

Before the Tenure Track: Graduate School Testimonios and Their Importance in Our *Profesora*-ship Today

By Patricia Sánchez & Lucila D. Ek

So I had a dream. Two other female graduate students of color and I were imprisoned in a dark, subterranean facility where all inmates were people of color. We were given an escape map that involved driving a white golf cart out of the light-less prison onto the ground level, which was the Berkeley campus. The three of us steered through Cal's grounds with success because of this inherited map; we reached the south side of campus and were "free."

The above description really is a dream experienced by one of us authors (Sánchez) during first-semester doctoral studies in northern California. In many ways, dreams like these are symbolic and representative of what it is like to be an underrepresented "minority" in "Whitestream" institutions or organizations (Urrieta, 2009). Metaphorically, the "escape" mentioned above, as well as the maneuvering through a public institution of higher learning, parallels the journey many of us women of color have traveled to find educational success in the US. We have emerged from a "prison" that represents the structure of White-male-dominant

Patricia Sánchez and Lucila D. Ek are professors in the Department of Bicultural and Bilingual Studies in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas.

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social-cultural reproduction processes. However, the “maps” we have inherited as members of communities of color have often not been as explicit or direct—or as dangerous—as the physical maps used to route, for example, the Underground Railroad led by Harriet Tubman or the paths to El Norte by coyotes.

Instead, the “maps” we use today to navigate such places like graduate school or the tenure-track system form part of an entire repertoire of resistive arts. Members of our communities have carved out paths of resistance and provided us with tools for navigating these paths in the forms of “hidden transcripts” (Scott, 1990). But regarding these “maps,” two important questions come to mind: How have some of these hidden “maps” developed? And how have they been passed on from person to person, from one community to another, from one generation to the next, from one woman of color scholar to another?

In an attempt to address these questions, we argue that resistance remains to a large extent a conscious effort, though it may take shape as an unconscious act, and that oppositional behavior or agency serves as a potential foundation for future (hidden) maps of resistance. Social reproduction processes by definition create an oppressive and hegemonic structure that cannot help but produce acts of opposition and resistance. According to Henry Giroux (1983) in his analysis of neo-Marxist resistance studies, “mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction are never complete and are always faced with partially realized elements of opposition” (p. 100). James Scott (1990), too, describes several examples of African Americans resisting the slave-master structure through “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (p. 4). And in yet another example, Devón Peña (1997) documents maquiladora workers’ opposition to the Fordist structure and pace of assembly-line work through the use of *tortuguismo* or “work at the pace of a turtle” inside *maquiladoras* (p. 112).

All of the above examples demonstrate the agency humans draw upon to counter processes of social reproduction. The power of our humanity rests in our ability to see these openings and sites of contradiction within structures of reproduction. There is ultimately no structure too strong or too contrived to not allow an opening of some size for human opposition to exist. Whether this opposition qualifies as strictly “resistance” or not is also another important factor in jarring social reproduction processes.

In his piece, “Reproduction, Resistance, and Accommodation in the Schooling Process,” Giroux (1983) emphasizes that in order for human opposition to qualify as resistance, it must possess emancipatory qualities. Like Giroux, Solórzano and Bernal (2001) assert that “resistance is motivated by a desire to create more just and equitable learning environments” (p. 309). They argue that certain acts of resistance can be self-defeating if they do not change oppressive conditions and instead perpetuate oppressive structures. However, resistance that moves toward social justice is transformative resistance (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). It is with this hope that eventually social reproductive processes will be dismantled if not at least become more revealed—until then, we create our own “maps” ...by reflecting on those strategic

practices that helped us navigate academia and get through clandestine, Ivory-Tower tunnels, first as graduate students and now as tenured *profesoras*.

Thus, this article documents how we, two Chicana tenured professors from immigrant and working-class backgrounds, drew upon our graduate school experiences as resources for navigating the tenure track. Our theoretical framework includes women of color feminism(s), as this frame calls for a groundedness in the flesh and material realities of each day's struggles; a groundedness in our individual and collective histories (Moraga 2000; Williams, 1991); and scholarship on testimonios (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Pérez Huber, 2009; Yudice, 2001) which "challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance" (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012, p. 363). We discuss lessons learned not in the official classroom but in other spaces inhabited by women of color. Such lessons included: networking with other women of color—both from our universities and professional organizations, like the collective *Mujeres Activas en Cambio Social* (MALCS); the double standards placed on women of color scholars and their journeys toward becoming pathbreakers; and resisting academia's heavy-handed socialization to gatekeeping.

Theoretical Lenses

I believe the best of our young academics are struggling to get their PhDs with their original tongue, cultural beliefs and basic humanity intact. At times I wonder how equipped they are for a world of real political confrontation when, at places like Stanford and Cal, they have been separated from the streetlife of their communities...I've seen these students, whose retention in the university is the hardest to secure, because they cannot integrate into their academic discourse the greatest source of their knowledge: life experience. (p. 180)

—Cherrie Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (2000)

What we have come to appreciate in women of color feminism(s) is a specific groundedness: a groundedness in the flesh and material realities of each day's struggles, a groundedness in our individual and collective histories. That is why we identify so strongly with Patricia Williams' (1991) and Cherrie Moraga's (2000) works, which are based on their life experiences and reflections. To us, being women of color graduate students/academics encompasses the occupation of multiple spaces and identities; it also involves responsibilities to community, based on a historical-political past of struggle and exclusion. As Mía Ong (2000) has found in her work, we try to belong to a group of women and minorities who make efforts to not fragment ourselves for the price of "success" in academia.

But part of this non-fragmentation still involves a variety of splits and post-modernisms that are part of a tactical survival. Our "schizophrenic" life is not new. In fact, women of color have lived the postmodern long before it was called "postmodern" (Alarcón 1990; Collins 2000; Davies 1994; Sandoval 1991, 2000). Patricia Williams (1991) asserts:

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Some part of me knows that it is intelligent for me to be schizophrenic. It is wise, in a way, for me to be constantly watching myself, to feel simultaneously more than one thing, and to hear a lot of voices in my head: in fact it is not just fashionable, feminist, and even postmodern. It is wise, I know, to maintain some consciousness of where I am when I am other than the voice itself. (pp. 207-208)

What follows, then, is a small window of this consciousness that is multiply split and mapped out. We rely on the method and practice of *testimonio* to tap into our past experiences as graduate students in predominantly white research institutions. Rooted in Latin American ways of knowing, *testimonio* is an “approach that incorporates political, social, historical, and cultural histories that accompany one’s life experiences as a means to bring about change through consciousness-raising” (Delgado Bernal, et al., 2011, p. 364). *Testimonio* centers marginalized stories as it facilitates the participants’ critical reflections of their personal experiences.

Chicana/Latina scholars who are members of the Latina Feminist Group have used *testimonio* to document the ways in which the academy has and continues to marginalize their knowledges and identities (The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). In addition, their *testimonios* are a means for individual and community healing and empowerment. *Testimonio* as methodology and pedagogy has been taken up in myriad ways by educational scholars.

Researchers in education have used *testimonio* to shed light on their work in predominantly White institutions. Linda Prieto and Sofia Villenas (2012) co-created *testimonios* in dialogue with each other to examine their teaching experiences as Chicanas/Latinas working with pre-service teachers. These scholars found that the tensions and contradictions they experienced in their home, family, and community experiences were encapsulated by Chicana feminist pedagogies that included cultural dissonance, *conciencia con compromiso* (consciousness with commitment), and *cariño* (authentic care). Saavedra and Pérez (2012) examined how their *testimonios* of lived experiences can serve to bridge Chicana and Black Feminisms that have been instrumental in shaping their scholarship and identities as women of color in academia—particularly as they battle insidious notions of “multiculturalism.” They document how *testimonio* can serve as a counter-discourse to the multiculturalism that educational institutions uncritically privilege despite the ways that such discourses reify tourist curricula that continue to “other” and marginalize people of color.

As previously mentioned, our methodology for this article is *testimonio*. For the past eight years, as colleagues at the same institution, we have been in constant (and almost daily) dialogue with each other, sharing our narratives openly and honestly about our *profesora*-ship. To analyze our *testimonios*, we draw upon Espino, Vega, Rendón, Ranero, and Muñoz’s (2012) notion of *reflexión*, which is a process for analyzing “individual *testimonios* as part of a collective experience that reflects our past, present, and future, thus moving us toward a collective consciousness” (p. 445). Furthermore, *reflexión* calls for examining and sharing ourselves and our life journeys with a dialogue partner. Espino and her co-authors explained: “We enacted *reflexión* to craft a collective consciousness from individual sufferings and

triumphs that would lead to change within ourselves and within our environments (p. 445).” Our article gives voice to our graduate student *testimonios* and how these have shaped our present roles as *profesoras*; we have coded these *testimonios* into several themes and present three of them in this article: (1) networking with other women of color; (2) the double standards placed on women of color scholars and the unsung work of pathbreakers; and (3) resisting academia’s gatekeeping role and instead becoming “access brokers.” We share these experiences in the hopes that other women of color traveling on the academic path can have a map to navigate its many challenges and to encourage those who work in isolation to find a trusted colleague with whom they can also dialogue and *reflexionar*.

Portraits of Our Academic Journey

As a ‘native’ ethnographer, how I make sense of my mother’s life has everything to do with my own experiences, journeys, spiritualities, and struggles. (p. 76)

—Sofía Villenas, “This Ethnography Called My Back,” 2000

Chicanas constantly grapple with the demands that our culture places on us as women. The demands include women’s compliance with sexist traditions of ‘respeto,’ respecting our elders. Further, when we deviate from Mexican/Chicano traditions that oppress and exploit women, other Chicanos/as challenge our identity. (p. 35)

—Sonia Saldívar Hull, *Feminism on the Border*, 2000

Before we share the *testimonios* related to our three themes mentioned above, we provide short portraits of our academic journeys. Like Villenas (2000) and Saldívar Hull (2000), our graduate student identities (and later *profesora* roles), are tied closely to our home cultures and mother’s life experiences. By sharing these with the reader, we hope to ground our *testimonio* themes.

Profesora Sánchez

For my master’s thesis, I wrote a collective life history of my mother’s family. I gathered the life histories of fourteen relatives: *los doce tíos y tías y sus papás, mis abuelitos—La Familia Gutiérrez Moreno*. Writing that family life history included my own journey, migrations, and search for more meaning. For the six years prior to my graduate work, I had been working with the Latina/o community in Houston, Austin, and Laredo, Texas. During these moves from second-grade bilingual teacher to university admissions officer to community outreach worker, I had two similar goals: empower students and families and widen the door to the educational system. In some ways, I remember feeling we had been able to make noticeable gains, but on another front, we kept hearing an increasingly louder voice saying, “Close it up. Get out. Go home.” These were the harsh anti-immigrant, discriminatory policies espoused by California’s Prop. 187, Prop. 209, Prop. 227—all passed between 1994 -1998. The Latina immigrant voice, her struggles and triumphs, slowly began to recede to the back. I was losing her voice to incessant political noise. I somehow needed to get closer to the muffled sounds—to hear and listen to that which I knew

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to be my family's and my reality and not the media's nor the politicians.' Here is where my journey began to reshape itself, like a river remembering its original path and place (Morrison, 1987).

I decided I needed to get back to this place, I needed to be able to hear and listen more closely; I needed time to sit and think and listen. Graduate school provided the best setting for this—so I thought...In one particular history class, after reading Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman* (1993), I heard more closely the voices I had begun to lose. Behar's subject, Esperanza, reminded me of my family and relatives who live in México as well as the ones who have immigrated to the United States. Some of Behar's actions, on the other hand, reminded me of the outsider who does not fully understand a local context because her understandings have not been shaped by a lifetime of organic interactions. I felt a certain level of anger toward a researcher who had entered a small Mexican town like my own family's. Behar had given herself permission to take Esperanza's story—not really thinking if she should be the inheritor of this richly complex lifeworld. Were there not other Latinas from this same community who could write up Esperanza's story—instead of Behar? And if there weren't, could Behar not have built capacity in someone more closely tied to this community? I set out to protect my family on both sides of the border from other inorganic intellectuals and academics. Behar and her book somehow triggered a reactive stance on my part: I decided I was going to write my own family's life histories before someone else did.

In her work, *Loving in the War Years*, Moraga (2000) speaks of inherited histories that are stored in the physical bodies of our ancestors; she asks women of color to consider “the home-grown language of cuento and canto and a philosophy that resides within the physical body of history” (p. 174). These bodies of our mothers, grandmothers, great aunts hold theories of a lifetime of experience that speak to the struggle and survival of women of color. Aída Hurtado (1996) also speaks of this theorizing in everyday practice: “Almost all feminists of Color do not make a distinction between theorizing that emerges from political organizing, everyday interaction, and artistic production” (p. 40). I, too, have found that what the older bodies of our relatives have endured contains a stored knowledge that helps present-day Chicana feminists work through present and residual patriarchy.

For my collective family life history project during my master's graduate program, I interviewed my Tía Abuela Escolástica—my grandmother's 80 year-old sister in 1998 (as well as 14 other members of my extended family). From her, I learned so much of why my family raised me the way they did in a conservative, Catholic home along the El Paso-Juárez border. I came to understand my family's patriarchal overprotectiveness through the realities of my Tía Escolástica's stories. She and her sisters experienced very real dangers of patriarchy in their everyday lives. My Tia spoke about the fear of washing clothes at the river, the fear of being kidnapped by a man, raped, and made his property/wife. She told me about one of her friends, Albina (pseudonym), who was in fact kidnapped by a man who was “in love” with her. Albina rejected his love, and so, to make her his, this man kidnapped her and took

Albina to live with him and his mother, Doña Chole (pseudonym). Albina escaped her captor and survived without being raped because she never left Doña Chole's side; she slept with her and borrowed a pair of pants that she wore day and night when in those days, the 1940s in México, women rarely wore pants. Doña Chole and Albina, though severely confined by patriarchy, practiced collectivity, and through their agency helped Albina escape and not become this man's forced property.

Another story my Tía told me was about my grandmother who hid in the chimney when my grandfather's parents went to ask for her hand in marriage. My grandma, Lucina, was so scared of what my great-grandmother, Herminia, would do to her because the Gutiérrez familia was coming to ask for her hand in marriage that she hid inside the chimney until they left. Women were not supposed to be flirting, meeting men, let alone having boyfriends who would come and ask for their hands in marriage. Historicizing this patriarchal history within the physical body of my family has helped me understand my mother's inherited fears as practiced through her notions of child raising. In my family's particular history, it was as if by hiding the daughter, making her "unseen," was the only way of protecting her. Because daughters/women were already considered objects to be taken and owned, then a very possible way to counteract this was to make the women unseen, unavailable, equating her to non-existent so that another may not come and take her for himself. Understanding this history within my family helps me understand my own strict and protective upbringing and its hold on patriarchy.

Today, memories of my Tía Escolástica and her one *consejo* that she constantly shared with both my mom (her niece) and me: "*No se deje, hija. No se deje.*" She advised me to stand up for myself in any setting—whether it was in a romantic relationship, the workplace, or in a trying situation (like pursuing a PhD or earning tenure).

Profesora Ek

I learned to write in Spanish when I was about seven years old and from that moment on, I became my mother's letter writer. As my mother cooked and cleaned, I sat at the kitchen table taking dictation, carefully writing my mother's words in my best printing aware that my abuelita and my tíos and tías in México would read the letters. Each sentence that she spoke inevitably led me to ask questions about her growing up in our *pueblo*. This is how I learned that she was only able to attend school one single day during her entire childhood. My mother was the third of ten siblings and because the first child was a boy, and the second, her older sister, married young, much of the caretaking for the seven younger brothers and sisters fell on her. She told me her paternal grandmother, Abuelita Victoria, always wanted her to get an education and one day when she was visiting her, Abuelita Victoria got her up early, dressed her, and marched her to school. My mother recounted that she was so excited to go to school and learn to read and write. That day, she felt that her grandmother could persuade her parents to let her go to school. Unfortunately, my mother's wish never materialized as shortly thereafter, Abuelita Victoria passed away. My mother said that her inability to go to school was the reason she valued education

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so greatly and always pushed my sisters and me to excel academically. She always told us that we had to get a good education so that we wouldn't have to rely on anyone to support us financially. She wanted us to learn how to stand on our own two feet.

The opportunity to obtain a good education was also a reason that my parents immigrated with my younger sister, María, and me from Yucatán to the United States. However, because María and I were undocumented, we knew that university was not a possibility and our goal was to finish high school. My youngest sister, Karla, born in the US, was fortunate that she could aspire to all the educational privileges and benefits that citizenship could bring. However, during my final year of high school, the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act granted us our papeles (papers). We finally felt some relief from our fears of being deported, and I was one step closer to the dream of attending a university, a next step that I had been praying and preparing for by studying hard and excelling academically. I also knew that the only way my parents would let me leave home and explore the larger world was if I were married or at a university.

The four years I spent as an undergraduate at Stanford University served to raise my consciousness about the broader Chicana/o sociopolitical and historical realities that I had not learned in high school. Much of my learning occurred in informal spaces such as *Casa Zapata*, the Chicana/o/Latina/o theme dorm where I lived for two years; *El Centro Chicano*, one of the Ethnic Studies Centers; and MECha, *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan*, a student group that promotes the education and self-determination of Chicanos/as. Living in community with my fellow Chicana/o students contrasted greatly with the loneliness I experienced in middle school and high school where often I was the only Chicana/o/Latina/o student in my honors and Advanced Placement courses. One of the most rewarding experiences I had while an undergraduate was working with a tutoring program for Chicana/o/Latina/o elementary school students from neighboring East Palo Alto. This program helped foster my interest in teaching, and upon graduation, I returned as a bilingual-bicultural teacher to the elementary school in Los Angeles that I had attended from kindergarten to sixth grade. The educational inequities that I witnessed as a teacher spurred me to pursue a PhD.

I began my Ph.D. program at UCLA rather naively, not knowing much about research, university rankings, and the politics of academia. At the time, I hoped to obtain my degree and work in some capacity where I could address the woeful state of education for Chicana/o/Latina/o students, particularly those from working-class, immigrant backgrounds like me. It soon became clear to me, however, that in order to be successful in the Ph.D. program, it was not enough to complete all my assigned readings and write my papers. There seemed to be another curriculum, the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1995), that I also needed to find out about and master. My interactions, friendships, and collaborations with other women of color in my Ph.D. program taught me many valuable lessons that have served me not only in graduate school but also as a tenure-track, and now tenured, professor.

Networking with Women of Color: A Space of Refuge, Knowledge, and Productivity

Most Chicanas/Latinas encounter feelings of marginality throughout their educational experiences because of their gender, ethnicity, and social class status (Medina & Luna, 2000). This section is about how networking with other women of color graduate students became a refuge for the marginality that we experienced. We learned so much that was not part of the classroom from other fellow women of color grad students, from Latina professors, and from professional organizations created by/for Latina academics. Ek reflects fondly on this important practice:

I felt such joy in meeting other women of color like me with whom I could share my experiences, both positive and negative, while in graduate school. I joined and co-founded several groups on campus where I could network with other women, particularly women of color. One group I co-founded included three other women from different racial/ethnic backgrounds—African-American, White, Jewish—who provided support to one another primarily by reading our proposal/dissertation drafts. A second group that I co-founded was comprised solely by women of color: three Chicanas, one Filipina, one Japanese-American, and one Japanese woman. At first, we would get together informally to study and socialize with one another. These get-togethers led to formalizing our group.

Filled with lofty idealism, we called ourselves, “Women Writers for Liberation,” a name that purposefully emphasized our identities as writers given that so much of our work as budding academics involved writing papers, research proposals, conference proposals, dissertations, cover letters for jobs, and other texts. We recognized that we needed each other not only to survive but thrive in academia.

In reflecting closely at this self-actualized group, Ek recalls the specific levels of support that group members provided to each other, including:

- reading drafts of writings and providing feedback
- co-organizing panels for conferences
- sharing knowledge about different resources (fellowships, grants, research assistantships, other job opportunities)
- demystifying the hidden curriculum, academic genres and discourses
- providing emotional support
- sharing expenses for travel/lodging for conferences
- providing an audience for practice orals, defenses, and job talks
- celebrating our successes (both small and big)
- processing and healing from microaggressions

Thus Women Writers for Liberation provided a space of safety, caring, authenticity, and healing that was missing from the formal academic spaces that were often sites of both racialized and gendered microaggressions (Pierce, 1995; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) defined racial microaggressions as:

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(1) the subtle verbal and nonverbal insults directed at people of color, often automatically or unconsciously; (2) layered insults based on one's race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative insults, which cause unnecessary stress to people of color while privileging whites. (p. 300)

We also found refuge from these hostilities in women of color organizations like MALCS.

Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS)

An organization that was hugely significant for our development as scholars is that of *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS). Ek was introduced to this organization by another Chicana who was pursuing her Ph.D. in English and whom she met in the Raza Graduate Students Association at UCLA. Ek was hooked on MALCS the first time she attended their summer institute. The space was so different from the educational conferences she had been attending, particularly the predominantly White American Educational Research Association (AERA). That MALCS was a mujeres-only space also made it very different from the National Association for Chicana/Chicano Studies (NACCS) which was comprised of both men and women. Going to MALCS felt like being in the Women Writers for Liberation Group (mentioned earlier). Ek felt safe, comfortable, and cared for. She felt that she didn't have to defend the kind of research that she engaged in: ethnographies of immigrant Chicana/o and Latina/o community spaces.

For Sánchez, MALCS was an organization that provided crucial mentoring missing from her academic training. The first time she attended, she, too, was a graduate student like Ek. At MALCS, there were women scholars that Sánchez had seen present at other academic conferences, but instead of presenting on their formal research projects, MALCS created spaces and workshops where these same women humanized the academic path by sharing valuable, reflective experiences. Sánchez particularly remembers one Latina's analogy of academia as running a three-part marathon: first you finish your dissertation; then you secure an academic, tenure-track position; and finally you earn tenure. You cannot stop or give up but instead must realize that the academic marathon takes endurance and *ganás*.

Moreover, for both Ek and Sánchez, MALCS afforded the opportunity to meet other Chicanas/Latinas from other institutions and from other fields that we otherwise would not have met. Collegial relationships established in this organization have remained over the years, and as time passes and new challenges arise in our careers, MALCS Latina scholars continue to share their time, wisdom, and *consejos* with us.

Double Standards Mean Double the Work: The Unsung Work of Pathbreakers

The abilities of Chicanas/Latinas in academia are constantly questioned and scrutinized (Chait, 2002; Reyes & Rios, 2005; Turner, 2002). We are "presumed

incompetent” (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González & Harris, 2012), and thus, must work doubly hard to receive the same recognition our white male counterparts receive. In this section we explore the times we each heard how as a Latina or woman of color you must always work doubly hard because you will be judged harsher than your white male counterpart; that impending judgment is a challenge in and of itself. The inhospitable world of higher education, especially toward traditionally subordinated groups, can ultimately “push out” women of color academics—so preparing to become a pathbreaker in this context takes on even greater meaning.

Ek’s Chicana/Latina mentors at UCLA repeatedly told her that as Chicanas/Latinas, they needed to work twice as hard for their tenure and promotions. Ek remembers one of her mentors saying that for her own tenure and promotion, she made sure to have twenty-four publications, which is double the amount that her other colleagues had so that there would be no question that she deserved tenure. Other Chicana classmates felt they needed to complete every reading assigned in doctoral courses so that when they made comments in class, their non-Chicana/o peers would know that “Chicanas can think.” Her classmate’s thinking and the measures she took to ensure a scholarly image also underscore how Chicanas/Latinas are placed in the position of representing our whole community in graduate school, and if we stumble or don’t succeed, this is representative of all Chican@s/Latin@s—such expectations are not placed on our white counterparts. When Ek started the tenure track at a doctoral-granting institution (i.e., a Tier 2 university), her mentors continued to push her to excel, exhorting her to publish manuscripts as if she were at a Tier 1 research institution. While we see the importance of maintaining an active research agenda and publishing record, our mentors’ advice also created more pressure and anxiety about our productivity.

For Sánchez, similar thinking took root when in her second year of graduate school as a master’s student, she was devastated by the news of a dear Latina mentor not earning tenure at a small, private university. During the ensuing months, Sánchez learned how other Chicanas/Latinas processed this injustice: a recurring theme was that no particular university was safe nor immune to institutional racism and bias, and as much, women of color academics had to work doubly hard in their departments and publish more than what was usually needed for tenure. The pathbreaker role, therefore, fell on those Latinas who would be the “firsts” in their departments, colleges, universities, and academic fields to reach a milestone, accomplishment, or revered position. To some degree, there is no other route but to become the pathbreaker because deep structural issues have led to so few of us being represented in our respective academic fields; after all, women of color only make up 7.5% of all full-time faculty positions in academia (Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, p. 449). But the pathbreakers that have broken barriers, and who earn our utmost respect, are those that share their experiences and consejos with others making a similar journey. In our opinion, if you have paved the path, remember to return and yank the weeds because others like you have many of the same hopes and dreams—and need guidance to see the road less trodden.

Being Mindful of Gatekeeping Roles and, Instead, Becoming “Access Brokers”

Being a “successful” academician, to us, is not solely about the acquisition of traditional knowledge in a particular discipline nor resting on your laurels if you happen to become a successful pathbreaker. We reject the rhetoric of university knowledge as an elite commodity/site. Instead, we believe that we academics need to make universities accessible and our strong conviction is that anyone with determination can do this. By this we mean that it is not a gift/talent from above (to be able to earn a Ph.D. and teach at the university level) only infused into a small group of people, but there are codes, processes, social practices that one can learn, understand, uncover, break, crack, get into that will enable you to get through the seemingly insurmountable challenges in the Ivory Tower. That is where we academics of color have responsibilities to be “access brokers” and not gatekeepers.

Sánchez once wrote a friend (Gabrielle—a pseudonym) a letter explaining the difference between gatekeeping and brokering—providing her own *testimonio* and *reflexión*. Gabrielle is African American and teaches at an HBCU (Historically Black College/University) where she mentors many students. One time, in the early part of Gabrielle’s career as a tenure-track professor, Sánchez and she had an extensive telephone conversation about her mentoring a young African-American student who was hoping to apply to film school; he was a senior undergraduate, looking for advice on the Ph.D. process. Gabrielle, however, felt that this student really did not have the commitment, dedication, nor preparedness for graduate work. Sánchez (who was still a doctoral student), on the other hand, felt terrible about her discernment and judgment; this is what she wrote after the phone call:

Dear Gabrielle ,

Don’t be a gatekeeper. I was just remembering what happened to me when I was finally looking at getting a master’s in Latin American studies. There was this White English professor I really liked and thought was cool. Anyway, I went to get a recommendation from him after I had been out of college for three-and-a-half years; I had gotten a B+, A-, and an A in his classes, so I thought I had done pretty well. Also, he always said he liked my creativity with projects (performing Hamlet in Spanish for a mini-class play to counter the ridiculous notion that you could not discuss Shakespeare with formally uneducated parents, espoused by the Latino writer, Richard Rodríguez).

Anyway, I tripped when this professor told me he was going to have to “think about” writing a recommendation for me, that first he was going to have to talk with me (read: interview me) about my reasons for wanting to go to graduate school. Girl, as I look back on it now, I trip and think, “What if I hadn’t ‘passed’ that ‘interview’ with him? Where would I be today?” That was an entirely unforeseen “gate” put up along my path toward graduate school. Who had given him the right to serve as a gatekeeper? His White liberal conscience looking out for my little Brown self?!? What’s up with that? Instead of him saying, “You know, I think it’s

great you want to go to graduate school. How can I help you? Where do you want to go? There are not many Latinas in grad school and we need more, so let me give you some inside scoop on how to get through these hurdles.”

It is people like him thinking he is doing right, doing me a favor...He, HIMself, evaluating if I should go to graduate school...He became an unofficial gatekeeper. He took on a role that plenty of others already do far too often, and maybe he would even do it worse by not fully understanding the entire process of graduate admissions.

Girl, I think we need to remember this kind of stuff when we mentor other students of color. I know that personally it was hard for you to get your Ph.D. for lots of different reasons, as it is for many of us, but instead of doubting students' abilities, let's help them learn the way to make grad school a reality. We need to get down to helping them learn the system, learn how to get in, and how to stay in and finish. We do no one any favors by serving as a “concerned” gatekeeper trying to look out for them. Nope. And let me tell you, I write all of this to you today probably more for me than for the situation you just described to me with that one film student. I am working with quite a few immigrant students and need to stop looking at things in their “best interest” and instead look at how to get them all the information they need to reach their goals. It's about demystifying the whole higher ed process...

---P.

As an academic, it is not difficult to be socialized (or perhaps seduced) by the power inherent in teaching, grading, and guiding students through higher education. Sometimes we can unknowingly take on roles that no one asked us to assume, thinking we are acting in good faith. But a critical reflexión can help us understand—as well as a dialogue with a trusted colleague—that an important role of being a critical woman of color scholar is to create maps for those students who are struggling to maneuver academia and its many requirements. Otherwise, we may inadvertently re-inscribe structures that reproduce restricted navigation. Brokering access is therefore an important, though often tiring, aspect of our job.

Research in Education for the Advancement of Latin@s (REAL)

Our powerful graduate school experiences with other women of color impelled us to collaborate in similar ways with our colleagues here at UTSA. It is not surprising that we helped establish a research collaborative, “Research in Education for the Advancement of Latin@s (REAL),” with our Chicana/Latina colleagues. As research on REAL has documented, REAL develops our consciousness about social justice, our working-class backgrounds, and community uplift (Quijada Cerecer, Ek, Alanís, Murakami-Ramalho, 2011). In addition, REAL validates our experiences, knowledges, and identities while affording a space from which to engage in muxerista-mentoring which recognizes the racialized, classed, and gendered realities of our daily lives (Ek, Quijada Cerecer, Alanís, Rodríguez, 2010; Quijada Cerecer, Alanís, Ek, Rodríguez, 2012). As members of REAL, we value and leverage the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 2001) that Chicanas/Latinas bring to the academy and we build upon this capital.

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Another significant way in which REAL members mentor and support one another is through the development and refinement of our research. We (Sánchez and Ek) have worked with each other on a research project that looked at the narratives of language, literacy, and immigration of our Latina/o pre-service bilingual teacher candidates (Sánchez & Ek, 2008). We are also currently collaborating with four other REAL colleagues on an afterschool technology program for Latina/o bilingual elementary students and their parents in a working-class area of San Antonio (Ek, Machado-Casas, Sánchez & Alanís, 2010). In fact, the present special issue of the *Journal of Educational Foundations* is also a byproduct of this collaborative and approach to finding “success” in academia—especially when there are so few pathbreakers. The collaboration on research is particularly important as our university seeks to become a Tier-1 research university and increases its emphasis on research and publications. As associate professors wanting to obtain full professorship one day, we recognize the need to continue our work with other Chicanas/Latinas as well as with other women of color. REAL in many ways formalizes the unsung work of pathbreakers by attempting to create durable linkages and a recognizable camino for other women of color.

Conclusion

This article examined the graduate student *testimonios* of two Chicanas as we navigated our doctorates at UC Berkeley and UCLA. In particular, we focused on how networking with other women of color creates a space of refuge, knowledge, and productivity; how women of color scholars are burdened by the double standard of having to do double the work (but may become pathbreakers in the process); and how being mindful of gatekeeping roles can lead to becoming an access broker instead. In doing so, we build on the work of women of color feminists and on Chicana/Latina feminist *testimonio* scholars. Thus, our stories become part of these epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies that can help carve pathways for other Latinas on their journey: the three-part academic marathon.

The strategies of resilience and resistance that we used to navigate these institutions served us well not only in graduate school but also as tenure-track, and now tenured, faculty at an HSI (Hispanic-serving Institution) in Texas. The critical reflexiones and practices that had their roots during our Ph.D. training matured during the past eight to nine years that we have spent as assistant and associate professors engaged in dialogue about our experiences. As we discussed, our involvement in REAL continues to help us navigate the next step in our scholarly trajectory. At the same time, we use the spaces created by REAL to reflect how the difficulties inherent to being a pathbreaker are faced with innovative and supportive strategies.

Ultimately, the *profesora*-ship for many Latinas is not a clear-cut path with an explicit map. Instead, it entails *testimonios* like our own to help provide critical guidance—just like we received in those *muxerista* spaces, early on during our path toward the Ph.D. If we continue to reflect closely at each juncture of this journey,

then we can help ensure that other Latinas like us all catch a ride on that golf cart that leads to “success,” up and out of the darkness.

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