

VERACRUZ TO AMHERST: Undocumented Student to Postdoctoral Fellow

Judith Flores Carmona

I did not have a choice to come to the United States. My story begins like that of many other children who are brought by their parents to el norte; I am a child of immigration (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). My family's initial migration began in Veracruz, when we relocated to Puebla, Mexico, and, in 1985, my mother migrated without documents to the United States. She was pregnant with my brother, José, who would come to be known as Little Joe. My mother was the first to migrate to the United States without documents. Soon after, my oldest brother, uncles, aunts, and cousins joined her in what would become my neighborhood—South Central—in Los Angeles, California.

My older brother, José Guadalupe, and I were among the last four to arrive. A turning point in my life, I recall exactly the day we crossed. We arrived in Tijuana. I had no idea where we were headed. What mattered to me was that I would soon see my mother—it had been five years. September 4, 1989, was the day I arrived in Los Angeles—I will never forget it—the memory is embedded in my body with a scar on my left knee because I fell when I tripped while running toward my mother. Also, eleven days from arriving to our new home I would be eleven years old. Surprisingly, my idea of el norte turned out to be a deception; I thought I had been lied to. Many of my neighbors were African American or Salvadoreños. Nowhere could I find the güeros or gringo Americanos whom I learned to believe lived in el norte.

Soon, I entered the world of gringos, when over-crowded schools forced my sister Rosa and I to be bussed from the inner city to West Los Angeles, migrating to yet another world. There, they marked us as not belonging to the school or community because the yellow bus that carried us back and forth branded us as outsiders. Yet, my teacher was from China and my classmates came from all over the world.

In a sink-or-swim situation, I had to learn English pretty fast—about two years. I became fluent sooner than my siblings. As a result I became the cultural broker for the family (Jones and Trickett 2005). Still, I resented having to translate, having to attend every parent/teacher conference, and always having to interpret for my mother. Later I learned to value it. Because of this responsibility, I negotiated and navigated social service systems and educational institutions.

In the eighth grade, I was mainstreamed into English courses, leaving my ESL student identity behind. One of the first assignments given to me was to write an autobiography. As a result of this assignment, my teacher, Mrs. Cappas, suggested I apply to the Fulfillment Fund—a mentorship program. It paired wealthy people with so-called underprivileged students who were perceived to have potential for college. As the eager and willing student I had become, I applied for the program.

Sometime later, my mother received a phone call informing her that I had been chosen for the program, and that my assigned mentor, Dee Nasatir, would be visiting the following weekend. I put it out of my mind that Nasatir, from West Los Angeles, would be coming to visit. When the day arrived and she showed up at our home, my uncles and brother were drinking—they gave her a really good view of the way my family and I lived. To be quite honest, I felt embarrassed by what she saw. Years later, when we had built enough trust, my mentor shared that

she had been afraid to come to South Central. She also talked to me about being afraid that I would not like her, and, even worse, that if I did like her she would be incorporating not only me into her life, but also my entire family.

Abandonment and separation from my mother made me an angry teenager. Having been apart from her and my siblings for five years, I lacked a relationship with my mother. I coped by avoiding home and staying at school.

I knew that we had come hiding from the authorities but I did not know or understand exactly what it meant to be undocumented—until I asked. When I was a sophomore, and developed an interest in going to college, I learned I needed a social security number to enroll. Simultaneously, the passage of Proposition 187 in California made us fully aware of the rights we lacked because of our status. I even walked out of school in protest of Prop 187. It was this initiative that became the catalyst in the development of my relationship with my mentor and her family. They realized the precariousness of my situation and began to think of alternative ways of helping me. Before the passage of this proposition, they did not know exactly what it meant for me to be undocumented.

Adoption became an alternative. However, because of the vulnerable relationship I had with my mother, this would not be a choice. In retrospect, becoming part of another family would have denied me the opportunity to work things out with my mother, and she would have never realized how much I love her.

Still, the Nasatirs presented this option to her.

When my mother heard their proposal, she thought the Nasatirs wanted to take me away from her, and worse yet she thought that was what I wanted. To

take that step, my mother would have had to be declared unfit. In my young adolescent mind, I was confused by my mother's response. I was surprised it hurt my mother to even think about that option, after all she had abandoned me to come to the United States, and I had been the last one to bring over.

There were eight of us. She had to pay attention to so many of us. Maybe it was my self-reliance and independence. Perhaps she felt I did not need her. But, we did not talk about the potential in this arrangement. It was not until after I left for college that we discussed adoption as an option for me. It was then that we both told each other, "I love you." The path and support I received from my mentors established the foundation for college.

But how did I get to college?

I met Cecilia Burciaga, an administrator from California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), at a career day hosted by the Fulfillment Fund and the Nasatirs approached her to help me get to college. With a dare, they asked: "Do you go around saying nice uplifting speeches? Or do you walk your talk?" It turned out that she walked her talk.

I began to fill out applications, using a social security number I made up with the first nine digits that came to mind. When I did not hear back from any of the schools, the Nasatirs called Burciaga; she found out that my application had been lost. I completed a second application and she expedited the processing. This time, I was accepted to several California State University (CSU) campuses as an international student. This meant that I would have to pay about ten times more tuition than in-state students, because of my undocumented status.

Recognizing the economic difficulty of the situation, I visited CSUMB, and feeling bienvenida, I made it my choice. Soliciting funds from their

immediate circle, the Nasatirs asked for donations from their friends and applied these funds toward a scholarship to pay my tuition. These generous donations funded four years of my baccalaureate degree and my first year of an MA program.

At CSUMB, I really got to connect with faculty and developed strong mentor relationships that continue to this day. I also became involved in the surrounding community through service learning, which was and still is a graduation requirement at the university. I fell in love with the work. The Nasatirs paid for my school, and I saw my involvement in the community as a way of paying back—a way of paying it forward. The Nasatirs had advised me to always give back.

My service-learning professor recommended that I apply to the leadership program in service learning. I applied. I was accepted. Soon I became trained as a co-facilitator in a service-learning classroom. Unlike other student leaders, I did not receive wages because of my undocumented status. Still, I worked for three years without compensation.

It was while I participated in this program that I fell in love.

In 2000, on my twenty-second birthday, my U.S.-citizen boyfriend asked me to marry him. Fortuitously, before he left office that year, President Bill Clinton opened a brief window of opportunity for people like me. Through section 245(i) of the LIFE Act, U.S. citizens were allowed to adjust the residency status of their undocumented spouses and children. Aware of my legal situation after a two-year courtship, my fiancé married me on March 3, 2001, to adjust my status. Two months after we got married I became the first in my family to graduate from high school and earn a baccalaureate degree.

With the adjustment, I received authorization to work and I could now receive payment for my labor. With my marriage, everything changed; the hopelessness soon dissipated for me. As I reflect on the situation, neither of us was ready for marriage—we were divorced December 2008.

To pursue an MA degree in education, I remained at CSUMB, receiving a fellowship to teach service learning courses. For my MA thesis project, I examined the ways in which people of color and other marginalized groups learned and taught about race, class, sexuality, and diversity in general, at our own expense—it is called: “Dismantling the Master’s House Using Whose Tools?” Through my work, I offer that our bodies serve as texts to teach about marginalization, oppression, and privilege. Through this experience I realized how unjust and ironic it was that I could not be compensated for my work teaching about social justice, while at the same time the work made me feel used and tokenized. Some of us, because of what we embody, are exploited in what is perceived to be social justice education. Our bodies represent diversity, but we are used to build programs. They can claim diversity; that they are serving historically underrepresented students; but at the same time “they” reify social inequalities. The status quo remains.

In 2003, I applied to four doctoral programs in California without success. One of my undergraduate mentors suggested I attend a presentation about a pre-doctoral program aimed at recruiting students from historically underrepresented groups. Through this effort, in 2004, I was accepted to the Summer Research Opportunity Program (SROP) at the University of Utah. Again, the program matched students with a faculty mentor based on similar research interests. The program provided students with research experience that strengthened their qualifications for graduate work. The following year I applied to several schools, and two research one universities accepted me

with full funding and research assistantships. Since I had already established a strong mentor relationship, I opted to pursue a doctoral degree at the University of Utah in the Department of Education, Culture, and Society.

My previous work with service learning, diversity training, and community engagement prepared me to become a research assistant for an elementary school–university–community partnership. Through my work with the partnership, it was affirmed that my scholarship could not be disconnected from my community work—personal, political, and professional lives are woven together (Delgado Bernal 2008). For me, everything had to connect—it still does. While learning in the classroom about educational achievement gaps, I could not help but connect the stories that elementary school students shared with me. So then, it is not just a statistic in a classroom—Daisy, José, and Marilyn personalized theories of educational inequality. My work with the children led to partnerships with their undocumented Latina mothers. Their stories were critical in the completion of my doctoral degree. I owe my dissertation to the mothers who offered their testimonios on claiming space in an anti-immigrant state.

Because of those who have supported and guided me, I graduated in May 2010 with a PhD in Sociology of Education. This is a testament to the value of mentoring relationships, friendships, and familial and communal support. Everyone who has been part of my story has contributed to the fulfillment of my dream.

Most recently, on the strength of my dissertation work, I received a post-doctoral fellowship at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, to continue researching Latina/o critical literacies and pedagogies. Still, as a professor I cannot disconnect from the experiences of having been

undocumented. At Hampshire, the courses I have developed and teach emphasize Latinas/os as producers and holders of knowledge (Delgado Bernal 2002).

Why is my story important?

First of all, I know it took a lot of courage for my mother to come to the United States by herself. At the same time, as a child, I often felt lonely and abandoned. When I came to this country I was confused and angry. Yet, the skills I gained as a cultural broker, combined with the emotional, economic, and academic support I received from family, friends, and mentors created a pathway for me to reach my professional goals.

In sharing my story, I am not trying to romanticize the experiences of undocumented immigrants. I cannot separate myself from the frustration and hopelessness of those around me who continue to live in fear of their status. Without presuming to give advice, I offer my story to provide insight into the lives of undocumented students—the dreams and esperanza we bring.

Works Cited

- Delgado Bernal, Dolores. 2002. "Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Critical Raced Gendered Epistemologies: Recognizing Students of Color as Holders and Creators of Knowledge." *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8 no. 1, 105–124.
- . 2008. "La Trenza de Identidades: Weaving Together My Personal, Professional, and Communal Identities." In *Doing the Public Good: Latin@ Scholars Engage Civic Participation*, edited by Kenneth P. Gonzalez and Raymond V. Padilla. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 134–148.
- Jones, Curtis J. and Edison J. Trickett. 2005. "Immigrant Adolescents Behaving as Culture Brokers: A Study of Families from the Former Soviet Union." *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 145, no. 4, 405–428.
- Suarez-Orozco, Carola and Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco. 2001. *Children of Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.