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Unity in Isolation: Reconciling Histories, Accentuating Difference

Wilfrido Cruz
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The experiences of a Chicano, Mexicana, and Mexicano interconnect in Burlington, Vermont. Who would have thought? Each of the authors' possesses a unique life experience that is rarely mirrored in everyday life at The University of Vermont. Through their narrative, each author expresses the complexity of their graduate experience from the three different perspectives: 1) a Chicano born in the United States; 2) a Mexicana who moved to the United States as a child; 3) a Mexicano who came to the United States as a teenager. Each author identifies strongly with their Mexican heritage yet arrived at it in different ways. Their histories are the same, only their experiences differ. This piece highlights their cultural and academic journey and how it translated into their interactions between one another in a predominately white environment.

I am me in my private world;
But "other" in my public world
I know what to talk about;
and how to talk
I know the issues; and how to frame them
I know paradigms and theories and
frameworks
but where does my reality fit in?

I am halfway.
I am an academic.
I am Latina.
They are comfortable with one half
and that lets them ignore the other.
-K. P. Gonzalez, et al.

A friend and former graduate of the Higher Education and Student Affairs program at The University of Vermont (UVM) shared the following, "The cohort environment is great, but it is going to be white" (personal communication, April 1999). The predominately white environment at UVM presents complex challenges for students of color. The label "students of color" indicates a common experience. What is lacking is an acknowledgment of the many cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences that make up "students of color."

Tonantzin Ocegüera, Wilfrido Cruz, and Jacob Diaz possess similar cultural heritage, yet profoundly distinct life journeys. We are three: a *Mexicana*, *Mexicano* and a *Chicano* connected by heritage, yet we are diverse in our perspectives. As students in the Higher Education and Student Affairs master's program at The University of Vermont, we utilize our personal narratives as a way to describe how the diversity in our experience served as a catalyst in helping us form supportive connections with one another. What follows are vignettes that we hope capture the diversity in our similarity as well as acknowledge the trust and respect we shared that aided us in coping, managing, and maintaining our sense of identity throughout our graduate experience. This essay chronicles the unity in our differences through the expression of our personal voices.

Wilfrido Cruz is currently a second-year HESA student serving as the graduate assistant in the Center for Cultural Pluralism. Jacob Diaz is currently enrolled in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at The University of Vermont, and a 2001 graduate of the HESA program. Tonantzin Ocegüera is a 2001 graduate of the HESA program where she served as a graduate assistant in the Office of Admissions. Tonantzin is currently working at Chapman University as the Associate Director of Student Activities and Organizations.

Personal Introductions

Tonantzin Ocegüera - Born and raised in Mexico City. Identifies as *Mexicana* but struggles with this limitation and often questions what is authentic. Instead, Tonantzin considers herself someone who fights social injustices in her place of work and community.

Jacob L. Diaz - Born in Anchorage, Alaska and raised in San Diego, California. His parents are third-generation Mexican-Americans born in the United States. He chooses to identify as a *Chicano*, which he feels supports the complexity of his ethnic identity and the struggle of living amidst two cultures, one Mexican and one American, yet not fully accepted by either.

Wilfrido Cruz - Born in Guerrero, Mexico. He identifies as a *Mexicano* displaced by socio-political circumstances. He struggles finding cultural capital in a society that deems his existence as substandard in relation to dominant culture.

Isolation (Tonantzin's perspective)

There are moments in my life when I feel as though a part of me is missing. There are days when I feel so invisible that I can't remember what day of the week it is, when I feel so manipulated that I can't remember my own name, when I feel so lost and angry that I can't speak a civil word to those that love me best. These are the times when I catch sight of my reflection in store windows and am surprised to see a whole person looking back...I have to close my eyes at such times and remember myself, draw an internal pattern that is smooth and whole.

-Patricia Williams

"*Hola Mami*"

"Hi *Mija*. What's up? How are you doing?" Oh, how great it was to hear a familiar voice.

"Ma, you think you can send me some *frijoles*, *tamarindos*, and *tortillas*?"

"Don't they have some over there?"

"No Ma, they only have flour *tortillas* and they probably don't know what the other things are".

"*Hay Mija...*" There was that deep, sad sigh again.

"Mama, I'm one of three *Mexicanos* here and one of six *Latinos* in the whole graduate school," I replied, with tears in my eyes and my voice cracking.

"*Mija, no te preocupes*, you'll make it and you will be home soon."

"Aha" My mind and heart were somewhere else, I ached for "home soon."

"*Mija*, I'll send you and your friends some *comida*, just give me the address... Burlington, aha, Vermont, aha, 05401 - okay *Mija*, we love you and remember, *Si Se Puede*."

Conversations with friends and family were pretty much the same: me sharing the experience of being one of very few Latinos on campus and people being perplexed. The responses I got varied from "Well, you chose to go to Vermont" to "I understand, hang in there." To say that I felt isolated is an understatement. I drifted in and out of isolation, which, at times, included feelings of loneliness, depression, burning anger, and intense love. I felt lonely because I was one of few, but mostly because there was not a larger Latino community to provide support and comfort.

I came of age in Mexico City where the culture was everywhere. When my family moved to Southern California, we lived in a neighborhood of mostly other *Mexicanos*. There were family, friends, *tienditas* where we could buy corn *tortillas*, *tamarindos*, *chile*, eat *tacos*, or *pozole*. Los Angeles had three Spanish radio stations (now there are 11) and two Spanish television channels - *gente* all around. Although diverse, Los Angeles is not immune to bigotry; hence, I decided to explore other states and go to college outside California. I went to Fort Collins, Colorado to earn my bachelor's at Colorado State University.

Living in Fort Collins was a shock to my system, for there I encountered malicious, racist people and had my first experience with the Klu Klux Klan. However, having community support offset the pain of these events.

At Colorado State there were about 300 Latino/a students. I was part of a historically Latina sorority that helped me feel like I belonged. Consequently, when I left for Burlington, Vermont to seek a master's degree, I thought it would be at least somewhat similar.

Living in Burlington turned out to be two very challenging and rewarding years of my life. What took me by surprise was the depression that seeped into my life. It is safe for me to say that I cried more in those two years than I ever had. I cried on the phone (almost nightly) to my partner who was in California; I cried to my father in Mexico; and my sorority sisters in Colorado. After a professor made a racist comment to me, I cried for an hour to my aunt. Often, after classes, when classmates made insensitive and racist comments, I would come back to my apartment and cry in frustration.

One morning, while driving to work I saw a young black child walking to a local elementary school. In my mind, I saw all the atrocities that are committed against young black males in this country, and I said a prayer; "Divine Father, give him strength to survive, guide him, and protect him." I decided to slow the car down and follow him to school to make sure he arrived safely. A few minutes later I thought, "This isn't normal, what's wrong with me?" It was as if I had lost all hope in people being compassionate, and sadness had taken the place of understanding.

One day, I became wrathfully angry. I am not sure what brought me to that point or what events triggered it, but it was something I had never experienced. Perhaps what made me angry were the many comments like, "Wow, but you don't look Mexican, you're so pretty" or "You speak very good English," and my personal favorite, "Oh good, you could cook us some authentic Mexican food." Understanding that comments like these stem from cultural ignorance, I know what I am up against. I can begin a conversation about stereotypes, challenge assumptions, and ask questions. However, I think what made me angry was the passive-aggressive covert racism from so called "liberal" classmates, colleagues, faculty, and administrators who professed to know better. In my own mind, I could not make sense of how anyone could say and preach about understanding diversity, being allies for "students of color," or support "cultural pluralism," and yet their very next comment or action would be contradictory to what they had said. Because this form of racism is more pernicious than ignorance, I did not know how to deal with it. Often times I would say something or challenge people, but at other times I was shocked and bewildered, and for "political" reasons, said nothing. For those times I said nothing, I walked around angry, ready to strike.

I think I finally understood what James Baldwin (1964) meant by *The Fire Next Time*. In his book, Baldwin writes about the fire of wrath, bitterness, and ultimately the loss of peace of mind that can consume people who are oppressed everyday. Baldwin warns that as promised (in the Christian Bible) God would not send water again to destroy humanity, instead, it would be this angry fire from within that would slowly corrode brotherhood and compassion. Baldwin cautions us of this fire not because of its danger to drive people to violence or riots, but to help "Whites and Negroes to burn the fire of love" (p. 39).

It was during this time that I read Baldwin (1964) while re-reading Freire's (1997) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that I realized and decided not to live in isolation, but instead, use love as a subversive force. I was not naïve enough to think that I could change the world overnight with this newfound energy to love, so instead I chose to concentrate on those nearest to me. I began by anchoring myself in the love that my best friends Jake, Wilfrido, and I created. We spent a lot of time (at Denny's mostly) discussing what it meant to be Mexican; issues of race, class, religion; our personal tastes; or latest songs by J.Lo and Shakira. I found my larger support (even if it was only three of us) and decided to spread that love/energy to others I had written-off.

I have found that this love/energy is more challenging to generate but it is more lasting (not to mention better for my health) and it gives me the strength to continue to work for social justice.

Hermano y Hermana - Same Culture and Different Ethnicity
(Jake's perspective)

I would like to begin this vignette with a brief history of how I came to embrace the *Chicano* identity as my own. I struggle with labeling my identity for I believe that identity is fluid, but for the purpose of this vignette I use the term *Chicano* as a label to describe my experience as an individual of Mexican heritage born in the United States.

Roughly three years before I attended The University of Vermont, I was a student at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). It was there that I came to grips with my identity as a *Chicano*. In classes and conversations with others, I learned of the historical roots of the Chicano Student Movement of the 1960's. I learned of the harsh inequalities faced by people that share a similar cultural heritage as I. It made me angry for I began to realize that this society I lived in was racist, and even if I worked hard, I would still be judged by my skin color. This awareness sparked my interest in political change and it was at this time that my political identity as a *Chicano* began to take shape.

At UCSB, I attended political rallies, protested against university administration, and worked hard to fight for equal treatment for fellow minority students. It was not until I chose to attend The University of Vermont's (UVM) Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program that I suddenly had to hold onto my ethnic identity without the comfort or support of my *Chicana/o* and Mexican brothers and sisters. At UCSB, there were roughly 3,000 *Chicanas/os*, but at UVM, I was suddenly one of three in my program. Upon reflection, I believe that conceptually I was prepared to deal with this sudden isolation, yet emotionally and psychologically I could not have understood the deep impact that the upcoming experience would have on my life. At UVM I met and became close friends with a strong *Mexicana* by the name of Tonantzin Ocegüera. I learned from her that cultural and ethnic pride comes from loving oneself. The following account shows my growth as a developing human being, but more importantly, it highlights what it was like for me to search for cultural recognition within a predominately white environment.

August 1999 - As I strolled through the doors of the Living/Learning Center at The University of Vermont to attend my first graduate class I was filled with excitement. As I walked through the doors of the classroom, I immediately scanned the room for any other people of color. I was aware of two, one of which was Tonantzin. I remember feeling some sense of comfort in knowing that I was not the only one, yet I was also aware that while we possess similar backgrounds we may assert it in drastically different ways. At that point, I decided to wait and see.

September 1999 - A few weeks had gone by and Tonantzin and I had yet to share more than a few words with each other. I began to wonder if I would be alone in this struggle. I thought that, as students of color, we were supposed to stand together as a united front. What was I doing to contribute to the situation? These are questions that I would soon have answers to.

During one of our classes, Tonantzin approached me and asked if I was planning to attend a lecture on affirmative action by Dr. Christopher Edley, a well-known lecturer and proponent of affirmative action policies. I responded with a resounding, "Yes!" We then chose a time to meet and left it at that. As the date for the lecture grew closer, I found myself wondering what this would be like. Was she testing me? What were her political perspectives? Would we get along with one another? These questions engulfed my mind as the day drew closer.

On the evening of the event, our conversation began at a superficial level. We discussed what our experience in the HESA program had been like, what new friends we had made, and for the most part, just light conversation. At one point the conversation turned towards politics and I thought, "Here's my chance to see what she is really like." I asked, "What kinds of things were you involved with as an undergrad?" She began to share her involvement with various student groups, but what caught my attention was the commonality we shared. We seemed to share a strong passion for actively engaging and tearing down oppressive environments wherever they exist. Most importantly for me, she seemed to possess a love of self that I was yearning to explore in my own journey as a human being. She modeled for me that identity is both personal and public at the same time. At UVM, we faced the challenge of balancing these two at times opposing forces in our attempt to understand these identities and exist as equals in an unequal society.

I came to know myself better through my experience in the HESA program. Tonantzin and I formed a community to call our own while at The University of Vermont. The cultural isolation at UVM spurned my desire to embrace my ethnic identity and use it as a personal place of pride and security. Thank you, Tonantzin, for I learned the importance of finding this home within myself.

United by Similarities (Wilfrido's perspective)

Toni, Jake, and I were the only three students of Mexican descent in our graduate program, and probably the only ones in the whole school. We were bound by our histories. The three of us were very different, but were forced to act the same. We spoke differently, cooked differently, approached our academics from different angles, and perceived each other from opposite, and at times, conflicting standpoints. Nonetheless, living in Vermont forced us to look, act, and behave similarly.

A key element that the three of us shared was our mutual respect for one another. Living in cultural isolation was a challenge in and of itself. We needed each other. It was not common for people around us, intentionally or not, to offend us with naive comments: "Why don't you teach me how to dance salsa?" The Mexican experience, to many, was a myopic one: abundant in misconceptions and romanticism, yet unknown and unappreciated for its cultural richness and diversity. This mentality is not limited to the North East, for even back home in California, one has to put up with scapegoating and stereotypes: "Mexicans are tearing this country apart, but don't get offended, you're not one of those kind." The difference between being stereotyped in Vermont versus California is that, in California, one has a safe place to retreat from such reality. There were not many of us in Vermont. We ache for our shelters. Consequently, coming together was our way of gaining strength in order to move forward.

It was not unusual to find ourselves engaged in intellectual discourse as we ate a meal, watched television, or simply listened to Mexican music (yes, the kind of music that does not sound anything like Salsa or Merengue or Bachata). I still vividly remember an incident that took place immediately following a student meeting. Toni, Jake, and I, along with a couple of other students, chatted for a few minutes. In talking about our futures, I alluded to Jake's obvious admittance into a doctoral program at a prestigious institution. Conversely, I playfully depicted Toni as a typical housewife, caring for her children as her husband (partner at the time) worked to provide for the family. Toni was not happy with such depiction, and even though I desperately attempted to make it clear it was only a joke, she still challenged me to acknowledge my own biases and stereotypes towards *la mujer*. For as long as I live, I will never forget her lesson. Thank you, Toni, for helping me to broaden my horizons.

During our time together in cultural isolation we found ourselves constantly growing to understand each other. Toni enlightened us with her political liberalism, Jake with his thoughtful insights, while I shared what little cultural knowledge I possessed. Our socioeconomic, religious, political, and economic experiences were amazingly different and only through respectful dialogue did we successfully acknowledge and reconcile them.

Conclusion

Many people have wondered why the three of us chose to write this article. Our identities have been influenced by socioeconomic, political, religious, and ethno-cultural experiences. It is often the case that the voices of minority students in academia are rarely included in the dominant discourse. We wrote this piece in the hopes of continuing to give voice to the experiences of *Mexicanas/os*, *Latinas/os*, and *Chicanas/os* in predominantly white institutions. Our voices and theirs are as important as those that have dominated the discourse in higher education. We hope this essay will challenge readers to engage in dialogue about the experiences of *Chicanas/os*, *Mexicanas/os* and *Latinas/os* in higher education. We do not intend our experiences to speak for all, but as a kernel, an initial spark for creating change.

This article is a testament to the support and respect we gave each other during the time we spent together in cultural isolation at The University of Vermont. It is our reminder of the countless sacrifices made along the way. This article bears witness to the unity of our complex histories. It expresses the development and contradiction of two identities: one private and the other public.

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