

Barriers to Success: A Narrative of One Latina Student's Struggles

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In this essay, Jannell Robles explores and discusses some common themes found in her experiences as a Latina undergraduate student. During the summer of 2008, she conducted fieldwork in a rural town in Mexico. Her experiences as the only Latina student on this trip were similar to her experiences at her university and those discussed by Latina scholars. Robles considers the pros and cons of being an insider and an outsider to a rural town in Mexico, the use of Latinos as cultural brokers while denying their contributions as social scientists, and the blame she experienced for her lack of adjustment. She also discusses the ways she resists these obstacles through survival strategies.

In the summer of 2008, I traveled to Mexico to participate in a seventeen-day anthropology field school. A professor invited me and three other students, whom I had never met before, to work on a series of small projects with the youth in a rural Mexican town as part of a larger ongoing project related to attracting ecotourism to this area. We taught English to adolescents, focusing on vocabulary specific to selling arts and crafts and to guiding tourists through local archaeological sites. These classes helped the youth be better prepared and trained to work in the tourism industry of that region. While there, we also engaged in recycling activities and a photography project.

I was interested in participating because I had hardly visited Mexico since starting college and because it would be my first experience studying abroad. Additionally, I wanted to go on this trip because I was eager to learn more about applied anthropology and community development projects, to learn about building a relationship with a community, and to be able to give back to the people in Mexico through teaching.

During this trip, we were told to take field notes and keep a journal about our observations and anything that caught our attention. The assumption was that we would record our observations about the people in the town. Ironi-

cally, I wrote more about my interactions with my colleagues than with the townspeople. I suppose what seemed more foreign to me, the only Latina on the trip, were my dealings with my colleagues, rather than the customs and practices of the people in the town. I expected to see different customs and practices—to eat different foods, have a different lifestyle, and engage in different activities—but I was not expecting to disagree with the other team members regarding our interactions with the townspeople, our presence there, and our actions.

No Soy Gringa: Negotiating Insider and Outsider Status in Mexico

My insider/outsider status at this field site in Mexico caused my peers, and in some instances the local community members, to question the degree of my insider perspective. As a result, I felt liminal. On the one hand, I considered myself an insider because I am a Mexican American (born in Houston, Texas). On the other hand, I also considered myself an outsider because I didn't grow up in Mexico and my family wasn't from this region. No one could really understand my position in the town. The other students and I were introduced as *gringas* to the local people, but I considered myself *Mexicana*. I had a hard time dealing with this at the beginning. I would speak up and say that I was not a *gringa*, but the people of the town didn't know what to make of me. They said, "*hablas el español bien*" and "*tienes el cabello diferente de las otras muchachas*." The people in the town recognized my Spanish-speaking skills and interpreted my appearance as different than my fellow students.

When we visited people in the town, I was the only student who understood most of the Spanish in their conversations. There were many times when I felt that the professor misinterpreted or misunderstood conversations simply because she was not a native Spanish speaker. Since Spanish varies from region to region, I'm sure I didn't understand everything either, but I felt that what I did understand, and even what I misunderstood, was disregarded.

After a couple of days in the town, the professor asked, "Are you OK?" and I replied, "Yeah, why?" She responded, "Just making sure." But in reality I was not OK. There were a lot of things that I felt uncomfortable about, but I did not feel I could discuss them freely. A few days later, the professor invited me to talk to her at her house. She noticed that I had "not been feeling good" and asked, "What's going on?" This time I was honest and told her that I didn't agree with a lot of things that were going on. I explained that every time I tried to give input and let my voice be heard among the students, I wasn't understood.

Because of the way I was raised, I felt a connection to and familiarity with the people in this rural town. I was an insider because some customs were very familiar. I grew up listening to stories of hard work and physical labor *en la labor*, on the farms. My father is a first-generation American, born and raised in northern rural Mexico. My mother is a 1.5-generation American, born in

northern Mexico and raised in south Houston. I was born in Houston and raised in Pasadena, Texas, although I often visit my family in Mexico and the Rio Grande Valley. I have a lot of extended family members who own land and live in Mexico. The difference between them and me is that I was born, raised, and socialized a few miles north of the border in a different social, political, and cultural environment. I guess some people might not consider me Mexican enough because I was not born or raised in Mexico and possibly because my parents were born and raised in the border region of Mexico. Others sometimes think of the U.S.-Mexico border region itself as having a culture that is different from the rest of Mexico. However, I feel that I have a connection to Mexico because I have family who live there and because I have grown up listening to stories from my elders, stories of the past and stories of change, migration, and overcoming difficult times.

I have relatives who, until recently, still worked on the land of our family ranch and on farms in Colorado. My father and his siblings were raised on a ranch in northern Mexico along the border. They loved the land and cared for it; they knew how to work the soil, knew the animals and different species that lived on it, and knew the plants, herbs, and trees that grew on it. They took care of their animals: chickens, cows, pigs, *borregos*, y *chivos*. They knew how to kill, prepare, and cook them for special occasions. My dad still makes me *barbacoa de chivo* when I go visit him once a year, usually at New Year's. These experiences of home made some of the cooking styles that the people in the town used familiar to me, like cooking meat in a hole in the ground, which is still practiced by my father.

The music that I heard while visiting and working at this field site in Mexico was also familiar to my ears. I remember walking the streets of the town or walking to class and hearing the loud music coming from the houses. I could tell if it was the youth blasting the music or the adults, because the genres were different—the older *rancheras* and the modern *reggaeton*.

Since I was familiar with some of the customs and practices of the people in the town, I recognized appropriate behavior more easily and tried to behave accordingly in their space. At times, I even believed I was more culturally respectful in my behaviors and actions than the professor and especially the other students. For example, I listened to the stories of the elders, I tried not to take pictures, and I tried to be *humilde*.

When we visited families in their homes, I listened to the elders speak, while the other students went outside to play with the children. I knew that the elders had a lot of rich stories full of so much life-knowledge and that listening to them would give me a window into their lives. At home, my grandmother always reminds me that she may not have had the opportunities to go to school like me, but she does have *la escuela de la vida* (the school of life), which translates for me into the knowledge and wisdom that she has accumulated over the years. The knowledge and wisdom of my elders is far richer than anything a person could learn or get from a college degree. “*Sin consejos uno*

no llega a viejo” is a Spanish proverb that literally translates as “a person will not get to old age if they do not get *consejos* while growing up.” It was this kind of education that led me to listen to the stories, the life lessons, and the *consejos* told by the elders at the field site.

One Sunday evening, we were invited to have dinner at a young couple’s house. After dinner, two of the students went outside with the children, while the rest of us remained inside the house talking about ceremonies and traditions that were getting lost over time. The two students who went outside were playing with the children and taking several pictures—a sign of a lack of respect, *falta de respeto*. Yet, while I was in Mexico, my cultural sensitivities gave my fellow students the impression that I was defiant and uncooperative. As a result, they did not invite me to go to the store, on walks around town, or to visit people’s homes. Most of what I had to say during the trip was dismissed or ignored by the students.

I recall once when my fellow students and I were walking around with youth from the town and taking pictures for the professor’s project, we entered the old colonial Catholic church. I sensed that we should not have gone into the church to take pictures. To me, a church is not simply an exotic or romantic religious building but a sacred place of worship. In addition, during the time we were in Mexico, I too often heard other students saying, “Oh, the children are cute; their costumes are colorful; and their food is so good.” Everything seemed so exotic, eccentric, and romantic to the students. I wondered if they really valued the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the people in the town.

When walking around the streets of the town, I tried to avoid attracting too much attention to myself. I tried to follow what the women in the town did, and I knew that being loud and attracting attention from the men was not the norm. I was very aware of my position and privileges. I knew it was a rural town, and I purposefully took clothing that would make me appear as *humilde* as possible. I knew the value of being humble and of not being *una presumida*. Even still, the people of the town recognized the differences between “us” outsiders and themselves. We were privileged, we had power, we were educated; we were *gringas* and *Norte Americanas*; we spoke English and had a lot of money, compared to “them.” Few people said no to us. I didn’t want to act like one of those people who is not aware of her privilege.

Latinas as Cultural Brokers

Outside of Mexico, there have also been instances in which my Latina perspective has caused some to question my objectivity as a researcher and my legitimacy as a young social scientist. I have often conducted research on populations with which I identify ethnically. For example, I have conducted research about the sociocultural and economic survival strategies of *Mexicanas* and the educational trajectories and experiences of Latinos in college. Currently I am researching the contributions, achievements, and experiences of Latina

anthropologists. Sometimes I find myself spending more time and effort explaining why a Latina is interested in studying Latinos than explaining the content and findings of my research. I am surrounded by people who are not willing to acknowledge the connection between my experiences and research interests and the legitimacy of the work that I do. I research Latina/os inside and outside of the academy because I want to build on my existing knowledge of this community and better understand this growing population. However, a professor suggested to me that studying Latino culture was not viewed as scholarly research.

Despite others' dismissal of my academic contributions, like many Latinos in the academy, I have often been used as a cultural broker. During my first experience studying abroad in Mexico, I was appreciated for my linguistic abilities but not recognized for my unique perspective and scholarly abilities. I was invited to Mexico to provide research assistance; what I did not know was that I would be used in a secondary manner—as a dictionary. I hated hearing my name called out by the other students on the trip because I knew it meant I had to translate a word or a phrase for them. They never asked about my background or my research interests. I felt as if they saw me as a cultural broker rather than as a fellow scholar—expected to play this role without any recognition of the knowledge or expertise it required. Other minority scholars in anthropology have also critiqued the field for using them as cultural brokers rather than scholars. For example, more than half of the minority anthropologists surveyed by the American Anthropological Association in 1973 agreed that “minority scholars, in contrast to nonminority anthropologists, had been utilized chiefly as field-workers, interviewers, liaisons to an ethnic group, cultural broker-interpreter and informants” (Chapter III, para. 28). In addition, two of the earliest minority female anthropologists—Native American ethnographer Ella Deloria and African American ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston—“both served as welcomed ‘native’ informants but were excluded as scholars in anthropology (Behar, 1993, p. 85)” (Davalos, 1998, p. 30). I felt brokenhearted because finally I experienced firsthand these scholars' critiques. Even on the campus of my university, I have been asked to translate many times, yet, in some of these instances, my other skills and abilities are not recognized as important.

In Mexico, I felt that I was being taken advantage of. The idea of being *interesada y convinenciera* helps me make sense of how my abilities have been used to promote the interests of others and how they are discounted when it comes to my own education. People who are *interesados y convinencieros* are only interested in dealing with you if you can provide services or goods to them for free or when they are interested in something you have to offer. I felt that my insider perspective was ignored, except when others could use me as a translator. The ability to translate means having the knowledge to not only translate words and sentences but also, and most importantly, to translate metaphors that carry ideologies, belief systems, values, and philosophies. I would have

preferred to be acknowledged for my insider perspective and utilized in a primary capacity instead of the secondary role I played.

On a few occasions in Mexico, I told the faculty that students from our group were taking pictures without permission. A professor assured me that the people in the town were used to *gringas* taking pictures and that they trusted the students wouldn't do anything with them. A few days later, one of the students posted a picture of a well-respected elderwoman on her Facebook page and set the picture as her main profile photo. After this, the professor began to understand what I was talking about. Still, I felt that my experiences as a Latina and the knowledge that I brought from my Latino culture and heritage were not valued in Mexico, nor have they been valued throughout my college education.¹

Lack of Adjustment

In addition to serving in a secondary capacity, I'm blamed for not being well-adjusted as an undergraduate student and as a student researcher abroad. I was told by a professor in Mexico, "Jannell, I thought you were more prepared for the field." I wasn't sure exactly what she meant by this, but I'm guessing that she perceived me as experiencing "culture shock" and therefore not being prepared for the field. I have a general awareness of my own conflicting cultural values. Some of these conflicts have to do with separation from family, the questioning of my dedication, internal contradictions, hostilities in academia, and the perceived lack of my preparedness. I am often told that the discomfort or displeasure I experience as an undergraduate student is my fault because I cannot adjust to college life. In Mexico, the faculty interpreted my experiences as the same kind of culture shock experienced by outsiders. I was told that these experiences were my fault and that I didn't know how to deal with being in a different culture. Educators and scholars sometimes blame Latino/a students for their failures—suggesting that something is somehow wrong with us, our personality, our mentality, our way of thinking, or our attitudes.

As a research scholar in the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program at the University of North Texas (UNT), I'm often asked to make research more of a priority. I feel hurt and conflicted when I hear this because I've already sacrificed so much to be a college student. I left my family, expecting that I would see them during my breaks; yet I've spent my summers and even some holidays and other school breaks away from them. Programs such as the McNair Research Scholars help in offsetting the financial burden of college and preparing me for graduate school. However, there are tough choices that students must make in order to comply with the program's expectations and policies. For example, we are expected to dedicate at least ten hours a week to research during the semester and forty hours a week during the summer. I have had to choose between devoting my time to this intense

program and visiting my family. As a Latina college student, I feel that I'm being asked to give up everything about my life and my culture, replacing it with something else in order to succeed.

I left the familiar to come to the unfamiliar. I left a life with a close-knit family in which we relied on our interdependent relationships. At first, I thought, "How selfish can I be to leave my family?" I was the first one to leave home. I talk to my mom every day and to my dad several times per week. My brothers miss me. They ask me to come back home. They ask me, "Why can't you go to school here [in Houston]?" Initially, my father feared for me when I told him that I was going to college away from home: "Who's going to help you change a flat tire or fix your car if it breaks down?" He didn't want me to move away from my mother and my brothers. He would say, "Who's going to be there for you if you need anything?"

When I left for college, my parents had recently divorced, ending their twenty-six-year marriage. Both of my brothers had gotten married the previous year, and I was the only child left at home. I was getting ready to transfer from a community college to a four-year university. My mom didn't want me to leave her; but she wanted me to have opportunities that she did not have, so she allowed me to go. *A uno tambien le hace falta el calor de los padres*—their nurture and the warmth of their bodies—*y tambien los consejos*. I miss my family, and at times I feel lonely, but somehow I'm expected to ignore these feelings because they are assumed to interfere with my education.

In addition to the disregard for my need and want to keep in close contact with my family, I also experience hostility. I get upset when I sit in a class with professors who are bashing "illegal immigrants" or perpetuating negative stereotypes of Mexican or Latino culture. I think to myself, "What do they know?" They might show all these numbers and graphs that support their "findings" and assume that makes their research "objective." Just like the history that I learned in public school, these data are seen as being "universally true and valid." Latinos and indigenous peoples are usually discussed in textbooks and by professors as primitive or uncivilized; however, this isn't how I experience my culture. These contradictions and implications regarding my family separation, dedication to school and research, and lack of preparedness have been perceived as a lack of adjustment on my part and are not recognized as affecting my experiences in college.

Personal Survival Strategies

In order to survive the contradictions of college, I rely on a Latina epistemology—*sobrevivencia*—the ability to survive, resist, and be resilient (Villenas, 2005). In the field, I learned to set boundaries. I sometimes chose to ignore the other students when they called my name or asked me to translate because I thought that some of the things they were saying didn't make sense or weren't relevant to the people with whom they were speaking. I also

chose not to walk around town with the other students. I didn't want the local people to view me as another outsider or intruder in their village—wandering around as if I owned it. Instead, I stayed in my room writing or maybe talking to my neighbors. I dealt with this solitude by writing in my journal as much as I could—recording experiences, reflections, and events. In addition, I occasionally visited the local Catholic church for *consuelo*. The church was a safe place. Here I prayed for strength to not give up. Here I could kneel and pray and cry—without being judged by others.

On campus, I have gained strength from other people. If it were not for my mentor, the programs in which I participate, the community projects and student organization in which I'm involved, and the constant *apoyo* given to me by my mother and my father, I would not be where I am. Despite the obstacles, I have met people in college who have given me opportunities, have not given up on me, and have offered me tremendous support and patience. I seek *consejos* from those who have been there and done that. *La Profe*, my mentor, Dr. Mariela Nuñez-Janes, and Dr. Roberto Calderon have given me so many *consejos* for navigating academia these past few semesters—sharing their experiences and their educational trajectories with me. They've told me similar stories of learning to succeed in the system and coping with different attitudes and hostilities. Dr. Calderon has shared his similar undergraduate experiences of balancing time and energy spent on schoolwork, student organizations, and community work. Dr. Nuñez-Janes has helped me by teaching me to navigate through processes concerning my research, scholarships and funding, and course work. Her *feminista* perspective has attracted me to her teaching style and mentorship. Most importantly, both of these professors have not disregarded my experiences as a Latina student but, rather, see my concerns of academia as reasonable and significant.

My mentors have empowered me and given me confidence when I wanted to give up. When I participated in the National Science Foundation Summer Program in sociocultural anthropology at UNT, I wanted to quit on the second day. I was the youngest person in the program with the least amount of experience with anthropology and research, and it was my first summer away from family. On the first day of class, the instructors gave us seven books and two four-inch binders full of readings to be completed in five weeks. The first assignment was to write an abstract for our reading that night. I didn't even know what an abstract was, and I didn't comprehend even half of what I was reading. We were in class Monday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., and we were expected to conduct research during our free time. The program was intense. Over the first couple of weeks, I wondered if the coordinators of the program had made a mistake when they chose me. I wanted to give up because I doubted my potential. But I didn't give up because I knew that if I couldn't get through this program, I wouldn't get through graduate school. I stayed in the program, even though I was frustrated about not understanding things like other students. The coordinators of the program held meetings

with me on a regular basis and guided me when I was lost. I also met my mentor during that summer. My mentor and the program coordinators—three women of color—did not give up on me. They expected me to finish and to finish well. They believed in me—even when I didn’t—and they set high expectations. They stuck around and devoted time to see me grow.

Inspired by the words of Patricia Hill Collins (1991) and Sofia Villenas (2006), I’m assimilating enough to survive in academia but not participating in the oppression of my own people. Though I’ve been used as a cultural broker, blamed for my lack of adjustment, and questioned for my insider perspective, I have learned to overcome and withstand these circumstances. In the future, I hope to conduct research that will influence policy makers and bring awareness to the experiences of Latino/as inside and outside academia. In addition, I hope that one day I can offer my *consejos* and mentorship to young Latino/as.

Note

1. Carlos Velez-Ibañez and James B. Greenberg (1992) talk about something similar referring to the “funds of knowledge” that students from Mexican households have and bring to school from their homes and families.

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Primeramente les quisiera agradecer a mi mama y a mi papa por todo el amor y el apoyo que siempre me han ofrecido. Tambien a las mujeres en mi vida, especialmente mi abuelita, les quisiera agradecer por darme el buen ejemplo y por ser mujeres trabajadoras y luchadoras. Mil gracias to Dr. Mariela Nuñez-Janes for giving so much of her time and for caring about her students, for empowering me through her teachings and mentorship, and for helping me achieve more than I ever imagined. Additionally, I would like to thank the

Ronald E. McNair Research Scholars Program at UNT for providing the necessary funding to conduct research, and Dr. Diana Elrod and Twila Farrar for their guidance, support, and mentorship. Also, my gratitude goes to Danyel Rios and Shima Dessouky for teaching me so much during the NSF summer program. Thanks to Dr. Roberto Calderon for inspiring me through his lectures and for sharing his consejos with me. Additionally, I would like to sincerely thank the *Harvard Educational Review* editors, Kristy Cooper, Candice Bocala, and the anonymous editors for their invaluable feedback on previous drafts. Lastly, I extend my appreciation to Dr. Mariela Nuñez-Janes and UNT McNair Scholar Rebekah Samaniego Kopsky for their help on previous drafts and for encouraging me.

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