter syndrome. I am not a “stupid Mexican.” A racist encounter in my early 20s remains the fire that ignited my desire to never have someone call me stupid again. My second racist encounter happened while shopping, mistaken for an employee by an Anglo woman with two young impressionable children. I told her I did not work there, as she stated, I looked like I should while walking away with a smirk. These experiences were specks in the rearview as women like Tia Rita showed me. Tia Rita, my 3rd cousin, was educated, with striking beauty, and wealthy. She, too, had made it out of society's “box” and gave off the impression she was free. Education for me meant freedom and access to living comfortably. Though I saw freedom in my Tia Rita, I also saw freedom in my grandparents. Though they never left the west side, they had freedom through their hard work and multiple retirement pensions. They lived a simple and satisfying life with the same 1972 suburban. Even if, I changed my name to my husband’s Anglo-sounding name from my Hispanic name ending in s, it is my grandpa’s work ethic that still drives me. It is the Anglo name that, unfortunately, gives me a bit more respect. My olive pigmentation, though not dark, still plays a decisive role in society. My ancestry and bloodline are guides, healers, and protectors in my journey. As I look to my ancestors for guidance and believe the younger generation has knowledge also. Comparably, the last two years of my doctoral journey I have experienced invisibility and microaggressions. As my Hispanic serving doctoral institution has a predominately white board, the shifting to silence has occurred. This shift is a prime example of how colonialism and imperialism are reshaping my institution from a primarily Hispanic community to a white impressionist. To resist colonialism, we must remember “we cannot do the big things until you do small things.” Focus on “meaningful research” that “actually makes a difference.” As older generations pass away it is important to keep cultural traditions alive. Like the smell of warm tortillas as you walk through the door, speaking Spanish, and bringing to fruition the dreams of our ancestors.

CONCLUSION

Becoming a Doctora is a combination and transcendence of connecting our two worlds: academia and culture. The iniquities of social injustice, prejudice, and those stereotypes are generational curses from which we have chosen to break free. The indigenous ways of knowing are felt through

the spirits of our ancestors to whom fewer opportunities were afforded. We are two women who have worked harder than some to be in the competitive academic ring. Two who were supposed to be a statistic or write off because of sex, race, pigment, and socioeconomics of our cultural identity. Two who identify as different, but with others like us. In future studies, there is still significant work to be done within the world of Latina Academic scholarship. The truth is society has taught women we are not meant to succeed. We Latinas have joined the resistance to the larger sociopolitical climate and rhetoric against minorities in the United States” and push those doors open for ourselves and others. (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020, 385).

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