

# Sense-Making Encounters of the Biographical Kind: Understanding and Theorizing Community-Oriented Scholarship of Puerto Rican Women in the Academy

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## RESUMEN

A través del proceso de formar una relación formal de mentoría que apoye a una nueva profesora boricua, se generan contra-narrativas de persistencia y resistencia en el toma y dame de conversaciones escritas sobre cómo navegar los requisitos institucionales para la permanencia y el ascenso. Este artículo traza la trayectoria de dos profesoras universitarias de la diáspora puertorriqueña desde su primer encuentro en julio de 2011, en un nuevo espacio de convivencia, donde se encuentran con regularidad para compartir y hacer sentido de los retos que confrontan como facultad en programas tradicionales de formación de maestros en universidades ubicadas en centros urbanos. A través del intercambio de mensajes electrónicos, las académicas escriben, leen, reflexionan y toman conciencia de las similitudes y diferencias en sus trayectorias y las fortalezas culturales únicas (biliteracidad, conocimientos de comunidades de la diáspora puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos, experiencia de enseñanza bilingüe en escuelas públicas) que les permiten transfor-

mar retos en oportunidades para cumplir con los requisitos institucionales que corresponden a todo profesor. En tiempos de pocos recursos y cargas académicas altas, se espera que las contra-narrativas de estas dos profesoras inspiren otras narrativas de esperanza que, a la vez, generen nuevas teorías de práctica (o praxis).

**Palabras clave:** contra-narrativas, diasporicans, estudios de orientación comunitaria, fondos de conocimiento

#### ABSTRACT

In the process of developing a formal mentoring relationship designed to support a Boricua scholar's entry into the academy, counterstories of persistence and endurance emerge from the give and take of written conversations over how to navigate institutional requirements for tenure and promotion. This article traces the journey of two diasporican scholars from their first encounter in July 2011, in a new *space of co-existence*, where they meet regularly to share and make sense of challenges they confront as community oriented scholars in teacher education programs, in large urban institutions. Writing, reading and reflecting on email exchanges, they gain consciousness of similar and different trajectories and unique cultural strengths (biliteracy, knowledge of U.S. diasporican communities, and bilingual teaching experience in public schools) that enable them to transform challenges into opportunities to meet institutional demands for teaching, scholarship, and service. At a time when scarce resources and increased workloads complicate the tenure-promotion process, shape scholarship, and get in the way of family responsibilities, counterstories by working class Puerto Rican women who successfully navigate the academy may motivate other narratives of hope that make theory building from practice (or praxis) possible.

**Keywords:** community-oriented scholarship, counterstories, diasporicans, funds of knowledge

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**T**his narrative focuses on an intergenerational mentoring relationship sustained through dialogic encounters in cyber-space, with occasional lengthy phone conversations. The encounters started as a result of a yearlong experiment that paired five junior scholars on tenure track with five senior scholars, all with roots in Puerto Rico, with the purpose of presenting a scholarly paper at the 2012 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Professors Carmen I. Mercado (senior scholar) and Sandra Rodríguez-

Arroyo (junior scholar) did not know each other when they agreed to participate in this project; a relationship sustained intermittently over a 4-year period. Their first encounter focused on Professor Sandra Rodríguez-Arroyo's concern: "How to respond to the multiple demands of the academy?" and on Professor Mercado's community-oriented research that sparked in her interest. Gradually, a framework for a research agenda emerged with the potential to guide the junior scholar's path to tenure and promotion. Beginning in 2012, senior and junior scholar collaborated on a manuscript for publication based on initial conversations, with the goal of advancing the writing of the junior scholar. This article represents a new effort, with the senior scholar taking the lead, describing and interpreting the experience from her perspective as first author.

Professor Mercado resides in New York, the city with the highest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. diaspora (or diasporicans<sup>1</sup>), whereas in 2011 Professor Rodríguez-Arroyo relocated to Omaha, Nebraska, an urban center with a growing concentration of Mexican immigrants. Professor Mercado retired after 40 years of service to the City University of New York (CUNY) at Hunter College, where she was the last remaining, full-time faculty of Puerto Rican origin in a department where once there were five, three retiring at the highest rank. This is an unusual accomplishment in Teacher Education Programs locally and nationally (Pimentel, 2002), and a reflection of the supportive institutional culture that Dr. Mercado encountered as a new assistant professor.

Professor Rodríguez-Arroyo was hired to teach Bilingual Education and English as a Second Language (ESL) courses in the Teacher Education Department of the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO). She feels welcomed in her new institutional home, as she becomes acquainted with her colleagues and the educational concerns of the nearby immigrant community that is predominantly of Mexican origin. Unlike Professor Mercado, Professor Rodríguez-Arroyo enters the academy with a Doctor in Education, or D.Ed., and formal preparation in teacher education in a changing sociopolitical landscape. This new era has made the hiring, tenure and promotion of full-time faculty more challenging. It explains her need for advice on how to navigate successfully the multiple and changing demands of the

1 *Diasporican* is the invention of the poet Mariposa (María Fernández), that she explains in her poem "Ode to the Diasporican: Pa'mi gente" (Virtualboricua.org).

Diasporican is increasingly being used as an inclusive term for the neocultural identity formations engendered by immigration (Allatson, 2007, p. 178).

academy, and Professor Mercado's interest in making herself available to Professor Rodríguez-Arroyo.

The present sociopolitical climate also affects the type of research that is valued and rewarded. Arguably, experimental and quasi-experimental research designs and methodologies that yield statistically significant findings, generalizable across different settings, are considered to be more rigorous than narrative research (Liston, Whitcomb & Borko, March/April 2007). Some argue that narratives, or *testimonios*, are closer to the truth because they shine a light on the lived reality of Latin@s in the academy, and give glimpses into how institutional power works. Conducting research *is* a professional responsibility, and why all five teams in the intergenerational mentorship project are asked to consider: "How Latina's funds of knowledge interact with their thinking about and acting on educational research challenges?"

This narrative strategically weaves three distinct voices—the "I" of two protagonists when they speak as individuals, and "we" when they speak in one voice. The narrative voice corresponds to the first author who assumes a dual role as participant and narrator, sharing her experiences as senior scholar and stepping outside of them to comment on or interpret an ongoing journey that changes both senior and junior scholars. The next section describes the critical incident that set these two scholars on this journey.

## The Journey Begins

Sandra Rodríguez-Arroyo never felt as welcomed as she did at the 2011 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) held in New Orleans. What made it special was joining a group of *Boricua* women scholars for brunch; sharing a meal with Úrsula Casanova, Antonia Darder, Sonia Nieto, María Torres-Guzmán, Rosalie Rolón-Dow and other Puerto Rican scholars she admired. After the annual international gathering, Sandra received an email encouraging her participation in a yearlong arrangement that would match her with a mentor. The intent was to make available additional support during her pre-tenure years, specifically focused on emerging research genres and methodologies. Sandra was assigned to work with Dr. Carmen I. Mercado, a name Sandra remembers from her days as a doctoral student. She read a research article co-authored by Dr. Mercado in a book edited by Dr. Sonia Nieto (Mercado & Moll, 2000), and she looked forward to working with her as she was initiating her academic career.

Carmen, a child of the diaspora, has memories of inequality as a public school student and as an educator in New York, the city with the largest concentration of *diasporicans* in the world. These memories motivate Carmen's pursuit of social justice, making it the dominant theme of her teaching, her service, and her scholarship. Consequently she did not hesitate when, in July of 2011, she received an invitation to pair up with a junior scholar to develop life narratives as researchers. The focus on narrative and *testimonio* fit well with Carmen's inclination to write narratives or stories about her practice in the genre of teacher research and self-study (Mercado, 1996), but this is the first time she employs *testimonio* to frame her work with Sandra.

Each pair was assigned the task of writing a 500-word summary of their individual contribution to a proposal for a 2012 AERA symposium on the "project," causing Carmen to panic knowing the demands of writing an AERA proposal with a 3-week deadline. As it turns out, this exercise was the perfect way to initiate a mentoring relationship, specifically through conversations about how to respond to a real academic task. During first phone conversations, Sandra remembers that it was easy to talk to Dr. Mercado, whom from then on became *Carmen*. Carmen wanted Sandra to feel as a colleague and a "comadre," sharing a sisterhood as Latin@ practitioner scholars. These ties forge a bond as *comadres en la lucha*, and as women with a strong sense of responsibility to their families, to their communities, and to their profession.

Through these early exchanges, Carmen and Sandra establish a relationship of trust ("confianza") as Carmen begins sharing her community-oriented research. As she suggests, community-oriented research (a) is carried out in modest-income Latino communities; (b) with participants as co-equals, sharing in decision-making; and (c) focused on high priority community concerns; (d) testing and documenting alternative responses. Sharing stories of lived experiences (or *testimonios*), Latina scholars "reflect on a praxis grounded in the community work and activist scholarship that we engage with as we negotiate the academy, as working-class women of color" (Alarcón, Cruz, Guardia-Jackson, Prieto, Rodríguez-Arroyo, 2011, p. 370). The next section discusses the importance of *testimonio* research.

## Research Background

*Testimonio* is a research genre that makes public the experience of being a working-class Latin@ scholar in an academy where Latin@

academics are underrepresented. Through “counterstories” and other methodological and pedagogical approaches, Latin@ Critical scholars expose obstacles Latinos encounter, and the human experience of inequality that also makes transparent the importance of community as a source of strength (Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 121). Although the *testimonio* genre has been criticized for not meeting conventional standards for education research established by the “academy” (Medina & Luna, 2000), since the 1980s the number of *testimonios* by Latin@ scholars is on the increase. Some of these narratives shine a light on the experience of marginality of Chicanos in higher education, as Reyes and Halcón’s (1988) seminal article does; the vulnerabilities of Latin@ professors (primarily Chicano, Dominican, Mexican-American and Puerto Rican), in general (Reyes & Rios, October, 2005); and teacher education, in particular (see Medina & Luna, 2000; Torres-Guzmán, 1995; Reyes, 2005). One recent example of *testimonio* research is featured in a special issue of *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, and is described by Machado-Casas, Cantú-Ruiz, and Cantú (2013).

*Research for the Educational Advancement of Latinas*, or *REAL*, is a mentoring project initiated in 2005 at the University of Texas at San Antonio (a Hispanic Serving Institution) to support the development and retention of new tenure-track faculty. Thus it addresses the “academic, social, and emotional isolation that is often experienced by Latinas in tenure-track positions” (Machado-Casas, Cantú-Ruiz, & Cantú, 2013, p. 5). *REAL* participants are able to meet and collaborate in the same academic space, in a supportive institutional culture; in contrast, Carmen and Sandra are situated in two different geographic locations, and have met only once at the April 2012 gathering of AERA. Even without external funding, both scholars have sustained their relationship through e-mail exchanges and telephone conversations because the junior scholar lacks a strong Latino/a support system in a predominantly white institution (PWI).

From their first conversations, Carmen emphasizes the importance of integrating research, teaching, and service, with understandings derived from collaborations in community-based practice settings used to inform pedagogy in college-based teacher preparation. Nevertheless, Carmen also reflects on tensions she experiences as a practitioner-scholar who carries a heavy course load, and expected to participate fully in the academic and social life of her home institution, as she works directly in and with local communities. No scholarly

writings describe the embodied tensions she experiences, and which she begins to theorize in conversations with Sandra.

As she pays attention to Carmen's description of her work, Sandra is inspired to search for ways to conduct community-based research from her new professional home. Within a few short weeks, she acknowledges "seeing the light" on how to approach research and writing as part of her new tenure track faculty responsibilities while serving the needs of the Latino community that is close to UNO campus.

### Cada Una Por Su Camino: Separate, But Ever Present, Paths

The experience of writing their AERA proposal strengthens Sandra's and Carmen's personal and professional relationship, and the two scholars become a "we." Just as abruptly, each one takes her own path: *cada una por su camino*. Sandra makes her big move to Omaha in the fall of 2011, needing time to settle into her new home, to turn the glance outward to learn about her new surroundings and adjust to the many changes she is experiencing, personally and professionally. In contrast, Carmen turns the glance inward, to retrace and understand with fresh eyes, a 30-year trajectory as a diasporican woman in the academy. Engaged in teaching as research since her first semester as faculty on tenure track, this retrospective and introspective analysis is different because she is different, changed through experiences in the academy. It matters little that Carmen previously viewed some of the documents she now previews, as all are subject to reinterpretation in light of where she is in the present moment, as Dewey (1938) describes. She searches for clarity by retracing her journey from her 1988 appointment as new assistant professor on a "reading" line, to her last semester before retirement in January 2011. She reads and rereads, reduces and categorizes data from personal archives that are most relevant in guiding a vulnerable Boricua *comadre* preparing to navigate the hazards of the tenure process. Loosing herself in time and space, Carmen experiences mixed emotions as she relives "moments of being" evoked by *writings* she has kept all these years. Finding her way back from this nostalgic and emotional journey, she works on a new chronology that captures her professional trajectory as one of a broadening of community. She emails it to Sandra as a formal self-introduction, to remain a presence in her life as Sandra settles into her new home. Situating her development within a dense and expansive social network also illustrates how our accomplishments are always a product of personal and professional relationships, frequently in the safety of others who are Latin@s,

but not always. Carmen advises Sandra to broaden her social network strategically, to accomplish goals she values when material resources are limited and workload demanding.

Through this analysis Carmen develops a new appreciation for her first mentors at CUNY, Professors José A. Vázquez-Faría (her supervisor) and Migdalia Romero (junior scholar). The three collaborate as professionals and close friends over 20-years, beginning in February of 1977, when Carmen took an unpaid leave from her teaching position in an experimental bilingual elementary school, never to return to the classroom. The three co-authored a major publication even before Carmen was awarded a faculty line. Beyond creating access to a professional community with expertise and influence in the new field of bilingual instruction, José was adept at navigating the institutional power structure, introducing his two protégés to top-level administrators as assistant professors on tenure track. However, by the time Carmen is promoted to Associate Professor, institutional leadership has changed with relocations and retirements, including José's.

Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the pace of change accelerates, and academic freedoms that are the heart of university life begin to erode as new state and federal policies shaped by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, affect public education K-18. NCLB affects directly faculty who teach literacy methods courses, arguably the most politicized core content in the curriculum (Selwyn, 2007; Ovando, in Torres, 2004). Carmen draws on her background in bilingual/biliteracy instruction and collaborative classroom research to address inequalities in access to literacy, which means that she brings non-mainstream perspectives to her literacy methods courses. What she teaches and how she teaches become increasingly problematic in an institutional culture where "the dominant group has the power, resources and authority to define what is normative and what is dysfunctional" (Ramirez, in Medina & Luna, 2000, p. 49). Carmen prefers constructivist pedagogy to engage adults in a community of practice to learn about literacy, and to learn to teach literacy. This approach is not normative in institutional culture, where some prefer to learn by being told explicitly what to do and how to think. Thus, Carmen goes from being treated as "a rising star" of her department to one who is stigmatized as someone who does not know how to teach, based on inconsistent student evaluations. In a new culture of accountability, adults learning to teach are encouraged to judge the quality of "services" they receive based on personal experiences and unexamined theories of learning and learning to teach (Britzman,



2002). Tenured faculty who do not conform to institutional standards are marginalized and stigmatized, and that is why Carmen decided it was time to retire in January 2011.

The opportunity to offer advice to a junior colleague provides a motive for a new analysis that is mutually beneficial, as Carmen gains a better grasp of how a changing policy context contributes to the alienation and shame she suffered in her last five years as full professor. Even so, having earned this distinction, she is not as vulnerable as non-tenured colleagues who, under similar circumstances, may be relieved of or discharged from their teaching duties (see Reyes & Halcón, 1988; Medina & Luna, 2000; Reyes, 2005). Although she feared how a premature confession would affect Sandra, there are important lessons to be gleaned about understanding how power works in the new corporate university under the influence of neo-liberalism (Torres, 2004). Carmen is well aware that what sustains and nurtures her is (a) enduring relationships with appreciative students who become close friends; (b) memories of her community-oriented research, (c) the unconditional love of her parents, and (d) the support of esteemed colleagues who value her work.

Carmen spends many hours in public school classrooms because that is where she learns about and from the children we serve through our work as educators. How can teacher educators do their work without a clear sense of the student population they will encounter, especially in a global city as diverse as New York, that has more than a million children representing every corner of the world, with a majority from the Spanish-speaking Americas? It is eye opening to see a child within the context of family life, as she has during home visits with teacher researchers, but observing vulnerable children in institutional contexts that lack quality resources, as they are subjected to a pedagogy of the poor, is heart wrenching and compel action. Spending time in local classrooms is Carmen's professional preparation for work, and why she chooses to supervise clinical experiences most tenured faculty avoid, despite the hard work it demands. Carmen's classroom observations yield insights that guide her work as a pedagogue, and "real life experiences" that adults who are intent on learning to teach appreciate.

Carmen's community-oriented research tests alternatives to the low-level, "back to basics" approach to reading that NCLB promotes as "scientifically-based." The little emphasis that is given to literacy demands of the grade 3 to 6 curriculum is concerning, as it is the likely

reason why many exit school at grade 6. With a 21-credit course load and other responsibilities, Carmen is able to write modest grants to secure “seed money” for her projects (under \$10,000), to pay for participants’ travel, meals and supplies. She also strategically widens her circle of support to include graduate students, classroom teachers and social scientists, making her workload bearable and connecting communities of practice. She also follows the advice of her assigned departmental mentor to produce a publishable article each year, and why she protects time to write on her collaborative community research during summers, fully aware of the need to safeguard the platform a prestigious faculty position makes possible.

Thus, the seamlessness of research (as a pedagogical act), teaching and service enable her to fulfill obligations with coherence, meaning and purpose, on her terms. In the section that follows, Carmen describes lessons learned from the three projects that have had the most impact on her personal and professional life, and that she draws on to offer advice to a junior colleague. These are: (a) Participatory Action Research in a Middle School, (b) The Study Funds of Knowledge in Puerto Rican/Latino Homes, and (c) The Local Writer’s Project. All three projects represent different ways to locate, make sense of and use community funds of knowledge to promote forms of literacy needed for self-realization, not simply to meet grade level standards.

### The Middle School Project (1989 to 1995)

For five years, I collaborated with Marceline Torres to address problems in teaching reading and writing to 6<sup>th</sup> graders said to be very “poor in writing,” as Marceline described in a session log for the literacy methods course she was taking. Soon, the teacher in me looked forward to Fridays at a middle school, a short car-ride away from where I grew up and where my elderly parents live. It mattered little that the school was under review and under threat of reorganization, ranking 10<sup>th</sup> from the bottom of all middle schools citywide, with less than 25% of its majority Latino and African American students on grade level in reading. I was intent on putting “ethnography into the hands of those who will use it to improve their knowledge of what is happening around them... to improve their learning and skills in oral and written language,” as Heath (1985) guided underperforming secondary school students to accomplish, from a distance. What I could not anticipate is how this would work out with sixth graders in a middle school.

Marcy’s classroom became my classroom, my refuge and my training ground as we experimented with a writing-intensive approach that engaged all of us in collaborative teaching and research. That first year, I shocked students who did not believe that I was a Puerto Rican with a “Ph.D.” and

perplexed as to why I would want to “waste” time with them as a college professor. I responded that I needed to learn from them to teach teachers, in turn asking what students wanted to learn. In 1989, their responses were astonishing: “Why are there so many problems in our community”—problems such as homelessness, AIDS, violence, teen pregnancy? In a few weeks, and with their parents’ permission, students searched in earnest for answers much the way I do research—by observing, listening, talking to “authorities,” reading informative sources, and keeping a written record of what I do and learn. Marcy said she would arrange for them to meet local experts, and I added that they could interview family members who are authorities. One mother, a nurse, came in to share her expertise, legitimizing the importance of knowledge that is in their family circle and in their communities. Marcy invited a Spanish-speaking epidemiologist from a local hospital to give a “lecture” on AIDS, and encouraged students to take notes the way college students do.

I pushed the envelope by introducing the idea of presenting at research conferences because it is part of doing research as a professional. We would travel in small groups accompanied by a few adults, when they decided they were well prepared. At first, few expressed curiosity and all eventually did, as conference participation added legitimacy to our work, exposed young adolescent learners to college campuses, and to “Dr. Mercado’s friends.” In February, a small group of students and adults accompanied me to my first presentation as a new assistant professor, at the Ethnography Forum at the University of Pennsylvania. When students described their research experiences, the crescendo of voices growing increasingly confident affirmed that what I imagined was possible, proving wrong skeptics at the middle school. Other conferences followed, in Washington, D.C., and UMass Amherst, all paid for by modest CUNY grants. Conference presentations were powerful ways to gain visibility and recognition, and prominent scholars offered encouragement. Dr. Fred Erickson wrote directly to students; others, understanding the need for professional documentation, wrote to me: “this kind of work— involving teachers, students and university professors—demonstrates why education must be coupled with dignity, respect and dialogue, and what it can offer when it begins with the political realities of the students, in their communities” (Dr. Deborah Britzman, 1990). Dr. Sonia Nieto enjoyed chatting informally with students, and Epi never forgot that she explained the meaning of Epifanio (“Epiphany”) when he said he did not like his name. Reflecting on photos of our experiences, one of dad picking me up at school led to written exchanges with my parents, delighting them and leaving precious memories that now bring comfort.

Although increasing scores on standardized tests of reading and writing was not our primary concern, test scores exceeded expectation, as great as 5 times the 4-point gain score that was statistically significant. As one teacher emphasized: “These students are ready to learn!”

Theorizing today, what we witnessed was embodied knowing, a far more powerful indicator of change that is captured in images, students' assessments of their presentations, and their writings over time. Parents who traveled with us added insights on changes unimaginable to us, as did future teachers from local colleges:

...what amazed me was (Prof. Mercado's) willingness to take them out of the classroom and introduce them to an adult world of scientists and researchers. Then she kind of hung back and let them explore that academic world to see what they could get out of it for themselves. The mental image of students talking to people on the train (Amtrak), attending conferences, and giving and critiquing their presentations was mind-boggling...(04/1995).

In sum, students made the tools and practices of inquiry their own to become self-reliant and self-assured learners capable of paving their own path toward self-realization because adult educators organized challenging learning environments, believing in their capacity to learn. Through collective action, we enabled students to navigate obstacles that control and limit their opportunities to learn, as this administrator reveals: "All these kids want to do is research!" An unusual combination of experiences transformed an underperforming school from a site of deprivation to a site of radical possibilities, a space of resistance and for inspiring others who may never experience marginality, as bell hooks (1996) theorizes. The experience changed students' relationship to themselves, to others and to their social worlds; it also changed their adult guides (including parents) as much as those who witnessed their performances and read their writings. Although the project produced 10 publications, and led to 19 presentations at local, national and international conferences, it is the writing of middle school students that endures all these years as a potent teaching tool, touching past, present and future educators. Now mature adults, some remember doing research with "Dr. Mercado," admitting that it brought comfort in challenging moments in their lives. I would like to believe that courageous students from the margins continue to influence (or change) a mainstream research community that now seeks to actively sponsor youth researchers nationally and internationally, as AERA 2015 did.

Unconventional thinking, dedication and commitment to community help dispel myths that shape how new and experienced teachers organize instruction for under-achieving students. Evidence from the Middle School Collaborative indicates that young adolescent learners (ages 11 to 14) are able to engage in challenging, writing-intensive work over long stretches of time, showing no signs of a short attention span, nor of being "poor at writing" when writing on topics they found compelling. What these outcomes do suggest is that failures and successes are organized accomplishments, which, at the time, pre- and in-service

teachers were able to see for themselves and now see in the writings of these youth researchers. Showing, not telling, is a more impacting way to question or to dispel enduring myths. What remains challenging is engaging in practices that complicate the teaching-learning process for novice teachers. Today, the middle school project, and other similar projects that have developed since then, offer Sandra new ways to think about the potential (and challenges) of service learning projects she is helping to organize for UNO.

After returning from her first sabbatical in 1995, Carmen embarked on the Study of Community Funds of Knowledge she had first heard about at an invitational research symposium in 1989. Energized by her sabbatical year, she took on the complex task of re-designing a required graduate course on bilingual inquiry and evaluation, shifting the focus from independent teacher research in classrooms to one focused on collaborative research in students' homes. All but one of her research collaborators are experienced bilingual teachers, the majority with roots in Puerto Rico. She organized the course much the way she organized the middle school project, learning about research through participation in a community of practice, in which she was both research collaborator and instructor.

### **The Study of Funds of Knowledge in Puerto Rican and Latino Homes (1996-1998)**

For three years, bilingual and ESL teacher candidates enrolled in a required bilingual research and evaluation course learned about research through the practice of research within a supportive community of practice. We met for weekly sessions at the college and, after obtaining permission, conducted two to three home visits in small teams in the homes of Latino students, the great majority first and second generation diasporicans living in East Harlem (El Barrio). Through well-planned and focused conversations and observations, home literacy practices that modest income families use to meet their economic, intellectual and spiritual needs were made visible. Finding a range of literacy practices that exceeded the low-level ones found in the school curriculum were as surprising to family members as they were to the research teams. Thus, the misconception that many teachers have, that research serves no useful purpose, was challenged as research teams discover useful knowledge that informs pedagogy. Moreover, the process of making this discovery also changes relationships to students' homes and re-orient all of us to community.

It is significant that these outcomes would not have been possible without the biliteracy distributed in the group, and that mediated conversations in homes where Spanish is the language of family life. Doing so required

thoughtful preparation, as I guided teams to collaborate on, rephrase, adapt and rehearse interview questions, because the way we use Spanish (and English) is central to building trust, and allowing access to what we seek to understand. Clearly, what we learn is dependent on our relational practices, and using Spanish and English appropriate to the situation is key. However, being physically present in students' homes represents another form of knowing, as we bear witness to or see memories of small (and significant) moments in family life, and experience the sights, sounds and smells of a cramped physical space. This embodied form of learning is more impacting than didactic teaching in a college-based course, where it is common practice to read and discuss relevant research.

Although this "experiment" added considerable complexity to my teaching and more than doubled the workload for one course, a moral and ethical commitment to social justice drives the neverending quest to improve K-18 education. Even so, this work would not have been possible without an extensive network of local and national colleagues who responded to requests for support. This support came from Puerto Rican and Latino faculty at CUNY, scholars affiliated with the Educational Testing Services in New Jersey, and the original team of the study of funds of knowledge in Arizona (see Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005), as well as former students. Thus, it was possible to engage in a complex multifaceted project that had limited financial resources, giving new meaning to the term "social network," a central construct in the study of community funds of knowledge. Once again, collaborative research with classroom teachers makes clear the ethical and moral responsibility that we all have to act in the best interest of vulnerable children and families, and why we must work to dissolve the barriers that keep us from learning about and learning from one another.

This collaborative project also led to participation in local and national educational research gatherings where classroom teachers are typically in the minority. In sharing the experience of our home visits, teacher researchers were applauded for adding new insights to the knowledge base on teaching. The experience also changed teacher researchers who gained new appreciations for research (and the research community that welcomed them) as a positive tool for educational change. Most significant for me is that this collaborative project brought me out of my institutional setting into the social worlds of teachers, to learn about and understand where they labor and students live, practical knowledge needed to better serve teachers in our teacher education courses.

The interest that the New York Study of Funds of Knowledge Project generated led to chairing a consortium of the major teacher preparation programs in the metropolitan area, one component of *The*

*Development and Dissemination Project (or D&D)* that engaged practitioner-scholars, administrators and researchers in action research to identify effective practices in Bilingual and English as a Second Language instruction. Visiting assigned sites of excellence, I bore witness to excellent teaching by dedicated and hardworking bilingual and ESL teachers, and added to my teaching toolkit the “interactive read aloud” that we identified as an effective instructional practice in classrooms with English learners. However, in these sites of excellence, I also witnessed the disruptive effects of a changing policy context that hit public schools like a hurricane. It disturbed K-18 education through the sudden introduction of new literacy and math standards, and increased accountability through curriculum standardization and testing. I felt powerless and angry as I witnessed in silence the imposition of practices that eroded the confidence of accomplished and committed bilingual/ESL teachers, and that affected academically vulnerable children. These practices also undermine efforts of teacher educators who view their role as one that includes improving school learning, and not merely preparing novices for credentialing requirements. The problem is that policy changes of this magnitude are not comprehensible when one is standing in the eye of the storm. However, through this retrospective analysis I have come to understand that we have the responsibility to make these lived experiences public because taxpayers have a right to know that the problems of public education often have their origins in policy makers who are not accountable for the potential harm they cause to vulnerable children and dedicated teachers through hastily implemented policies. Being present in schools to witness to the impact of new educational policies motivates this writing, and Sandra will need to decide if and when it is wise to engage in this type of writing in her pre-tenure years.

The last project that I describe happens to be the first one that I shared with Sandra, and that led her to the *testimonios* of Latinas in the academy, as she will explain.

### Developing Curriculum on the Writers of the Diaspora (1999-Ongoing)

I HAVE lost myself and FOUND myself in history in the archives of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies (or Centro), and so have pre-service teachers in my undergraduate literacy course, some with roots in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and others from the Middle East and Asia. But as Parker Palmer (1998) says, “Teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look

in that mirror, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge, and knowing myself is crucial to good teaching" (p. 2). It was teaching that brought me into the Centro archives, and it was teaching that led me to the mirror.

Although Puerto Ricans have migrated north since the late 1860's, making important contributions to the economic, social, and cultural life of US cities, educators in the US and in Puerto Rico know little about the literary production inspired by this experience. The history and cultural heritage of the US diasporic community remains invisible in all but a few special schools like El Puente, in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and why entering the archives in the 1990s led me on an emotional and transformative journey where I lost my-self and found my-self in history. Previously, the only glimpses I had of this history came from occasional social encounters with island educators I admired, for example, Mrs. Aida Legazpy and Ms. Carmen Dinos, who migrated north in the 1940s and 50s. Attending island-based cultural institutes designed for stateside educators was instructive but never sufficient to quench my desire to know. It was not until I entered the Jesús Colón Collection at Centro Library and Archives and held original, handwritten letters and other writings of this inspirational man that I began to understand with mind, heart and body, the power of Centro's archival collection as a tool for self-understanding and for teaching. The experience affected me deeply at a time when I was beginning to believe what some dared to voice, that Puerto Ricans are a people without a literature. Discovering that Jesús Colón (1901-1974) is recognized as the intellectual leader of the Nuyorican Writers Movement, as significant as the Harlem Renaissance, and that he wrote in English to promote a better understanding of Puerto Ricans by an English-speaking readership, has changed me. As an educator who addresses social and educational injustices that affect our sense of self, required assignments in a pre-service course creates opportunities to see what remains invisible in the school curriculum. Engaging in the "Writer's Project," keyed to the "author's study" unit in the city-wide mandated reading and writing program, prepares second semester undergraduates in a methods course on literacy in the content areas, to meet challenging (and complex), new social studies and English Language Arts standards. Lacking this preparation, future teachers are not likely to organize activities that prepare elementary school children to demonstrate competence in applying historical methods in studying local communities, including using oral histories/memoirs, reading, interpreting, and synthesizing written information across multiple sources.

At the time I embarked upon this project, the Jesús Colón, Pura Belpre, Nicholasa Mohr Collections were available to us. The Pedro Pietri Collection was made available several years later, the immediate choice of one group that fell "in love" with this poet, and who could not understand why they had never heard of Pedro Pietri's poetry in school. Handling historical documents (not simply reading digital versions on screen) was an emotional experience for me because artifacts of lived experience bring the past **and** the person to



life. In effect, working with archives is not simply researching the past; it is an embodied form of learning, and a distinctive approach to teacher preparation.

From the Jesús Colón Collection, we read three poignant sketches from "A Puerto Rican in New York," the first book written in English by a Puerto Rican about the experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York City, published in 1961. Although he wrote more than 400 pieces in his lifetime, little has been written about Jesús Colón, and most of his writings are not accessible in bounded form.

The two archival collections that address younger children directly are those of Pura Belpré (1899-1982) and Nicholasa Mohr (1938-present). Students working with the Pura Belpré collection learned that she was a talented storyteller, award-winning author who wrote and re-interpreted Puerto Rican folk tales. She was also a respected editor. It came as a surprise to all of us that she was the first Puerto Rican librarian in New York City, and that she organized programs that focused on island culture and folklore within the New York Public Library system at a time when Americanization practices in public schools denigrated ethnic backgrounds and languages. Pura developed all these special programs for children because she feared they were losing their language and their culture.

Groups that studied Nicholasa Mohr learned she is also an award-winning author (and teacher) who, unlike Pura, was born and raised in New York City. Nicholasa's powerful and elegant writing in English and in Spanish illuminates the day-to-day lives of individuals in daily struggle to belong and to coexist with dignity and respect, and in harmony with others. She also allows us to see and understand through the eyes of children, the experience of being Latin@ in New York City from the post WWII period and beyond. As she wrote, "That experience when in my young life I witnessed hatred, abuse, brutality and xenophobia based solely on the fact that we were Puerto Ricans will remain with me for the rest of my life." Nicholasa Mohr celebrates the dignity and strength of the human spirit and the power of being bilingual.

The original power-points on writers of the diaspora that my students created would not have been possible without the collaboration of Centro librarians, archivists and historians, who helped all of us to access appropriate resources, patiently guiding us through a vast collection of historical materials that chronicle the accomplishments of Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora, and assisted in the duplication of primary documents that students chose to include in their power-points. However, engaging in this challenging work was also a collective process that involved sharing, discussing and thinking together over work in progress. We had, in fact, created a new "space of co-existence" that served the intellectual and emotional needs of all involved. Pre-service teachers gained consciousness of what remained invisible in their experiences as students and how these voids may be filled working in collaboration with future students. This cultural space where local and global meet, is characterized by a "radical hybridity" (Kanu, 2002) that is the reality of

today's major metropolitan societies everywhere, and in a global city such as New York, even more so. In general, second semester undergraduates on their journey to becoming teachers had an unusual and intellectually challenging experience focused on Puerto Rican writers, which provoked their interest in wanting to know more about other communities of interest. Still a few could not understand why we gave so much attention to the Puerto Rican community, until recently the largest and oldest of the Latino communities. These anonymous comments appear on end-of-semester faculty evaluations, and were, in part, the reason why I eventually eliminated this assignment from a 2-credit, work-intensive course.

**The three community-oriented projects described in this narrative generate practical theoretical knowledge that informs the professional community broadly and educators locally.**

At a 2006 conference in Puerto Rico, where I was invited to share my collaborative community projects, an esteemed university administrator summed up these experiences in one word: “Pertenencia,” or “Belonging.” I agree and add that it’s also about recognition (the opposite of invisibility). Belonging and recognition are critical issues that impact children as much as adults (and scholars) in the diasporic Puerto Rican community. Although some of us derive satisfaction from knowing that we have acted to improve the lives of children, a lack of recognition coupled with a sense of alienation and invisibility may contribute to the low rate of retention of Puerto Rican/Latino professors who navigate an academy that does not value our contributions as community-minded scholars.

In the next section, Sandra describes memorable experiences of the many mentors who have shaped her professional trajectory, and the difficult transition to a new institutional home. Now settled in, she explores with excitement, the possibilities that her new institutional home affords her, the Latino community that needs her, and colleagues who value her unique gifts, among them that she is the only bilingual/biliterate professor in her program.

### **Sandra’s Journey into Academia**

While my parents never went to college, they believed that education was “la cura de todos los males” (the cure of all ills), and they gave me the emotional support that I needed to continue my journey towards a better education. When I arrived to graduate school, I had the dream of becoming an English professor and changing the way English was taught in Puerto Rico. My first Latina/Boricua mentor at the Research One University where I completed master and doctoral studies guided me to look at language learning

and teaching from a critical pedagogy perspective. After finishing my M.Ed. on Bilingual/Multicultural Education and continuing towards my doctorate, my Peruvian thesis advisor never stopped fighting for me. My second mentor was my Boricua mom and boss, who supported me in all ways imaginable. Entering the academy as a Puerto Rican woman, I had heightened consciousness of the importance of mentorship.

After graduation, I made the decision to stay at the Research One University two more years as a fixed-term Assistant Professor of Education. During this time, I started an academic support program for English Language Learners (ELLs) who wanted to enter the teaching professions, and planned/implemented a new seminar for Puerto Rican future teachers. Two years later, in the fall of 2011, I moved to Omaha, having accepted a tenure track assistant professor position at UNO, in their Teacher Education Department. I face many new responsibilities in my new home, but I begin this new journey blessed with another Puerto Rican mentor, "Gigi," who became an angel on earth for me during my first semester at the University of Nebraska. By then Carmen and I had started our conversations and I felt that I had two Puerto Rican mentors. Her work with the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños ignited a fire on me to learn more about Puerto Rican women in the academy who are not well known in the Latino community. Who are these women writing from a critical feminist Puerto Rican perspective? Where are they? Is there a difference on the way that Puerto Rican women write in comparison to how Chicanas and other Latinas write their testimonios? Why is it so difficult to find the writings of Boricua women in the academy?

With immediate need for guidance, I sought out Gigi's advice, to understand how other Boricuas describe journey into academia. As I settled into my new faculty position, I read the experiences of Xae Alicia Reyes (2005), Liza Fiol-Matta (1996), and Marisa Rivera (2009). Subsequently, I discovered the voices of Luz del Alba Acevedo, Celia Álvarez, Aurora Levins-Morales, Iris Ofelia López, and Caridad Souza as part of feminist testimonio anthologies (Alfred & Swaminathan, 2004; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Their words resonated with my experiences and I felt that I had more mujeres boricuas to guide me in this academic journey. For example, Fiol-Matta (1996) emphasizes the importance of her role as a Puerto Rican English teacher. She sees it as "both an awareness—and a responsibility to that awareness—of the potential of racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist lessons that can be replicated and taught even inadvertently" (p. 70). Fiol-Matta reminds me of my condition as a woman of color in the academy that needs to serve as role model for future Latina scholars. She also insists that it is important to never forget to place Puerto Rico's historical reality as a focal point in our teaching. In her words, even though "the rhetoric of higher education in this country configures the classroom as an 'American and/or Americanizing space,' we are in an ironic position of 'invading a gendered racialized, legislated American space,' a fact recognized by designations of Affirmative Action hires or Targets of

Opportunity” (p. 73). Nonetheless, it is this “invasion” of our presence as Puerto Rican women “entering the classroom conscious of the contradictions of what place, language, class, and race mean in the United States—that is affirmative” (p. 73). These are powerful words that I also insist in my own teaching practice as I introduce myself to every new group of students as “very much Puerto Rican in everything I say and I do.”

As Carmen and I continued our mentorship in the spring of 2012, I lost Gigi during my second semester at UNO. It was overwhelming, as the security of having a Latina mentor close by was gone. Carmen encouraged me to write about Gigi: “I understand it must be hard to engage in our conversation under the circumstances. Perhaps our paper is a way to honor her—how did she mentor you?” Writing about Gigi helped me to heal, leaving precious memories of the few months that I was privileged to have her in my life. She made a huge difference in my journey into academia, and I knew that if I had a question she was there to respond with a reassuring smile. I miss her, but I know that I have Carmen and other colleagues around that have taken me under their wings, and will not let me fall into the cracks of academia.

What started with a simple question on how to respond to the multiple demands of the academy through conversations with Carmen, has become much more. My conversations with her have helped me to reflect on my experiences, develop a network in my new community and outline a community-based research agenda. Carmen’s advice led me to the works of many engaged scholars, and she constantly reminds me of the challenges of my academic and historical context. I realize that the current pressures in the academy to teach, publish, secure grants, and provide service are more demanding now than when she entered the academy. However, I now know that it is possible to link “service with teaching and research in a particularly important way,” as Carmen did, to become what Baez (2000) describes as a “scholar-activist,” who engages in “race-related research and service” (p. 382). I am blessed to be part of an institution that encourages and supports faculty initiatives with the community with financial and professional resources through the Service Learning Academy. As Carmen and I worked on our first manuscript in 2012, I shared with her that I was really liking to write again, to which she responded: Think about “like” to write and why it is “important” to write.

## Conclusions

Over a 4-year period, Carmen has given Sandra many *consejos* (advice), but three keep resonating with her: 1) to see writing as a personal and social responsibility, not only as an academic tool towards tenure; 2) to develop a support network; and 3) to outline a community-oriented research agenda and focus on it. Predictably, Sandra has had many ups and down in her pre-tenure years, but Carmen’s *consejos* have helped

keep her motivated and grounded. As Carmen shared her academic journey with Sandra, she was inspired to start conducting community-oriented research right away, but Carmen also warned of the challenges that she faced. As in life, our journey in academia does not get smoother with the passage of time, as Carmen well understands. Rather, we travel a circuitous route to avoid hazards that obstruct our path when we least expect them. One of those challenges is the shifting policy context that affects our teaching and scholarship, and tenure and promotion standards that are not immutable. Critical consciousness of potential hazards prepare Sandra to better navigate these turbulent waters, so as to protect the privilege that comes with the position she holds. Further, as a result of Carmen's *consejos*, Sandra discovered two research callings. First, she has kept sharing her *testimonio* as a Latina in the academia through publications and conference presentations. She has extended her social network to include *comadres* she has not yet met, but who offer her wise advice in times of need—through their writings as Latinas in academia. Sandra has also extended her social network to include a diverse group of school and community partners who collaborate with her on service-learning research projects, including mainstream teacher candidates and diverse learners and families. Carmen and Sandra are practitioner-scholars who are committed to making ours a better world through community-oriented research, which means challenging conventional thinking, and pushing boundaries. They also engage in research to claim social rights and to make public the contributions of Puerto Ricans in the Diaspora. As this narrative illustrates, it is possible and necessary to create new spaces of co-existence—spaces for being together, for sharing, learning and healing when we find ourselves physically alone, or isolated in time and space. Through conversations in an uncommon space, junior and senior scholars open their hearts and minds as they search for ways to inspire each other, to resist or persevere in the face of struggle, to attain the community-oriented goals they value.

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