

Hispanic-Serving or Not: La Lucha Sigue in Academia; The Struggle Continues in Academia

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This testimonio describes my lived experience as a Latina scholar who attempted to go up for promotion to full professor at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and failed. From the time I was on the tenure clock to the present, specific instances revealed the presence of racism at the institution. I describe the roles of gatekeepers, white allies and privileged, white accomplices, and mi gent, and I make recommendations based on my experience.

I write this testimonio with hesitation. I write it as I go up for promotion to full professor...again. This will be my second submission for promotion, so I run the risk of being turned down as I speak the truth, my truth, of what happens at the HSI where I work. I will not be using people's names for the same reason, but my drive to share this lived narrative, this testimonio, is to help other BIPOC scholars who may be struggling with injustice and racism at their own institutions. I use this testimonio as the primary methodology to describe moments and events that are painful to remember and difficult to share. I use testimonio "as a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure" (The Latina Feminist Group 2). I have learned that silence helps no one, and if it does, it helps the oppressor. Whether the intention of those in power and authority is to be racist or not is not the point. The point is that in my eyes I was treated unfairly, unjustly because I am a Latina, and it is easier to dismiss me than it would be a white, Anglo man. Whether overt or covert, conscious or unconscious, racist and sexist behavior should be ostracized.

The Beginning

I never imagined that being an English major meant that I would be treated as an outsider. In fact, for the first half of my career, I did not realize this—until I came to an HSI as a visiting professor. Reality set in when I applied for the Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies position at the end of my visiting professorship. It became evident that, for some of my colleagues, I did not belong there. I was an interloper; I had entered a field where whiteness dominates. I questioned whether the problem was that I was coming from a tenured job at a community college; I was aware that for some

professors, teaching at a community college was not the same as teaching at a university. I quickly identified some of the negative biases held by faculty in my department. I convinced myself that this was the case, and I was determined to show them how this was a misconception and erroneous thinking. I wanted to believe in—or seek out—the humanism of this HSI. It took me six years, as a tenured-track assistant professor, to open my eyes and face reality: Getting tenure and being promoted to associate professor were just preparing me for what was coming; it was only the end of the beginning.

During the probationary period of being on the tenure clock, I experienced moments that caught me off guard. I still remember when I was serving on the hiring committee for a new assistant professor. A white colleague, sitting next to me, stated how unfair it was for minority candidates to be considered for campus interviews just because of affirmative action. She clearly saw the Latinx candidate we had selected as a finalist to be incompetent and unqualified for the position. She assumed that it was only because of affirmative action that the candidate had been selected. And, if hired, this new colleague would be tagged as an affirmative-action hire. Had that been the case with me? Was I even qualified and competent enough to be here, to be at this table? What was I doing in this space? I felt silenced. But what could I do? I was still without tenure. Silence. Documentation exists that shows how a stigma of incompetence arises from the affirmative-action association (Heilman, Block, and Lucas 536-44). Was I setting up this new colleague, if hired, for failure and even mistreatment? Unfortunately, and fortunately, the position was given to another candidate. Unfortunately, and fortunately, I was still sitting at this table. Unsure of what I could do and/or say, my silence helped me realize the situation I was in: I was aware of the racism and couldn't share this with the job candidate. Sadly, I witnessed racism and couldn't or didn't do anything about it because of fear of retaliation. And so it was instances like this that I endured while on the tenure clock.

As I attended more conferences, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the Computers and Writing Conference, and the National Council of Teachers of English, I educated myself on what was missing in these gatherings. For instance, in fall 2018, only 3% of professors in degree-granting postsecondary institutions were Hispanic, with 1% of that 3% identifying as female. As for associate professors, in fall 2018, 5% were Hispanic, with 2% of those identifying as female (National Center for Education Statistics). Clearly, I was in the 2% of female associate professors with slim chances of contributing to the percentage of full professors. Something needed to be done.

Enter the Gatekeepers

In 2013, I received tenure and was promoted to associate professor, in spite of resistance from half of my tenured colleagues in the department. With two books under my belt and a couple of articles, I was still not welcomed. Between 2013 and the present, I have participated in the evaluation of numerous assistant professors going up for tenure and promotion. When I compare my publications, teaching, and service to theirs, I am convinced that I had more than enough to be granted tenure and promotion in 2013. It took the next six years to grow as a scholar and teacher and to build my identity in higher education. I established myself as a service-learning scholar in writing studies. Resistance should not have taken place back then, but it did. I can see it now. I can identify it. I should have received the support of all of my peers when I went up for tenure, but that was not the case. I have come to learn about the gatekeepers and how they control who is in and who is out. Gatekeepers, with their negative biases, their own insecurities, and in some cases, with their racist behavior and attitudes, are dangerous to higher education.

In 2019, I decided to apply for promotion to professor. It was time. With the right number of publications, a \$100,000 National Endowment for Humanities grant award, a state board of regents teaching award, and a long list of service to my department, college, university, and the field, I felt confident. Most of the professors in the department encouraged me to apply for promotion. The atmosphere felt different this time around. I felt supported and valued by my colleagues. But I was still fully aware of the existence of the gatekeepers in the department. One colleague in particular stood between me and the promotion. I knew it because this same professor had voted against my tenure and promotion. I had no clue of why or what the objections were that this professor had against me or why there was such disfavor toward me, but this caused me to experience impostor syndrome. I felt like I did not belong.

To my surprise, one day a student answered this question for me. Unknowingly, this Latinx student came to my office, afflicted, with a story to share. The student expressed concern because he said this professor (the gatekeeper) had stated that she would not pay tuition, as a parent, to have her children be taught by professors who had accents. My eyes opened wide in disbelief! The professor knew that more than half her class was composed of international students, students with accents. And, yes, students with Mexican accents. Ah ha! There it was. I had been imperceptive to it, but it was clear: This gatekeeper had a problem with minorities, at least if they had an accent and did not speak like her. It was then that I had to confront my reality: No matter what I did or said, I was not getting the support of this professor for my promotion. This incident reminded me of one of Aja Martinez's counterstories. In "An

Epistolary Email on Pedagogy and Master Narrative Curricula,” Martinez responds to her student’s assertion that English is a national language instituted by the founding fathers by informing him that there has never been a policy on a singular national language and that many of the founding fathers spoke more than one language (120). This student is erroneously attributing an ideology of monolingualism to the founding fathers, just like my colleague believes there is one “correct” accent. Gatekeepers can control the outcome of situations, and if they hold negative biases and, yes, racist attitudes, they can hinder the pathway to promotion for BIPOC scholars. At times, they are not just gatekeepers but bullies who sabotage the pathways for others. It is these people’s own insecurities that shut doors for others.

Meet the Privileged White Accomplices

Nevertheless, I pushed forward with my promotion application. I had hope because, just like there were gatekeepers, there were white allies, and even privileged, white accomplices that supported me. I am blessed that I have allies and accomplices within my department, college, university, and the field. A white ally is anti-racist but may not necessarily be proactive. They may or may not take action against racism. So who then is a privileged, white accomplice? Privileged, white accomplices don’t limit their support and are open about their support for you. Their support is unconditional, and they go all out to defend and support you. There is no room for hesitation or fear of retaliation. They support you because they know it is the right and just thing to do. In short, their actions speak louder than their words. Privileged, white accomplices speak out in meetings. They write letters of support. They advise you and guide you through the right channels for justice to be achieved. They connect you to the right people. They applaud you every step of the way, whether there is an audience or not.

I have numerous white allies and privileged, white accomplices who have carried me through difficult times. It is in their complicity that I have found strength. Together, we have fought for justice and have fought against racism in the institution. I wish to show how at least two of my privileged, white accomplices have made a difference in my journey at the HSI where I teach.

My first privileged, white accomplice is a white woman who has always been a mentor to me. She gave me my first job at the writing center when I was eighteen years old. She believed in me then, and she believes in me now. She recruited me from the local community college and saw to it that I received a visiting professorship at the university. She selected me because of my area of expertise and scholarship, and she saw how I could contribute to the Rhetoric and Writing Studies Program in the Department of English. When I went up for tenure and promotion, she supported me every step of the way. She spoke

up on my behalf to the college committee. When I went up for promotion to professor, she wrote a letter of support recommending me for promotion to the provost, even though she was retired. She has never questioned my abilities, my competencies, or my contributions. Many times, because of her, I have picked myself up when others have brought me down with their injustices.

My second privileged, white accomplice has been a recently retired colleague, who still finds ways to support me in the face of adversity. She is fully aware of the skepticism that exists in the department, but she tries to convince me that good prevails. Throughout the years and before she retired, she went out of her way to make me feel like I belonged. When situations arose in which she knew I was being questioned, she would immediately remind me of how my expertise, knowledge, and accomplishments went beyond what was expected of me. When I was informed that I had not been recommended for the promotion because, as I was led to believe, my scholarship did not have much impact on others in the field based on the number of citations my work has received, she did research and shared her findings with me. She showed me how Google Scholar was not a reliable platform for measuring impact in the humanities and how such a platform discriminated against women and minorities. She opened my eyes. My work was being measured unfairly and with a racist practice that undermines BIPOC scholars. This accomplice gave me my major argument in fighting for myself. Nevertheless, I later learned that impact was not the major argument against recommending me for promotion.

Y Mi Gente?

I have been blessed that throughout my journey in academia, I have had my gente supporting me. Latinx colleagues and Latinx scholars in the field have encouraged me and have paved the way for me to succeed. Letters of support, advice, opportunities, lunches, coffee breaks, and simple things like stopping by my office to say, “You got this!” “Tu puedes!,” are a few examples of how Latinx folks have made a difference at moments when I doubted my place in higher education. I have combated moments of serious impostor syndrome because of my gente. Just recently, a Latinx professor opened the doors to his home and invited all the Latinx faculty at the university for a gathering—the first gathering of all the Latinx faculty at the university, the first of its kind and, hopefully, not the last. This gathering became a safe and open space for us to share our stories, stories that shared common ground: racism in the institution. We also shared stories of healing, triumph, recovery, resiliency, and strength. Most importantly, we all met and realized we were not alone in our struggles.

I can confidently say that the majority of Latinx scholars and colleagues are supportive of each other. For example, I have a Latinx colleague in my

department who continually calls to see how I am doing. When she thinks of ideas for publications, co-teaching, or service, she immediately thinks of me and wants to collaborate. She has been with me through the ups and downs of my journey as I go up for professor. “Si se puede,” is her motto. “I can do this,” I tell myself, as I hear her rooting me on.

Another Latinx colleague in another department has seen me go through the roller coaster of the tenure-clock and sees me now struggling with the promotion to professor. We try to meet every month to check in on each other. We have created a writing support network. We report to each other how much writing we have done, and if we haven't written, we chat about what's going on that has impeded our progress. This Latinx colleague has stuck to my side from the beginning, and we both help each other succeed in academia. There is no room for personal agendas.

On to Professor, so I Thought

As stated earlier, in spring 2019, I decided to apply for promotion to professor. I will not describe the entire evaluation process, only say that it takes a year to complete the evaluation and offer a final recommendation. The process begins with the external review and ends with the internal review, which includes different levels of evaluation: department (only full professors vote), department chair, a college committee, the college dean, the provost, and then the university president.

In my case, it was one internal letter that created a domino effect and led to my not being recommended for promotion. The external review letters were all excellent and recommended me for promotion. For this, I thank the scholars in the field who recognize the value of my work. It was within the internal review that I faced the challenges. First, one professor voted against my promotion; this was the gatekeeper. I knew from the beginning that I would not have her support, but all other professors voted to recommend me for promotion. I thank them for their support and for recognizing all my efforts, performance, and accomplishments. Even with one vote against me, I knew I was still doing well in the evaluation process.

The problem arose with a letter from one of the administrators. In this letter, though he recommended me for promotion, he broke down my performance into what I was doing well and what I was doing wrong. Whether unconsciously or not, he wrote a letter that became quite punitive and negative. He would state one of my accomplishments and then focus on a negative aspect. For instance, he even criticized the external reviewers' letters. He stated that the National Endowment for the Humanities grant I had been awarded should only count as service. Because my scholarship centers on community writing and community engaged work, he found it easy to state that all my scholarship, teaching, and service fall under the category of service. He did

end the letter by recommending me for promotion, but the damage was done. The content of the letter was not supporting his final recommendation. From there, it only went downhill. All the other individuals evaluating me cited his letter with reasons for not recommending me for promotion. As my Latinx colleague shared with me: “As rhetoricians, we know better. It’s not the intent that matters; it’s the effect our writing has on the reader.” It does not matter if this administrator’s intent was to support me; his letter did the opposite. The effect his letter had on the other evaluators is what matters: They voted not to recommend me for promotion, and they cited from his letter to support this recommendation. I can’t stop wondering if this administrator’s letter would have been different had it not been written for a Latina. To this day, this administrator refuses to see how his letter hurt my chances for promotion. He justifies it by saying that it is only my perception of the letter, not his. But if my perception is that his letter is negative and others cited from his letter reasons for not promoting me, isn’t my perception valid? Isn’t what I see, what I feel, and what I perceive important? Add to this that the evaluation process is not transparent. It is set up against you: You are not told the vote count. You are not allowed to read any of the letters as you move through the evaluation process. You are given very little, if any, information about how you are doing in the evaluation process. The only reason I was able to read the letters regarding my promotion application is that I took it upon myself to go through the state Public Information Act and request all the documentation pertaining to my promotion application. I was able to do this only after the final decision not to recommend me for promotion had been rendered, and I had been notified.

Y Ahora Que? And Now What?

I believe wholeheartedly that with every failure, there is at least a lesson to be learned. Through this failed attempt at promotion, I came to realize how action needs to take place if we want to see the numbers increase of BIPOC faculty reaching higher ranks in academia. The following list outlines recommendations for such change to take place:

1. It is not enough for an institution to be non-racist; it must be anti-racist and be proactive. Racism must be shamed.
2. It is not enough for an institution to integrate anti-racist pedagogies in its curricula if its leadership practices and policies are racist. Examples of this include basing teaching performance evaluations on end of semester student course evaluations. Studies have shown that student evaluations are skewed against women and minority professors (Lilienfeld). Another example is measuring scholarship impact on platforms such as Google Scholar. Studies have shown

that citations reflect bias in publication rates and venues based on gender (Jensenius et al.).

3. If you are in an authoritative/administrative position where you have control or power to make a difference, be the change that is needed. Don't let your negative biases dictate your actions.
4. Institutions must be transparent, not only about their policies and practices, but about the hostile contexts experienced by BIPOC scholars at their institutions. For example, the evaluation process for tenure and promotion at my institution must be more transparent. The process should show the candidates/applicants that they (the institution, administration, colleagues, etc.) want their faculty members to succeed. The process should be encouraging and open.
5. Faculty and administrators, at all levels, must identify all signs of racism in the institution and in its practices, such as in hiring. Yolanda Flores Niemann states, “[i]t is also important to look for signs of overt, covert, and unconscious racism among potential colleagues; racists cannot evaluate ethnic/racial minorities fairly” (351). Affirmative action should not be used as a weapon to undermine and attack BIPOC faculty and scholars, as my white colleague did when we were considering a Latinx candidate for the job position.
6. BIPOC faculty must create safe spaces for themselves. In my case, for example, we could hold more Latinx faculty gatherings. We could also create a Latinx or BIPOC faculty organization.
7. BIPOC scholars must share their stories! You never know who is listening and whose life you are going to influence. Remember: Silence only helps the oppressor. Change begins from within. For instance, I have chosen to share my story through this testimonio. BIPOC scholars must find their place in higher education so that they can bring about change. You can't change anything from the outside.
8. BIPOC scholars must trust their instincts. If something does not seem or feel right, it probably isn't. Racists can hide in many ways. Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. At first, I did not want to believe that colleagues could be racist, but they can be, and they are.

Y Para Que? And For What?

In concluding this testimonio, I want to stress the importance of supporting BIPOC scholars, and as BIPOC scholars, we must stick together and not be obstacles to each other. We must play fair, too. Advanced BIPOC scholars should seek venues and opportunities for junior BIPOC scholars. Junior BIPOC scholars should genuinely seek out the support of other BIPOC schol-

ars, not to use them as stepping stones but to treat them as elders who have experience with, and knowledge of, the systemic racism in the academy.

This testimonio, more than likely, will not count as a publication, and yet, it is one of the most important manuscripts I have ever written. Its impact may not show up in Google Scholar, but its impact, I hope, will go beyond this journal's pages. My wish is for this testimonio to help other BIPOC scholars and/or to bring about change in higher education and make administrators realize how even unconscious racist behaviors, attitudes, and negative biases affect BIPOC scholars' professional growth and personal well-being.

In writing this testimonio, I had to develop "thick skin." I had to write with "ganas." I hesitated as I began to write this piece. I hesitated several times as I continued to write, and I am hesitant even as I conclude this testimonio. There's a lot of risk involved in doing this. As I attempt to go up for promotion again, I am filled with fear. Racist minds don't change. Retaliation is real. However, in writing this lived narrative, I underwent healing and am working toward recovery. Writing and sharing my story with others gives me the strength to push forward because *la lucha sigue*, the struggle continues, in academia.

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