

2011

Compartiendo Nuestras Historias: Five Testimonios of Schooling and Survival

Wanda Alarcón

University of California - Berkeley

Cindy Cruz

University of California - Santa Cruz

Linda Guardia Jackson

University of Texas at San Antonio

Linda Prieto

Midwestern State University

Sandra Rodriguez-Arroyo

University of Nebraska at Omaha, srodriguezarroy@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/tedfacpub>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Alarcón, Wanda; Cruz, Cindy; Jackson, Linda Guardia; Prieto, Linda; and Rodriguez-Arroyo, Sandra, "Compartiendo Nuestras Historias: Five Testimonios of Schooling and Survival" (2011). *Teacher Education Faculty Publications*. 77.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/tedfacpub/77>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Teacher Education at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Teacher Education Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Compartiendo Nuestras Historias:
Five *Testimonios* of Schooling and Survival

Wanda Alarcón

*Department of Ethnic Studies
University of California, Berkeley*

Cindy Cruz

*Department of Education
University of California, Santa Cruz*

Linda Guardia Jackson

*Department of Bilingual/Bicultural Studies in Education
University of Texas at San Antonio*

Linda Prieto

*West College of Education
Midwestern State University*

Sandra Rodriguez-Arroyo

*Office of Multicultural Programs
The Pennsylvania State University*

Abstract

This storytelling begins with a positioning of why and how we use *testimonio* as part of a larger project of social justice and transformative pedagogies. In this collective *testimonio*, 5 working-class Latina scholars tell the stories of their struggles to overcome the challenges of language and assimilation, of gender discrimination and racism, of the violence of patriarchy, and of the experience of being treated as an “alien” in one's own country.

Keywords

testimonio, assimilation, racism, sexism, homophobia, memory

When Margaret Randall (1984) stated that “it is no accident, because recognition of, knowledge of, and understanding of one's personal and collective identity is essential to people's revolution” (p. 10), the telling of our personal histories and *testimonios* as Chicanas and Latinas in the academy becomes nothing less than transformational. Our use of the *testimonio* narrative reflects a praxis grounded in the community work and activist scholarship that we engage with as we negotiate the academy as working-class women of color. To read and to listen to these stories is to commit to another kind of understanding—one of solidarity—of the challenges of language and assimilation, of gender and race and the violence of patriarchy, of the experiences of being treated as an “alien” in one's own country. *Testimonio* requires a deep learning, necessitating an openness to give oneself to the other. It requires what Emmanuel Levinas (1994) described as “receiving the lesson so deeply [that] the lesson of truth is not held in one consciousness. It explodes toward the other” (p. 80).

This compilation of testimonial narratives comes from the hundreds of hours that we have collectively shared and analyzed our experiences as we move forward in our educational trajectories. Our stories are not part of the national discourse of “pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps”—the individualistic, nation-building narratives of the hegemony. These stories stand in for the hundreds and thousands of women of color who are also struggling to achieve the credentials necessary to survive, to begin this larger project of racial, gendered, and economic transformation in our communities. *Testimonio* is one tool we own, this radical storytelling that we learned as cultural workers and community activists, and we carry it into the academy along with the political and social capital we bring to our scholarly lives.

John Beverley (1993) stated that stories “centered on the ‘I’ and personal experience, serving those subjects—the child, the ‘native,’ the woman, the insane, the criminal, the worker” (p. 71) “[evoke] an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (p. 75). Our stories, polyphonic and urgent, are an offering to those who would stand in solidarity with us, a theory in the flesh, and a process of healing. We progress with every truth-telling; every story we begin strips away at these inscriptions of race, poverty, violence, and homophobia; with every spoken word we heal. The personal is indeed political as we acknowledge our collective memories, our shared histories. Through *testimonio* we acknowledge our own resiliency and the histories of our resistance.

The educational *testimonios* we present here were first organized and shared at the 2009 American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education annual conference in San Antonio, Texas. In this space where we told our own stories, our audience responded powerfully and testified about their own experiences in schools, and our panel was no longer a staid academic space but one in which we heard one another's voices, transforming the place into one of mutual support and solidarity.

Wanda Alarcón

I didn't always know it, but English is not my first language. I came to understand this through a memory that feels to me like a scene from an old home movie, frozen in time. *Cut to: Inside of a fifth-grade classroom in the pueblo Reyes Acozac, Mexico. La maestra* says to the class, “*Atención niños, hoy tenemos una estudiante nueva.*” She turns to me and asks me to say my name to the class. I do as I'm told, and I say, “*Me llamo Wanda Ah-lahr-cone.*” With a smile, my teacher gently corrects my watery Americanized pronunciation and says, “*Tu nombre es Wanda Alarcón.*”

I was born in East Los Angeles to Guadalupe and Amando, Mexicano immigrants. Born and raised in Reyes Acozac, a little pueblo just outside of Mexico City, they married in their 20s and came to the United States to work and raise a family. Before I ever heard the A-E-I-O-U & sometimes Y song I remember how my father taught me the vowels with a funny song he would sing to me like this: “A”—*chaka chaka chaka chaka chaka chaka cha ...* “E”—*cheke cheke cheke cheke checke cheke che ...* and so on. My parents were wholly in charge of my education for the first 5 years of my life. Of course, Spanish was my first language. Other than what I might have absorbed from *Sesame Street*, I did not speak English when I started kindergarten. But I quickly learned it, and so did my brothers, with so much proficiency that in four more years English became our primary language. My parents regularly objected to our casual Americanisms, like “You guys.” “*¿Como que you guys? Nosotros no somos “you guys,” somos sus papás!*” And my father soon made a decision to intervene on our behalf because it was clear to him that our language and identity were at stake. It seemed to me that one minute he declared “*¡Mis hijos no van a crecer pochos!*” and the next we were living in Reyes with my grandparents.

That first day of fifth grade in Mexico, I don't remember feeling shame over not knowing how to pronounce my own name. I wasn't alarmed over my assimilation like my father was, and in fact I didn't even notice that I was growing up “American.” Life in Mexico changed all of that. At a time when the

Chicano movement was redefining first-, second-, third-generation Mexicanos in the United States, my parents drilled into us that we were not Mexican Americans, *pochos*, *cholos*, and whatever a Chicano was. They insisted that we would always be, above all, Mexicanos and that the United States was, therefore, a foreign land. To lose our language was akin to losing our identity, our history, and even our sense of family.

We spent a year in Mexico; my mother, brothers, and I all went to school, fifth grade for me. My sister was born in Mexico while my father stayed in the United States to work and save money for a house. My grandmother taught me my first piano lessons and solfeggio on my grandfather's upright piano: *do re mi fa sol fa mi re do*. By the end of that year we were the perfectly bilingual *familia* Alarcón. But I didn't so much experience that move as an intentional plan for a radical education transformation, not the way my father had in mind, but rather thought that we moved from the United States to Mexico, English to Spanish, because that's how our family looked and worked. My father's parents had migrated to the United States to work, but all of my mother's family, my *abuelitos* and *tíos*, lived in Mexico. We drove from Los Angeles to Mexico and back so many times for long summer vacations—I think it was in part my parents' sense of adventure to come to the United States in the first place. My father loved to drive and my mother loved new places. The memories of driving into calm beach cities at dawn, Mazatlán, Hermosillo, and having breakfast in a bustling *plazita*, the heady aroma of toasted corn and ripe fruit all around, crossing from the United States into Mexico and noticing the signs for Coca-Cola on both sides of the border gave me an education about life across the *frontera* from both perspectives. That was a long time ago.

Now I claim the name Chicana for myself for all it contains intellectually, politically, creatively. But in many ways the Mexican and the American experiences I've traveled and crossed all of my life have yet to meet. For my own survival, I retrace the palimpsest of my history through these early memories of songs and rhymes, desert landscapes, school in the pueblo and the city, our first home in the Los Angeles eastside, multiple crossings at the Tijuana border—my parents and siblings having to declare our various citizenships. Sometimes these experiences I've carried for a long time come to me as fleeting impressions and I am not sure I can fully grasp their meaning. But in that space of intangibility there is also perception. I remember a history that began with the sound of my parents' voices, and with that, I can be certain of what I know. No, English was not my first language.

Cindy Cruz

When I was in the fifth grade, a girl from my school said she liked me as she thought I was a boy. We all laughed, my friends and I, when we heard that. She even tried to talk with me during recess, but I was too busy playing soccer to listen to this girl who was so dumb she couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl. But the misrecognition bothered me (it always did), and I often wondered why people put so much investment in my appearance, what rule was I breaking? At home I looked at myself in the mirror—this body that enjoyed running and soccer and was as good as any boy, kung fu mock-fighting with them. Maybe it was my hair cut short by my *Tia* who just graduated from beauty school that confused this girl? Was it the boots I wore every day? Or the silver cowboy belt buckle my father bought for me at the rodeo last year?

As I got older, my gender did matter to people when I looked or played or walked like a boy. People felt free to police my gender—my clothes, or the way that I talked, or my hair. Sometimes it was teachers or nurses who questioned my gender and other parents asking me even while I was standing in the grocery line with my mother! My mother would tell them to mind their own business and a few other things. They knew I was different, but they didn't know why. Some of them thought they knew what to do with my difference.

I walked home from school every day with my neighbors, but on this day I was late, as music kept me later than I usual. Noticing the time, I grabbed my instrument case and made my way home. The streets were so quiet. I thought it was strange because usually there were kids playing and riding their bikes in the streets until nightfall. I remembered a book I read that talked about how birds and other animals instinctively hide away before a storm or a tornado. My boots echoed through the empty streets and I heard whisperings on my left near a row of vacated houses: “Wetback, go home.” I bit my lip nervously, as I was a little scared of older boys. They seemed to be the ones most outraged at my transgressions. I walked a little faster and noticed who lived nearby, just in case I had to make a run for it. I heard those words again, “Wetback, go home,” but this time it was a little louder. I walked to the middle of the street and shouted back to them, “Don’t call me a wetback, you assholes!” Three White teenagers came out of the house on my left, blocking my way home. I froze. “Calling us assholes, you little spic?” said the tallest boy, SWP (supreme White power) tattooed on his left arm. “Are you a boy or a girl?” the second one sneered. “Maybe we should find out,” said the third and started toward me. I tried to shout for help, but my vocal cords wouldn’t work. As the third boy grabbed me and started to drag me into the empty row of houses, the adrenaline rushed through me and I slammed my instrument case into his groin. He fell to his knees in pain and I ran as fast as I could from the other two boys who now had to get their Aryan Youth companion out of the street.

When I got home, I thought that this must be how people are going to react to me and my boots and short hair and cowboy belt buckles. I felt sick and insecure about my “looks”—I allowed my hair to grow out and wore more clothing made for girls. I hated how men and boys would stare at me. By junior high, other students made obscure comments about my sexuality, or lack thereof. Other classmates were more blatant, tagging “jota” or “dyke” on my locker in *placas* (graffiti) that I recognized. But the words did not stick to me, and I was fortunate to be placed in a pre-college track at my school. It kept the overt heterosexuality at bay. But the storm of drugs, sex, and alcohol swirled around me and I buried myself in my books. If outside the classroom was about the brutality of adolescent boys, then inside the classroom, where literature took me far away from my dusty hometown, I excelled. When the steel mill closed and my father and everyone around us lost their jobs, I didn’t ask for money for books, so I shoplifted what I wanted and searched the thrift stores for literature. I could get Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* for 25 cents, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, or five books for a dollar at the local secondhand store. I had teachers in high school, some of whom were lesbian or gay, who loaned me books or allowed me to search through the department libraries for literature and poetry. I read everything I could get my hands on.

During my first year of college, someone gave me a copy of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). It made such a profound impact to read these testimonials from working-class writers of color, that *Bridge* was a space where women of color, particularly lesbians of color, were at the center of a radical politic. Their critique of U.S. imperialism, of racism and homophobia, of the image in the foreword of a world on fire reverberated through my own histories and those of my family. *Bridge* gave me a language to begin to make sense of my world, and I understood that these writers made the political decision to be the connections between communities. But most important, it was reading the stories of Gloria Anzaldúa, Nellie Wong, Cherríe Moraga, and Audre Lorde and my intensely personal connection to their brutal honesty about themselves, their families, and how the shit comes down on women of color in this country. I recognized my histories in their words, my history of false rewards for my family’s assimilation into the language of this country, and my own queerness. I recognized my own resiliency. And despite all they’ve experienced, I recognized that these writers still choose to use their own bodies for political work—the human *Bridge*, the back that gets walked on over and over.

I believe that my experience growing up queer didn't necessarily mean "homosexual." In Fontana it was a queer thing to want to go to college. I want to believe that my socialization as an assertive and righteous girl cut me out of the crowd. Maybe it was the fact that I didn't speak with an accent, or maybe it was my refusal to play by the rules ascribed to my race and gender. It made sense to call myself a *lesbian* early on, as it was a term that described what I was experiencing, but maybe the term *dyke* would be a better fit for me—one that announces my hard-scrabble working-class history. When I hear other people tell stories about growing up and going to school, so normal and unassuming, I hesitate to tell my own stories. School was a safe space for me. I didn't have to "come out" of any closet, but my standpoint begins where race and capitalism and gender are hopelessly entangled. My life moves away from those I went to school with every time I claim my queer body. I am convinced that had I not been a lesbian, I would not have survived this. I would not have survived.

Linda Guardia Jackson

"You're just a dirty Meskin," my playmate from next door yelled at me after I had won, again, at the game of jacks. The words plunged into my being as hot and searing as that Texas summer afternoon. My 9-year-old mind didn't intellectually understand the epithet, but emotionally the words felt like a sharp knife cutting into my stomach. It was the first and only time anyone has made such a blatantly racist remark directly to me, but indirectly south Texas racism against Mexican Americans was always all around me. The words from that long-ago summer remain a hard kernel inside of me that I take out periodically to examine.

We were the only Mexican American family in an Anglo ¹ neighborhood, and I attended predominantly Anglo schools. I spoke English at home and school, but the sounds of Spanish swirled around me in conversations among my mother, father, *abuelos*, *tias*, and *tios* were never directed toward my sisters, cousins, or me. I later asked myself how I had not absorbed this "secret" language that the adults spoke with one another. Now I realize how the hegemony of English and the oppression of all things Mexican deeply affected my family and my life. At an early age, I noticed that my elders spoke Spanish to one another only at home and not in public. My mother must have felt deeply stigmatized in order to deny me her mother tongue.

I do know from her stories that my mother had been educated in a public school system in San Antonio that punished students for speaking Spanish and that she had not been allowed to speak English at home. I believe my mother's historical moment and geographical space led her to feel shame about her language that she wanted to spare her children.

As a result, I am, as Dr. Kathy Escamilla once stated, a recovering monolingual. In my early years, I was neither allowed to speak Spanish at school nor encouraged to speak it at home. Later in life, I made a conscious effort to learn the language that my *abuelos* and my parents spoke. Because I had been unable to have a lengthy conversation with my monolingual Spanish-speaking grandmother while I was growing up, I never got to hear her *cuentos* directly from her, even though she lived with us. This saddens me to this day.

I do, however, have physical and sensorial memories that connect me to my maternal grandmother. I remember her washing my below-the-waist hair with rainwater she collected just for that purpose. I remember sitting close to her side as I learned to crochet and embroider in the backyard on some of those beautiful days we can sometimes have in San Antonio. Another powerful memory is of our shared task of plucking out the little rocks that hid in the pile of dried pinto beans, which she would transform into her delicious *frijoles enteros*. Our communication had been nonverbal; she had not learned English, and at that time I spoke little Spanish.

Someone once asked why my parents had not spoken Spanish to me during my childhood. I did not have an immediate response and paused to think about the interplay between language and identity that I have found so difficult to understand and that, through the years, has elicited many different emotions in me. I have felt shame about my lack of fluency in Spanish and guilt about my success in school. My experiences moved me to learn Spanish as a second language and work in bilingual education.

I end with two stories that were told to me by Dr. Angela Valenzuela—one is an event and the other is the myth of Coyolxauhqui, Aztec goddess of the moon. The event happened in 1978: Electrical workers installing underground cables in Mexico City found a sculpture relief made of volcanic stone weighing 8 tons. It showed the goddess decapitated with arms and legs dismembered. The myth involves Coyolxauhqui, goddess of the moon, and her brother, Huitzilopochtli. The brother springs full grown out of their mother's womb and kills his sister because Coyolxauhqui was going to kill their mother. Her brother cuts off Coyolxauhqui's limbs and head and casts her down from the top of a hill.

I relate the event and the myth to the identity-making of Latinas who pursue a higher education degree. The covering and the (un)covering of the relief itself and the dismembering and the (re)membering connect to how I view the possibility of healing the wounds inflicted by our daily lived experiences through telling story, sharing story, and listening to story. The (re)discovery of the sculpture is sad because of the many lost years without it. The myth is violent. But schooling that is subtractive of language and culture is also violent and sad. However, Coyolxauhqui symbolizes the possibility of (un)covering, (re)discovering, and (re)membering through telling.

Linda Prieto

My *testimonio* speaks to my experiences as the daughter of Mexican immigrants growing up during the 1980s and early 1990s in the Central San Joaquin Valley of California, which is my backdrop. My family taught me difficult and valuable lessons through their words, actions, and expressions, lessons that I carry to this day. On long cold nights my mom made us *avena o una tacita de chocolate caliente* (oatmeal or a small cup of hot chocolate) to nourish us as we finished our homework, and in the mornings we awoke to the *tlac, tlac* of the rolling pin shaping perfectly round *tortillas de harina* (flour tortillas) on the kitchen counter, the smell wafting down the trailer corridor accompanied by that of *frijoles* (beans). These expressions of love provided physical, emotional, and mental nourishment that contributed to my academic success in the classroom. My mom also struggled to send us to school looking our best every day. Our clothes might have been secondhand but our attitudes were first class. We were clean, neatly dressed children. My sister and I wore ponytails or *trenzas* (braids) in our hair adorned with ribbons. Even though I had classmates who refused to play with me because my clothing didn't match, our appearance characterized quiet, hardworking students and was well received by our principal and teachers.

However, community and family relations would present their own conflicts. I had to learn to critique and question these systems as well. I am still learning. At a friend's house, my mom sat quietly as a *tía política* (aunt by marriage) commented, "*Las mujeres que se van de la casa y no visten de blanco son unas perdidas*" (Women who leave their homes before marriage are fallen from grace). My mom knew the intent of her comment because my sister would soon leave home of her own accord to attend Stanford and not to get married as was culturally expected. Three days after I arrived at Stanford as a new student, I asked my sister and four of her Chicana friends to accompany me to the hair salon. Growing up, my dad did not allow us to cut our hair. His reasoning was that because we belonged to him, *con más ganas* so did our hair. He decided when it needed a trim and cut it himself. So on that sunny afternoon, we drove to a salon on a mission. I was assigned to the only Chicano hairdresser and shared with him that I wanted to

have my waist-length hair cut. Later that day I took my *trenza*, placed it in an envelope, and mailed it to my father. No further explanation was needed. I stared in the mirror and reimagined a new self.

While at Stanford, my mom, sister, and I sat around the kitchen table in our apartment as the mom of one of our friends advised us on having children: “*Miren muchachas, si pa' los 36 no se han casado, que le hace; nomas encuentrensen un cabron que valga la pena y abran le las piernas*” (Look, girls, if by the time you're 36 you haven't married, it doesn't matter; just find a halfway decent jerk and open your legs to him). Growing up I never heard my mom use such expressions, unlike my father, for whom every other word was a curse word. We looked around the table at one another open mouthed as we processed her advice. Years later I was visiting a cousin when she made the following comment, “*Una mujer que no se casa y tiene hijos no es una mujer*” (A woman who doesn't marry and bear children is not a real woman). Being the only 30-something in the room who was unmarried and without children I pretended not to hear. Perhaps in their cultural world, one in which I didn't completely belong, it seemed unfathomable that I would want to be something other than a housewife and mother.

Resisting the patriarchal structure experienced at home also served to strengthen me. Although my father's character as a strong and committed worker gave me strength to endure hostilities outside of the home, I was also challenged by the role his male authority had over everyone and everything pertaining to the family. Day-to-day activities in the home (e.g., cooking, cleaning, washing) were the responsibilities of women. However, outside of the home my mother's duties were also numerous. Growing up, we raised farm animals and later consumed them and their offspring as a way to subsidize our income. I remember how my hands trembled as I helped my mother kill chickens and rabbits she later prepared as *caldos* (stews) or *moles*. Even when my father slaughtered the larger animals (e.g., pigs, goats, calves) it was my mother who prepped the tools and hot water beforehand and cured, stored, and prepared the meat afterward. One of the duties I most despised was cleaning the small intestines of the pigs, even when they later resulted in deliciously fried *tripitas* (small intestines). I was exposed to skill sets designed to benefit my survival in a poor rural context while I simultaneously learned to negotiate the means by which they were employed. As a result I was better able to navigate lived tensions outside of the home as well.

Through our daily routines we learned the strategies of organization, structure, doing for others, love, survival, and accountability. These tools became scripted in our bodies. I grew up in California during a time, much like the present, when immigration raids were common. For me and other children of immigration, the raids presented fears and frustrations that did not enter the classroom discourse. Growing up my mom refused to learn English. She forbid my siblings and I from speaking it at home, and now she surprises me with how much of it she really understands. I carry my family's sacrifices on my back, like a tortoise carries her shell, a constant reminder of what we have been through and what we have had to endure. But in my lifetime I have also struggled with the cultural traditions and values that weigh us down; like an unbreakable iron clasp these traditions at times squeeze my very spirit. Like a *Nahual* I am learning to transform. Sometimes I am the like the breeze that carries my *abuelita's* (grandma's) untold stories across the lands and whispers them in my ear. Other times I am caught off guard by the slap of patriarchy passed down from my father's family to him, an inheritance I refuse. Still I am the *fuego ardiente* (burning fire) of which Anzaldúa (1987/1999) wrote:

The spirit of the fire spurs [me] to fight for [my] own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which to view the world—a perspective, a homeground where [I] can plumb the rich ancestral roots into [my] own ample mestiza heart. (p. 45)

Sandra Rodriguez-Arroyo

Jorge [Duany \(2000\)](#) described Puerto Ricans/*Boricuas* as a *nación en vaivén* (a nation on the move), always in this constant back-and-forth move from Puerto Rico to the United States. My *testimonio* is based on five personal narratives to show this notion and how even with all these *vaivenes* (traveling back and forth from one country to another) I have always returned to my roots.

The Red Nightgown

The day before I was born my father decided to go to a baptism party. It was Christmas day, and he did not want to stay home. My mother was furious! So my father devised a plan to solve his “problem.” If my mother felt that it was time for her to give birth, she had to put on a red nightgown, go outside of our little yellow house, climb the little hill beside it, and stand on top of the hill. If he kept an eye on our house from the other hill where the party was taking place, he could see my mother's red nightgown *moviéndose con el viento* (moving with the wind), and he would return as soon as possible. Thank God I was not born that day! Ever since, when my mother told me this story, I always envisioned my mother with her red nightgown standing on top of the hill and my father running back home as fast as he could in a drunken state. I love that story! It is part of the beginning of my life back in Puerto Rico, and the little yellow house near the little hill was my first home.

Boston

When my parents decided to move to Boston looking for a better future, I was only 2 years old. We spent 5 years in a place that fascinated and terrified me at the same time. I was fascinated with my bilingual school and by Boston Commons, but I was terrified with the gang fights and gun shootings around the public housing project where we lived. To survive in the projects either you did not talk to your neighbors or you became the neighbor everybody was afraid to talk to. My sister and I had to learn how to remain quiet and not look around us when we walked around those dark brown buildings. Through those 5 years my father worked hard in all sorts of jobs (e.g., hotel housekeeping, salad man, handyman, school lunchroom assistant) to save money to buy a new house in Puerto Rico. My kindergarten teacher once mentioned that she never met my dad. The only time I actually remember that my dad went to my school was one night for a school presentation. I treasure in my memory the feeling of walking through the school halls with his hand holding mine and feeling so proud to finally show him off.

Llegamos a Puerto Rico

After 5 years of living in Boston, my parents decided that it was time to move back to Puerto Rico. The first thing that my mom did to prepare my sister and me for school on the island was to take us to get very short haircuts to avoid getting *piojos* (lice) at our new school; the strategy didn't quite work because we still got them. At our Puerto Rican school, we had to wear these dark green uniforms, and my classmates started calling me “Nuyorican.” It took me years to understand the demeaning use of that word among Puerto Ricans from the island. But at that young age I associated the word with New York, so I would yell back to them, “I lived in Boston, not New York!” Our new house made all kind of noises when we walked in it, and hurricanes scared me to death. My dad started working in construction, and my mom got a job as a lunch lady in the school my sister and I attended. They left the house before 6 a.m., so my sister and I had to wake up, prepare breakfast, and get ready for school on our own. When we got to school every day we *had* to stop by the lunchroom and report to my mom with a simple *llegamos* (we are here) and with a sense of relief she would always respond *¡Qué bueno!* (I am glad!). My sister and I grew up knowing that they were working hard to provide us with opportunities, so unless we *really* needed something, they were not going to buy it for us. There were other priorities, like fixing the house to make it a safer place and paying the bills. They instilled in us the importance of studying and working hard to have a better future. This is the main reason I decided to pursue graduate school.

Puerto Ricans Are Not International Students

On my way to graduate school at Penn State on a very cold, cold January morning, I took a bus ride from Pittsburgh to State College. I was scared to death as I watched through the big windows all the accumulated snow and ice on both sides of the roads. For the first time in my life I prayed the rosary on my own four times. I finally arrived to Penn State after 7 hours of bus travel and somebody told me to report to the International Students' Office. I did as I was told and I got in line with international students waiting to be helped with their paperwork. When it was my turn to receive help the lady who was to help me couldn't find my paperwork. After an hour of visiting offices to find out the reason for this incident someone finally told me, "Oh, I am sorry to tell you that as a Puerto Rican you are not considered an international student. Therefore, our office cannot help you." I had no other option than to return to the cold weather, and with some difficulties I finally found out how to register and get my student identification card. At the end of that long day I was starving and tired, but I survived. Ever since that first day at Penn State I have seen my years in grad school as a time of survival, but I have also worked hard on finding ways to help new Puerto Rican graduate students when they arrive on campus. Puerto Ricans, the same as many other students coming from other countries and states, also need help to navigate our new surroundings.

Can I Come Back Home?

Now I feel the urge to finish my doctorate and I recognize that on my quest to help others survive graduate school, I forgot about myself. And like the prodigal son, I had a hard time accepting the fact that I needed help to finish my doctoral degree. Last spring I called my *mami* (mommy) and asked her if I could return home to Puerto Rico to write my dissertation, and she said, "*Sí*" (yes). As when I was a little girl, the moment I arrived at my parents' home, I said, "*Llegué*" (I am here). My *mami* said, "*¡Qué bueno!*" and gave me a big hug. I am now closer to my goal of finishing my dissertation, and I recognize that without my family I could have not come this far.

I recognize that my personal experiences are very similar to the ones lived by many Puerto Ricans. As *Boricuas* we are aware that our constant *vaivenes* from Puerto Rico to the United States could make us feel extremely confused, with the constant question of what makes Puerto Rico not an international country but a U.S. territory. However, we know something for sure—our Puerto Rican roots, our families, are what hold us together no matter where we are.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully thank our friend and mentor Dr. Sofia Villenas for her support of our work and our stories.

Notes

¹In south Texas, *Anglo* is a term used to refer to White Euro-Americans.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. 1999. *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. (Original work published 1987). OpenURL University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Beverly, J. 1993. *Against literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. OpenURL University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Duany, J. 2000. Nation on the move: The construction of cultural identities in Puerto Rico and the diaspora. *American Ethnologist*, 27(1): 5–30. OpenURL University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Levinas, E. 1994. *Outside the subject/Emmanuel Levinas*, Edited by: Smith, M. B. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press. OpenURL University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Moraga, C. and Anzaldúa, G. 1983. *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*, Boston: Kitchen Press. OpenURL University of Nebraska at Omaha
- Randall, M. 1984. *Testimonios: A guide to oral history*, Toronto, Ontario, , Canada: Participatory Research Group. OpenURL University of Nebraska at Omaha