

SURVIVING, RESISTING, AND THRIVING [?] IN THE IVY LEAGUE

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“I could tell by your accent that you obviously haven’t quite mastered the English language yet. What part of Mexico are you from?”

These were the words that I was greeted with during my “recruitment visit” at Cornell University. *Despite* being the top graduating senior in both of the fields I doubled-majored in as an undergraduate; *despite* being admitted to some of the top (including the number-one ranked) American Politics Ph.D. programs in the nation; *despite* not only me, but also both of my parents, being born and raised in the United States; and, perhaps most ironically, *despite* speaking English better than I do Spanish, these remarks served as a stark reminder that unlike the white constitutional law professor who made them, some descendants of racialized immigrant groups continue to be viewed and treated as “perpetual foreigners”—even at the highest levels of the supposedly “enlightened” academy.

When I was invited to be on this panel, I was a bit hesitant to accept because I am a political scientist, not a lawyer. Moreover, I wasn’t too familiar with critical race theory (CRT), nor with what “story telling” meant to CRT scholars. Consequently, I did what any serious social scientist would—I Googled these terms. Through this “intensive research,” I quickly came to realize that by “story telling,” critical race theorists meant exactly that—just telling our stories. I also noticed that most of the stories I was coming across were of personal experiences about the different ways in which laws and institutions were racially and culturally bias and oppressive.

I acquired several of these same types of stories during my graduate studies. For instance, the same professor who I quoted above also asked me how I felt “the first time [I] crossed the border?” (assuming that I *must have* been going from South to North) and why I chose to “identify

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as Chicano” since it was “a derogatory term.” Another example is how during my first semester in graduate school, before ever having read anything I had written, a professor told me that I’d probably have to “work on my English” before writing my research paper. Interestingly, often when I’d submit drafts of papers to professors, they’d make it a point to tell me “how great” my English “writing skills” were. This “compliment” was always a bit confusing since English is the only language I’ve ever written in.

There were also more subtle ways in which my identity was assumed to hinder my progress. For instance, although my passion for my research interests was driven by my culture and life experiences as a Chicano from East Los Angeles, a professor once told me that they “hated to be the one to tell [me] this,” but that I just “wasn’t a good social scientist” because I allowed my personal beliefs to “get in the way of my ability to be objective.” In essence, I was told that the very things—my identity and life experiences—that I believed had brought me this far, would end up preventing me from succeeding. I have plenty of other stories like this, some more egregious than others. But because I’m guessing most of you here are still students, instead I want to focus the last few minutes of my comments on how our cultural identities and political “biases”—the same factors that often marginalize us in academia—can also help us get through it.

During my first semester at Cornell, a group of white graduate students invited me to a bar to have drinks and play *Scrabble*. I had heard of the game through television commercials, but had never actually played it. I grew up playing *Loteria*, where often times when I was tired of playing, I thought it would be funny to mess-up the game by blowing the *frijoles* off of my *primos*’ cards and, in effect, ending the game. I’d then immediately run laughing to my mother or grandma to save me from getting beaten up! Within the first 15 minutes of playing *Scrabble*, I realized how expansive my white colleagues’ vocabularies were and how limited mine was. I dealt with this by pretending to deliberately only use curse words, which everyone thought was funny. The truth was that those were the only words I could think of, since, when you grow up in the *barrio*, command of insults is vital for survival. But as the game went on, I started to feel inept and insecure because I didn’t know, and had never even heard of, many of the words my colleagues were using. Without the ability to use “Spanglish” or *Calo* (which none of them would

have understood), my linguistic repertoire was restricted in this culturally biased game.

Just then, right as my anxiety was increasing because my turn was coming up again, someone spilled a drink on the table. Fortunately, crisis can sometimes be turned into opportunity. As such, I quickly pretended as if I was reaching over to help cleanup the mess, but I intentionally let my sleeve sweep across the game board, ruining the game for everyone. Almost in unison, the other graduate students screamed, “*Watch-Out!*” Although they eventually laughed off my “negligence,” I on the other hand was relieved because I had avoided the humiliation of having to reveal the limits of my “linguistic-*máscara*.” I was relieved because I had survived by blowing the *frijoles* off of *their Loteria* card! I had survived by employing what James C. Scott would call a “hidden form of resistance.”

Although this may just seem like a funny story to you, that night I learned a valuable lesson. I learned that despite what my professor had told me, rather than hampering my success, my cultural and life experiences could actually help me survive and, as I would find out later, even thrive in my graduate studies. Two experiences during my dissertation fieldwork illustrate this. For example, prior to carrying out my research on the 2006 immigrant protests, my dissertation committee suggested that two of my case study locations (New York City and Fort Myers, FL) be “shadow cases” because of how difficult it would be to interview protest organizers in these places. They said that activists in New York were infamous for being suspicious of and closed off to academics. With regard to Fort Myers, the protest there was organized not by professional activists, but by “regular” local immigrants such as farmworkers, ethnic small business owners, domestic workers, and immigrant soccer league players. Because many of these individuals were undocumented, they were vulnerable to deportation and, thus, would probably be fearful of sharing their political organizing strategies and tactics with a stranger. Consequently, my committee believed that *at best* I’d get about a handful of interviews in each location.

In New York, my fieldwork began as my committee predicted. When I tried to arrange interviews with local movement leaders, several of them—often rudely—told me that they did not do interviews with academics because their previous experiences with scholars had resulted in the information they shared being “used against them,” or not worth

their time because the analysis produced “was of no use to the movement.” Yet despite these initial challenges, by the end of my two months of fieldwork in the city I had conducted over 40 interviews with all of the key protest organizers, including those from rival factions of the local movement. How was I able to accomplish this?

My political experience as an immigrant rights activist and the personal networks that I had developed through my previous participation in the movement helped me get access to New York immigrant protest organizers. Friends from the immigrant rights movement on the West Coast called and emailed activists they knew in New York to “vouch for me.” In fact, according to a local professor and New York immigrant politics “expert,” I later found out that although it had been over 2 years since the largest immigrant demonstrations in the city’s history had taken place, no other research had gained access to protest organizers that I had.

In Florida, it was my ethnicity and family history that allowed me to earn the trust of local rally organizers. As stated earlier, it was not professional-paid activists, but “regular immigrant residents” who organized the local Fort Myer protest. Here too, instead of interviewing the 5 people my committee predicted I would—“if I was lucky”—in only a few weeks I was able to interview close to 20 of the most important march organizers (some of who were undocumented). How was this accomplished? In Fort Myers, my ethnicity, ability to speak Spanish, and life experiences played vital roles in helping me get access to local protest organizers.

When I first contacted these individuals, I immediately: 1) Let them know that I was of Mexican descent, was raised by Mexican immigrants, and had several family members who at one point in their lives were undocumented; 2) I spoke to them in Spanish; and 3) Because agricultural work is the primary area of employment for many immigrants in Southwest Florida, I shared with them that my father and grandparents had also been migrant farmworkers. As a result, word quickly spread through local immigrant community social networks that “someone like them” wanted to write a book about their protest and about “why they deserved rights.” In fact, while conducting my fieldwork in the region, I was even interviewed by a local Spanish-language radio program in order to “show the community” that not all American university professors were white and “that even the children of Mexican farm workers could

succeed in this country.” In short, in part due to my race, ability to speak Spanish, and life experiences, I was able to gain the trust of the local community residents I needed to interview.

Given my overt political beliefs, many scholars—like the Cornell professor I mentioned at the start of my remarks—might immediately question the “objectivity” of my research. While I *do* believe that there is an important place and purpose for political propaganda, my decision to study the historic 2006 immigrant protest wave stemmed from my desire to understand, as meticulously as possible, *why* and *how* these unprecedented demonstrations occurred (so that we could attempt to repeat them) and what led to their decline (to prevent this from happening again). Because of my personal investment in, and commitment to, immigrant rights, it is of the utmost importance to both me and my fellow immigrant rights activists that my analysis be as precise as possible so that it is of practical use to us. Furthermore, unlike many other academics, I am both personally *and* politically accountable to “my research subjects,” given that long after my study was complete I continue to interact with many of them through our efforts to protect and advance the rights of the foreign-born.

As such, my research findings *must be* as reliable as possible for them to be beneficial to the movement and help further our political agenda. Thus, rather than hindering my ability to produce an “objective” and “trustworthy” study, my personal and political “biases” *demand* that my research be as accurate as can be. It would be too costly for both the movement as a whole, and for my future access to movement leaders and participants, for the results of my research to be erroneous when my findings might possibly help shape and influence our political strategies, tactics, and goals.

In sum, the title of this panel is “Negotiating Marginalized Identities in the Non-Legal Academy.” Unfortunately, although it is now 2013, the experiences and dynamics that Prof. Montoya described in her now classic essay still ring true today. Academia is still arguably as culturally and politically isolating as it was when she wrote her celebrated article. But as I’ve tried to suggest today, while our culture and our politics may marginalize us in these spaces of privilege, they can also sometimes serve as vital resources that help us navigate, survive, and sometimes even thrive in the academy.

As a result of me drawing on the cultural resources of family and community during my graduate studies, I was constantly reminded of whom I was ultimately accountable to. I have no doubt that this fact only enhanced the quality of my work. Consequently, not only was I able to get a job in my hometown, but my research also eventually went on to win the American Political Science Association's Race, Ethnicity and Politics Section's "Best Dissertation Award." Moreover, my book manuscript (based on the dissertation) is also currently under review at two prestigious university presses. I mention these achievements not to brag or pat myself on my back. Instead, I point them out to highlight how despite what "they" may tell us, sometimes the very things the academy tries to make us ashamed of and even penalizes us for, are not flaws but assets. In short, our culture, identities, and our politics are resources to be proud of and that can be utilized to help us succeed in these elite spaces. In conclusion, the last thing I'll leave you with is my response to the professor who asked me during my doctoral recruitment visit what part of Mexico I was from. I told him: "The northern part—East L.A."

Gracias.