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Chronicles from the Diaspora: A Memoir

Wilfrido Cruz¹

Chronicles from the Diaspora: A Memoir is a personal reflection on the author's seven years of college education; a journey from a "low-achieving" high school student to a promising college graduate. It highlights the continual struggle to transcend socioeconomic, political, and cultural borders, while at the same time, longing for a return to his past. This narrative captures a glimpse into the life of a Mexicano student striving to find a place in communities seemingly oblivious to his Mexicano experience. His thoughts are the product of the Diaspora, written in isolation and despair.

Introduction

The college experience can be delightful to some and burdensome to others. In my case, the college experience has been a constant struggle to adapt and survive in academic environments, while at the same time, longing for a return to my past; to the community I once called home. For the past seven years of my undergraduate and graduate education, I have fought to transcend socioeconomic, political, academic, and cultural borders. I have lived in multiple worlds, but belonged to none. My college experience has been a constant attempt to adjust.

This personal narrative chronicles glimpses of a journey that began with my initial encounter with the world of academia. I write from the heart and speak from the working class experience of a *Mexicano*. My voice is a tribute to those who began their academic journeys but stayed behind. They have not been forgotten. I refuse to leave them behind.

In this essay, I refer to the Diaspora as an experience best described as the existence between multiple cultures. In this case, I am describing the dissonance between the elitist culture of academia and my own working class background shaped by my Mexican heritage. I write from the lens of someone in cultural exile. I use the words of Bishop John Shelby Spong (1998) to best illustrate this experience:

Exile is never a voluntary experience. It is always something forced upon a person or a people by things or circumstances over which the affected ones have no control...Exile is an enforced dislocation into which one enters without any verifiable hope of either a return to the past or an arrival at some future desired place (p. 23).

Community College

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye...One day I will go away...Friends and neighbors will say, What ever happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away?...They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out.
-Sandra Cisneros, *House on Mango Street* (1994).

I am a product of the community college system. I ended up at MiraCosta Community College (located in Southern California) merely by chance. I graduated from high school without having applied to a single four-year institution, not even community colleges nearby. I knew I wanted to go to college but lacked the knowledge to do so. I was the first one in my family to graduate from high school and soon to be the first one to make it beyond.

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High school was an assimilating experience. I was told where to sit, when to speak, and how to speak. I learned to obey; I became passive. Teachers taught me who I was, or rather, who I should be. I was forced to adapt a false identity, while rejecting my own. In the classroom, constant references were made to *lazy* and *greedy* Mexicans who were tearing the country apart. I internalized those sentiments, hating, detesting my own culture. I became lazy, dependent on my teachers, doing only what I was told to do, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Those teachers rarely saw me as college material, and a counselor had several times discouraged me from applying. I guess I was not meant to go to college; college was perhaps meant for someone else.

I spent most of my summer after graduation looking for jobs at fast-food restaurants, movie theaters, a nearby swap-meet, and even department stores. Most of the money I earned came from helping a friend of the family do landscaping work. One day in late August, I came home and found a letter from a community college counselor. Her name was Yolanda. She congratulated me on completing high school and urged me to consider further education.

I met with Yolanda less than a week prior to the start of the fall semester. She told me about the Puente Program and the endless benefits of a college education. I began to dream. Even the thought of being a college student made me feel proud - A college student. There was still hope for me; there was still a chance of beating the odds.

I enrolled at MiraCosta College as a Puente student. I was one of twenty high school students chosen to participate in the program for the 1994-1995 academic year. The Puente Project is a statewide effort at the community college level, initiated by the University of California, to provide low-achieving students with the opportunity to obtain a college education. As a cohort, we, young and visionary Puentistas, took an English and College Skills course each semester, both taught by Puente staff. Yolanda was the only Puente counselor at MiraCosta College who taught our College Skills course. In addition, Yolanda provided us guidance and assistance in developing academic plans for the next two to three years. She was my role model, possessing all the qualities I admired in a person. She was friendly, intelligent, patient, knowledgeable, assertive, and understanding. She became a mentor. Her goal was to get as many of us as possible to transfer to four-year institutions. A few of us applied, a handful of us transferred, some stayed behind.

I became politicized in community college. I joined the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (M.E.Ch.A.), a Chicano student organization, product of the Civil Rights Movement, committed to the socioeconomic, political, and academic betterment of Latinos in the United States. I re-learned what I had once learned in high school. *Sí se puede* became my motto; yes, it could be done. We, *Mexicanos*, I began to realize, were also capable of achieving success. I was exposed to Latino figures, people who had similar struggles to the ones I had gone through up to that point in my life, the working class experience. I learned about Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union. Having learned about the mistreatments of migrant farm workers in the tomato and strawberry fields, I committed myself to boycotting those products; my father had been exploited in those fields. I protested against California's Proposition 187, which, if enacted, would have denied undocumented residents of the state access to healthcare and education. I joined fellow student activists from California State University at San Marcos in protesting the naming of Craven Hall, named after Senator William Craven despite his public racist remarks against *Mexicanos*. Senator Craven was convinced that *Mexicanos* were at the lowest scale of humanity, hence suited for agricultural work. Sometimes I protested causes of which I was completely unfamiliar. But that did not matter, for I was in support of the cause, whatever that might be. I was there, on the picket line, shouting, clapping, jumping, pushing, never retreating, always advancing.

The community college experience taught me about myself by teaching me about others. In reading Sandra Cisneros' (1994) *House on Mango Street* and Richard Rodriguez's (1981) autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*, I became aware of the challenges of education for those of us whose cultures are in direct conflict with those of the academy, or rather, those of mainstream society. I learned that education changes individuals, some for the better and some for the worse. For many Latinos, education is a painful process, capable of inflicting permanent damage. Education has the potential, more often than not, of detaching us from our cultures and forcing us to adapt into a different one. The educational process attempts to obliterate our past in the name of a better future. A rather interesting phenomenon occurs: we are detached from our cultures - our pasts - but yet never accepted in the new, dominant one. We find ourselves in cultural limbo, without a real sense of belonging. Cultural exile becomes our reality, hoping to some day find acceptance. We exist in more than one culture, facing multiple and opposing messages (Anzaldúa, 1987). Such was the case with Cisneros and Rodriguez, but only Cisneros successfully reconciled her past with her present. She was able to live and transcend cultural and academic borders. She was a border-crosser. She left her *barrio* in order to come back. Her Mexican culture and identity were immune to the academy. She remained Chicana, while Rodriguez asserted his identity in a different

way. He became the "uncertain scholar...bright enough to have moved from his past, yet unable to feel easy, a part of the community of academics" (Rodriguez, 1981, p. 69).

Three years of my undergraduate education were spent at the community college. Those are perhaps the most memorable years of my college experience. Community college and the Puente Program were the stepping stones for my later success. College administrators, faculty, and staff were my support group, committed to my success in higher education. I will always be thankful to them. My success has been theirs as well.

I had many close friends at the community college, most of them young and visionary Mexicanos such as myself, who looked up to me without knowing that they were people I had come to admire in return. Many of them, I am told, have settled down and started their own families. A handful of us have completed undergraduate education and even fewer are completing or have completed graduate school. While many of us have left MiraCosta, some of us have proceeded to leave our *barrios* behind in search of new and better endeavors, promising, anticipating a return home.

The four-year experience

I am visible - see this Indian face - yet I am invisible. I both blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They'd like to think I have melted in the pot. But I haven't, we haven't.

-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza* (1987).

I left for college on a Friday evening. The sun had begun its decent across the Pacific. I was expecting a long, tiring eight-hour drive to Santa Cruz from San Diego, California. My mom, my eight-year old brother Tito, and my future roommate and former community college friend, Rojas, were riding together. The borrowed pick-up truck we were driving was old and on the verge of breaking down. The heating system and fuel gauge indicator were malfunctioning, and the stereo had been stolen a few months before. Nonetheless, we took our chances.

On the back of the pick-up truck we had secured my motorcycle, Roja's television and extensive music collection, and our numerous boxes full of clothes, books, shoes, and magazines. I had also packed my 386 computer, probably a few years older than the college professor who had given it to me, and almost as big as Roja's 30-inch television. Immediately behind our seat, in the storage area of the pick-up truck, my mom had used several blankets and pillows to make out of that tight space an improvised bed for my brother. Poor brother of mine, he must have been suffering. On the front seat of the truck the three of us struggled to share the tight space; I, at the wheel, was perhaps the one with the most. Next to me sat my mom, and to her right sat Rojas, squeezing as close to the door as possible so that I could shift gears.

We made our first stop in Los Angeles--less than two hours into our trip--in an attempt to somehow seal the rear window that had been broken when the stereo was stolen a few months ago. The cool Southern California summer breeze was torturing us, and I knew it would get colder driving through the San Bernardino Mountains. At a gas station, we bought heavy-duty masking tape and a box of trash bags, and with them, my mom, Rojas, and I managed to seal the broken window.

We encountered rain as we drove through the mountains, causing our quick window fix to peel. I kept driving nonetheless, occasionally throwing an arm behind the seat to make sure my brother's temporary bed was not being swamped. My mom was sound asleep, resting her head on my shoulder, and using both arms to prevent as much heat from escaping her body by keeping them tightly crossed across her chest, while Rojas kept crouching into a ball in order to keep himself warm with the light jacket he was wearing.

I never thought Southern California could get that cold. An occasional car would pass by and disappear into the night. I envied them, for they seemed to comfortably cruise through the cold night, while my mom, my brother, Rojas, and I fought against the unbearable cold. I had to do something about this situation.

I pulled onto the shoulder of the highway and quickly looked through some of the boxes to see if I could find a blanket that could be used to keep us warm. The first thing I came across was an old bed sheet Rojas had used to keep his TV from getting scratched. Priorities, it is all about priorities, I said to myself (and I had not yet been exposed to Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs). I spread the bed sheet across the seat, covering Rojas and my mom, but also leaving some for myself. It certainly did alleviate some of the cold bitterness.

By dawn, we were a little over halfway into our trip. I had exited Interstate 5 and began heading westward towards Highway 101 on a deserted, one-lane highway that was approximately sixty miles long. To even think of driving sixty miles on such a highway felt painfully eternal. Mountains and empty landscapes surrounded us. Rojas, my mom, and my brother Tito were sound asleep, and only their snores kept me company. I tried to stay awake, but it became more difficult by the minute. I imagined native tribes occupying these now deserted lands before being displaced by selfish colonizers. The truck began to stall, as if trying to keep me awake. I could not help panicking. I kept telling myself that the stalling was nothing but a product of my wild imagination. The truck suddenly stopped running, leaving us stranded in no-man's land. I was too tired to try and find out what the problem was. Instead, I pulled some of the blanket away from Rojas and comfortably joined the rest in their sleep.

The noises from eighteen-wheelers passing by woke us up within a few hours. I asked Rojas to come with me to check the truck; we had run out of gas. I grabbed an empty gas container, and together with Rojas, began walking eastward, where I thought I had seen a gas station earlier. After walking and jogging for about a mile, an exit sign became visible in the dense fog. We ran faster. A gas station became noticeable. Our hearts pounded, our legs moved. After filling our container with two gallons of gasoline, Rojas and I raced back to the truck and got it running once again. I drove it back to the gas station, loaded gas, and once again we continued our journey north. The academy awaited. The four-year experience had begun; outrageously unique and unforgettable.

Successfully transferring to the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) was a major accomplishment. I had made it out of the community college system and could now, according to many, legitimately consider myself a "college student". With this privilege however, came new challenges; socioeconomics being one of them. A campus, such as UCSC, where the average annual family income reached six-digit figures, created a challenging environment for those of us who came from working-class families, with annual incomes at or below the national poverty line. Nonetheless, we had to cope. We were college students, sacrifices had to be made. An example of sacrifices made was my homegirl who transferred from a community college in East Los Angeles, a predominately Mexican community filled with violence and poverty. Every time she needed to go home, she would hop on a Greyhound bus and ride it for ten hours each way. She could not afford to fly home. This was her sacrifice. She was my *homegirl*.

My four-year experience was brief. I spent my entire two years at UCSC reminiscing about my years at the community college, while at the same time, attempting to incorporate into my new predominately white, academic, and elitist environment. It was a difficult transition. Unlike the community college, my interactions with others at UCSC seemed (and felt) superficial. Only years after I left UCSC did I begin to realize that I had spent two years proving myself to my fellow young and aspiring white scholars how well I could become a clone of them (hooks, 1994). I was beginning to assimilate into the mainstream, and only my brown skin alluded to a culture I once felt proud of. I was cloning myself.

From the Southwest to the Northeast: Graduate School in the Green Mountains

Most people are unable to understand us nor should we expect them to: they have their own terrors and, even if they wanted to, cannot really fathom ours, much less share them.
-Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls: A Memoir* (1993).

I had no idea whether The University of Vermont (UVM) was located in the state of Massachusetts, Maine, or New York. I heard about UVM (and the state) through a HESA alumnae who was my supervisor at UC Santa Cruz. She believed I had something to offer UVM, and likewise, UVM had something to offer me. I was encouraged to look into the Higher Education Program, and to seriously consider attending. She told me great things about the program, the school, Burlington, and the state of Vermont. She warned me, however, that Vermont was not as diverse as California, but nonetheless, she promised I would find a support network within my graduate program and the University.

Several months after applying to UVM, I was invited to visit the campus to interview with faculty members and prospective supervisors. The April weather was appealing. Back home people had been warning me of the extremities of

the weather in the Northeast. They were wrong, at least that is what I concluded after spending a few days in Burlington in early April. Thirty-five degrees did not seem bad at all. The thought of living in this kind of weather excited me. I was tired of sunny California and was ready for a change. People would not live here, I kept telling myself, if the weather was as bitter cold as Californians made it sound. I was living in a world of illusion; little did I know about Northeast winters. But that did not matter, not during my initial visit to Vermont. After just a few days of visiting, I went home convinced Burlington was a place I could call home for the next two years. As my plane that would take me back to California began gaining altitude that cold spring, I kept my eyes fixed on the disappearing city down below, telling myself I was leaving in order to come back.

My summer in San Diego ended too fast. In trying to reconnect with old community college friends, weekend parties, an occasional trip down to Mexico, and countless other time-consuming activities, I failed to realize graduate school was to begin in a few weeks. The price of airline tickets had skyrocketed, the lowest one being priced slightly above one thousand dollars. There was no way I could afford to fly to Vermont. I kept procrastinating, expecting to miraculously find a ticket for a few hundred dollars. Miracles do happen after all, I just needed to be patient.

Days went by and my bags remained unpacked, collecting dust by the minute, sitting in the living room of my family's one-bedroom apartment. I was beginning to realize the fact that airline tickets were beyond my budget was becoming an excuse for me not to go to school three thousand miles away from home. What once had been a beautiful and romantic dream about Vermont had mysteriously turned into a nightmare. Leaving my family as I had done when I left for UC Santa Cruz was becoming a painful thought, even more so than the thought of being one of few Latinos attending UVM. My family needed me, and I needed them as well.

On August 12, 2000, after one last conversation with my mother, I decided to pack my belongings, a few pictures, several music tapes, my sleeping bag and head for the Green Mountains via the Greyhound bus. Taking the bus from coast to coast would not only make it feasible for me to leave for Vermont, but would also ease me into the idea of once again being alone. At the deserted Greyhound station, I hugged my brother with one arm and my mother with the other, and there, in solitude, the three of us cried together one last time. The bus driver made a final boarding call, and a knot in my throat made it difficult to say good-bye. In silence, I slowly made my way into the empty bus. Tears kept rolling down my face. I did not look back; I was too cowardly to do so. My bus began pulling away, tearing my heart with its departure. I imagined myself stopping it, getting my belongings out, and heading back home with my family. But I could not do it; I was at a point of no return. My brother threw his arms around my mom's waist and continued crying disconsolately; poor brother of mine, always suffering. My mom stood strong, witnessing the Greyhound bus take her oldest child away, to a far and unknown place. She cried in silence, her eyes fixed on the departing bus. I was leaving. In the darkness of the bus, secluded in my own misery, I wept as the two silhouettes of my loved ones slowly vanished in the distance of that August night. I was leaving them once again. I promised myself that I would come back.

The trip lasted four days and three nights. I cried most of those nights and slept through the day. In Louisiana, I broke into tears immediately after departing from a bus station. I still do not know why it happened, it just did. I tried desperately calming myself down, but the harder I tried, the harder I ended up crying. A thunderstorm was approaching. Lightning illuminated the otherwise darkened skies. A middle-aged, heavy-set African-American woman sitting next to me asked me if I was alright. I told her not to worry about it, avoiding the slightest eye contact. Tears rolled down my cheeks. The woman handed me a paper towel; no words were exchanged. She empathized with my pain. Outside, the skies expressed solidarity, down pouring sweet tears. There was intense sorrow deep inside me. The reasons were unknown. I kept crying. Eventually I fell asleep, the rocking motion of the bus cuddling me as we made our way eastward.

In New York City, my bus was delayed for a few hours, which in turn, made me miss my connection in Boston. I arrived in Boston at around midnight. I had not taken a shower for the past three days and my body was beginning to exert strange odors. I smelled funny. It was a combination of sweat, cologne, dirty clothes, smelly seats, and air freshener from different buses. In the men's restroom I waited for the perfect moment to take a quick "shower" using one of the sinks. As soon as the restroom became deserted, I quickly undressed myself and began splattering water over my body. What a great feeling! My enjoyment, however, was short-lived. A bus driver who had to urinate abruptly interrupted my shower. And there I stood, with my underwear soaking wet, dripping - a puddle at my feet. The bus driver seemed confused. He headed for the urinal and began urinating. I avoided eye contact. He kept looking back, pausing his process as he tried to make sense of what was happening. That was a Kodak moment. He rushed out as soon as he was done, forgetting to even wash his hands, but not without pausing one last time to make sure he was not imagining things. Hey, I thought to

myself, people must do whatever they have to do in order to survive. I am sure Maslow would have done the same. I was doing just that, taking care of business. I was *roughing* it.

I began to dress as fast as possible, fearing the bus driver would notify the security guard outside who would throw me out of the terminal--immediately--wearing nothing more than wet underwear. Within a minute or so, the driver came back, this time making his entrance into the men's room much more slowly and dramatically. I was certain I was in trouble. I could only expect the worst. In one of his hands, I noticed, was a roll of heavy-duty cleaning towels which he handed to me. Not many words were exchanged. "Here," he said with a soft smile on his still puzzled face and walked away. This time he did not look back. Such an unexpected, and perhaps unintended act of kindness welcomed me to New England.

I ended up sleeping on one of the benches in the terminal that night. I did not care much anymore, for I felt refreshed. The following morning I boarded the first bus to Burlington. A white, middle-aged lady with an incredibly large and pointed nose chose to sit next to me. C'mon lady, I thought to myself, the bus is half empty!...I'm tired, I'm hungry, I'm annoyed, my blood is clogging at my feet...I WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE!

Her first question was to find out where I was from. "Mexico," I said, "by way of San Diego." That was a big mistake. I regretted it the minute it came out of my mouth. She began telling me of how much she adored my country and of her many visits there with friends. I only listened and agreed, hoping she would soon be quiet. She kept talking. I kept listening. Eventually, I began to participate in the conversation. I asked her about Burlington, and she told me great things about the town. She told me about Montreal as well, and encouraged me to go there. She made sure to warn me to always carry extra documentation if I ever chose to cross the US-Canadian border.

"I've never had a problem crossing the US-Mexico border before," I said. "Well," she replied, pausing at the same time, "Immigration will definitely ask you for documentation on this border." She paused again. I remained silent, attentive. "You look more...ethnic than most," she continued, struggling to carry the conversation. I said nothing, only listened, allowing the conversation to drift away. I was going to be different. I would stand out.

I finally arrived in Burlington on a sunny August afternoon. There was a lot of activity at the bus station. I felt awkward having finally arrived; I had gotten used to my mobile home. Thinking this place would be my home for the next couple of years sent chills down my spine. Burlington was nothing like San Diego. Was there any diversity in this place? A white couple sat next to me speaking French, but I did not find it appealing. There I sat, lost in my own thoughts and frustrations, absorbed in my uncertainty. I had no apartment; I was short on cash; I felt lonely. I was scared and confused. My Graduate Advisor (GA), who was a HESA student at the time, was on his way to pick me up, and I was still trying to figure out how to let him know I was homeless. But I was in Burlington, nonetheless. It was familiar territory.

I was able to stay with my GA for two weeks, but I had still not been successful in finding an apartment. Not wanting to be a burden to him, I tried asking fellow classmates for hospitality for a day or so. My plan consisted of spending a few days bouncing from one place to another until I eventually found an apartment. What a tragic miscalculation. Those expected few days without an apartment became another few weeks. Not wanting to bother those around me, fearing a possible rejection, I ended up spending some nights out on the streets - along the shores of Lake Champlain - anticipating the sunrise, fighting the cool September breeze as I once had done on my way to Santa Cruz, California years before.

My initial experience coming to The University of Vermont made me bitter. I was confused and felt somewhat out of place. I trusted no one but myself. I expected nothing from anyone. I became detached from classmates and other students. My first-year experience was terrible, despite my constant effort to make it as positive and productive as I possibly could. Nothing seemed to work. But somehow, and very effectively, I managed to fake a convincing smile to those around me.

I missed my family a lot during those initial few months in Vermont. The pain and sorrow I felt as a result of missing them was overwhelming. Sometimes I tried easing my pain and suffering by taking a walk downtown, landing at a nightclub. There, I would sit listening to hip-hop, rap, and house music, Burlington style, of course, entertaining myself

watching people dance. Often I would carry on a conversation with other bystanders, sometimes men, other times women, which helped me forget about the reality I was facing three- thousand miles away from home.

That seemed to work. I always looked forward to the following week when I would make another visit to the local nightclub. And one week at a time, I finished my first semester, and eventually completed my first year of graduate school.

In Retrospect:
Lessons from the Diaspora

I look at myself
and see part of me
who rejects my father and my mother
and dissolves into the melting pot
to disappear in shame.
I sometimes
sell my brother out
and reclaim him
for my own when society gives me
token leadership
in society's own name.
-Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales,
I am Joaquín, 1967.

"What would I have missed had I not chosen UVM?" This is a question Tim Wilson, HESA'97, grappled with years before I came. One of the reasons I chose UVM was precisely because of Wilson's (1998) compelling article, published in *The Vermont Connection*. Tim's words seemed reassuring during a time of confusion. *What would I have missed had I not chosen UVM?*

For one thing, I would gladly not have spent those countless nights in the privacy of my room crying uncontrollably. Had I not chosen UVM, I probably would not have felt the need to take my anger and frustration out by putting on my running gear and running non-stop, with no particular direction, beyond my body's threshold, hoping to land unconscious somewhere out in the woods. Had I not chosen UVM, I probably would not have experienced the constant discomfort and humiliation of walking around with empty pockets. But I chose UVM, and to a certain extent, I also chose to take on these experiences.

"As a Chicano in the East," a former counselor at UC Santa Cruz would tell me time and again, "I realized I was bilingual, bi-cultural, and by myself." Those words constantly resonated with me throughout my first year at UVM. A statement that once seemed hilarious, mysteriously began making sense. I was in the Diaspora, detached from the comforts of my *barrio*, culture, language, music, and food. I was truly alone for the very first time. But such a Diasporic experience provided me with a unique and valuable lesson, one that taught me to be critical of others by becoming critical of myself. Who was I?

How far had I come? Where was my path taking me? How much had my education detached me from my past? Those were some of the questions I grappled with as a graduate student in the Green Mountain state. I was learning about myself in relation to others; I was beginning to reincorporate myself into my culture, the one my education attempted to uproot.

Living in cultural exile - in a culture seemingly oblivious to my *Mexicano* experience - allowed me to pause my fast-paced journey through life and become critical of its direction. The academy was slowly but steadily pulling me away from my culture, my family, and my friends. I was becoming a scholar, anxiously anticipating the rewards of my success. I was beginning to detach myself from my past. Only in the Diaspora did I become reunited with what I was fast and unconsciously losing: my own self, my culture, my identity. How ironic, I became reunited with my culture in a place where *Mexicanos* make up less than one percent of the total population! Like Tim Wilson, I began to realize, had I not chosen UVM, I probably would have missed a valuable lesson, one that comes as a result of being detached from one's

own comfort zone. I had left my *barrio* and walked away from my culture years before, promising to come back. Had I not chosen UVM, I probably would have continued my journey through life without ever looking back to my memorable past.

After completing my first year at The University of Vermont, I went back to visit my family in Southern California. It was a wonderful experience. Never before had I enjoyed and appreciated sitting down with my family without necessarily thinking about other "fun" things to do. Never before had I allowed my "uneducated" mother to express her love and affection with such sincerity and compassion. Never before had I learned to express my love and affection to those two individuals who a year before had cried incessantly as my bus took off to a far and unknown place. Had I not chosen UVM, I would have missed the opportunity to reunite with my loved ones.

During those summer days at home, I was able to reconnect with former community college students: great and visionary leaders of their times. It saddened me deeply to find out that many of them had chosen to drop out of the community college system in dead-end jobs. A few of them were still taking courses here and there, off and on. What ever happened to their dreams of achieving educational success? What were the reasons that forced them to cut short those dreams? Had I not chosen UVM, I probably would have never found the courage to face the reality of my Latino brothers and sisters who failed in their academic endeavors while I bathed myself in success. Had I not ended in the Diaspora, I probably would have never been so compelled to give back to the community that has given me so much and expected nothing in return. Yes, indeed, had I not chosen UVM, I would have walked away from the *barrio* without ever feeling the need to return.

People say that only in times of adversity is it possible for the human body to find itself; for the body and soul to reunite. I could not agree more with this statement. The Diaspora does indeed work in mysterious ways. In pain, I was able to find joy; in confusion, I was able to find understanding; in solitude, I found friendship. It would not be fair for me to say that my experience at The University of Vermont was nothing but miserable. I was surrounded by caring and loving people, both within and outside of my program, committed to my success as a graduate student. Through them I found the strength to voice my reality, which had been suppressed for too long. *Gracias*.

I am beginning to realize I was living in two realities while at UVM, both being experienced simultaneously. I longed for a distant home, yet failed to acknowledge my newly found one. I craved for a past, yet lived in the present. I lived in two realities disguised as one, the pleasant one always being overshadowed by the unpleasant. Two realities, molding, shaping, and giving meaning to my life.

Throughout my seven years of higher education, I have witnessed and experienced the cultural price Latinos must pay in exchange for a college education. Some become lost in the process, absorbed in the rhetoric of mainstream society - assimilating. Others use the academy as a means to reaffirm cultural values. There is no middle ground for us; we either assimilate or retaliate (hooks, 1994). Either decision has its consequences, neither of which guarantees full acceptance into mainstream society. Some institutions respect individual students, allowing them to develop their own identities. Others, blatantly or not, continue churning out the model American citizen. In my case, UVM was the former. It did not attempt to shape me, but instead, provided me with the tools that would allow me to shape myself. UVM afforded me the opportunity to reaffirm my cultural values and identity. For that, I will always be grateful to The University of Vermont and my graduate program as well.

Living in cultural exile has challenged me emotionally but strengthened me psychologically. It has been a humbling experience, one that has been intellectually rewarding. But would I do it again? If given the opportunity, would I willingly and consciously put myself through the same experiences? My reply can only be affirmative. I would do it time and again. Only in the Diaspora was it possible for me to build meaningful and long-lasting relationships; only in times of emotional adversity was I able to find peace; only in isolation did I find the strength to reconcile disparate worlds: my working class background and my new found academic identity. I have found my way home. I have begun my journey of melding my past with my present. A Mexicano in the Diaspora. Bilingual. Bi-cultural. By myself...

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