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Unchoreographed Dance: Trust and Venture into Vulnerability—Building a Plural, Organic, and Recursive Collective

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Unchoreographed Dance

Trust and Venture into Vulnerability—Building a Plural, Organic, and Recursive Collective

ABSTRACT In this autoethnography, we—four Hispanic Serving Institution colleagues at the USA–Mexican *frontera*—share our process of building a collective where a plural, organic, vulnerable, and recursive space was created. In this space, through readings, conversations, feedings, discussions, and memories, un/anticipated stories emerge . . . in our unchoreographed writings, we whirl, twirl, collide, and craft our collective space, which was at once chaotic, cathartic, and sustaining. **KEYWORDS** collective autoethnography, vulnerability, poetic inquiry, Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)

INTRODUCTION

It started as a year-long collective to work with autoethnographic stories among colleagues based in a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) at the USA–Mexican *frontera*.¹ By the end of that first year, we were aware that our disparate experiences, the multiple voices used to articulate them, and the different ways they manifested in our classroom practices, interactions, and research had crafted the only academic space where we felt we belonged. Four years later, we continue meeting in this space, members have moved on, and a new member has joined us . . . and as a collective, we keep connecting our differences and celebrating contradictions and confusion at the *frontera*. We chose a qualitative approach, a collective autoethnography, as we were “self-focused, researcher-visible, context-conscious, and critically dialogic.”²

We were in a newly born institution—a merge of two universities with multiple campuses—identified by the U.S. Department of Education as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with 90+ percent of our students self-identified as Hispanics.³ Our college called for a full meeting and we were invited to share ideas and to participate in a research initiative to define our professional identities. The idea was thought-provoking; it felt that self-governance may be a possibility. Many of the faculty attended the meeting. Our leaders began presenting their ideas . . . a phrase got stuck in our minds: *only local Hispanics could do the job*. The message was extremely confusing, as most of our leaders were neither local nor Hispanic, and definitely from different socioeconomic backgrounds than our students. Regardless of the message and the messengers, individually—we—felt the uneasiness of the space, the directness of the microaggression, the no-belonging . . . *only local Hispanics could do the job*. The first reaction was to retreat—however, individually again, we all had made a conscious decision to stay at this institution. Thus, we searched for support and looked for committed faculty, including ones who may not identify as Hispanic but were fully engaged with the students and wanted to give their

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best effort to build a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). In that sense, we began this project in a paradoxical un/welcoming space.

We four submitted a proposal for a SIRG.⁴ The project “Cultivating an Ethic of Care at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI)—Individual Stories and a Collective Narrative” was one of the initial four accepted proposals. This collaborative proposal was based on Noddings’s feminine approach to caring and, timidly, included the critical works of Freire, Bartolomé, Valenzuela, and Beauboeuf-Lafontant.⁵ From these critical *pensadores*, we expanded our feminine, mothering idea of caring to include the politicized, ideological, and authentic/moral dimensions of caring. In fact, we embraced Beauboeuf-Lafontant’s proposal that sharing the language and culture of the students is important yet not enough. It is the teachers’ political clarity, not simple cultural congruence between the teachers and their students, that makes the significant difference.⁶ Bartolomé helped us in demarcating even more what was caring and commitment in our scholarship at the HSI and the power of teacher agency:

[to] either maintain the status quo, or transform the sociocultural reality in the classroom and in schools so that the culture at this micro-level does not reflect and reproduce macro-level inequalities.⁷

The first year, we tried to understand not only the HSI-SIRG expectations but, more importantly, to learn about each other. We have few commonalities: Cis women; working at an HSI; possessing a terminal degree; communicating in English. At the same time, we were so different not only professionally—different departments, research styles, language choices, classroom practices and interactions—but also, personally—country of origin, languages, age, families, religion, health, race, ethnicity, customs, traditions . . . and the list could go on and take up a lot of space. The critical theorists—Freire, Bartolomé, Valenzuela—helped our first group to clearly establish that NOT *only local Hispanics could do the job*, which allowed us to highlight the commitment, power, and our teacher/research agency. By the end of the first year, we knew we had a difficult road in front of us, as we needed to learn about our own selves to become part of the change we wanted. So, we began with the reflective work.

THE COLLECTIVE PROCESS

Karin & Miryam

Karin started the conversation, as she recalled our first meeting As I sat in a college-wide faculty meeting listening to our dean and invited guests from a community organization propose a new seed grant initiative, I was excited for the opportunity to apply. Yet, they asserted “we are Latinas and Latinos” and lauded the significance of our new university being the largest Hispanic-Serving Institution in the continental United States. Statements like, “we are so tired of them studying us” prompted me to question where I, a white woman from New England, and the many other faculty in the room who were not Latinas or Latinos, fit in this conversation. I looked around the room and noted the diversity among our faculty. The speaker posed the question: “What does it mean to be an

HSI?” I wondered, what does it mean to be a non-Latina faculty member at an HSI? I turned to a colleague, a woman originally from India who had been on my hiring committee. I whispered that I needed a check-in, a white person check-in. She leaned in and asked, “Are you feeling alienated?” Indeed, I was. She nodded. “Me too.” After the meeting, I decided to invite three of my colleagues, diverse yet not Hispanic, to form a research team and to submit a proposal. We did not expect to get the grant. The proposal was intended to challenge the organizers to think about the rest of us and to raise the question of what it means to be a non-Hispanic faculty member, an outside transplant, at a large HSI. I received a call from our dean, “your proposal caused a lot of commotion among the reviewers. You are going to get the grant, but I want you to be aware of the resistance—realize what you are getting into.” Thus began our collective.

Together, we recalled.

Early on, we endeavored to come to consensus, resulting in frustration and yielding friction. We collected references on collective ethnographies and arranged a conference call with a colleague, Marnina Gonick, who generously shared her experience and advice. Ultimately, her insight and our group reflections revealed that the strength was not in aligning in a neat, tidy singular pathway or stepwise process. The power was in the plurality, the organic, recursive, and messy ways forward as a collective rather than a confluence.

As an interdisciplinary research group with differences of ethnicity, class, religion, age, and regionality, we became intrigued by the inflection of these differences in the stories we told and also by our oral, written, and bodily responses to these stories. [In addition, to] how affective relationships may play a part in the process of story revision and how the diverse subjectivities of group members shape how the group engages with and responds to particular stories.⁸

We abandoned the outline, the linear list, and realized that to understand other voices and stories we had to seek first to understand and find our own. Thus, we embarked on individual autoethnographies to then see how our voices resonated with one another. When we came together, we invested time in cultivating trust and ventured into vulnerability. The conversations were sometimes confusing, meandering, challenging, always cross-cultural, with a collision of conversational styles. Yet, we remained committed.

Our work retained our distinct voices, organized as separate contributions to a collective piece. Each of us writing our story in response to a single event. The process of our work began with conversations that at times felt chaotic, a cacophony of overlapping thoughts, ideas, feelings, and Spanish comingling with English. The gatherings were our dedicated time to process, share, push and pull each other. It felt like an organic yet unchoreographed dance with a beginning but no end to our untiring whirling to the different stories, lifetimes, pains, and happy reminiscing.

We came together, dis/agreed on a topic, went our individual ways to work independently, returned to the collective to share, to receive/give feedback, to continue the shaping of the work, and started again—our untiring whirling. The stories were read aloud—this was always quite emotional—so many times cathartic, and we learned that

much of our writing would never be shared outside of our small collective. We digress from our projects and tasks because our lives—private and otherwise—demanded our full attention. As a collective, we tried to be respectful and offered friendly support. Yet, the free-spoken sharing in conjunction with honest feedback and candid reactions many times felt raw, privileged, and revealed deep fears and insecurities. Listening was not effortless, the process was not painless, and excavating beneath the surface of our experiences was oftentimes exhausting. A simple question in response to a story evoked unanticipated emotions. Yet, we realized that in embracing vulnerability we cultivated trust and our work deepened and became more meaningful.

AN ABIDING WHIRLING

Karin recalls reading aloud her story of relocating to deep south Texas—being candid about coming for the white sand beaches of South Padre Island, the year-round tropical weather, never thinking about the *frontera* with its history, culture, and the political controversy of the USA–Mexico border that abuts the university campus, until *Miryam* cautiously interrupted: “Do you see how privileged and oblivious that statement appears? Is that what you intended?” *Karin* yielded into a humbling, uncomfortable epiphany—blatant White privilege exposed.

Miryam’s recollection is quite different. She recalls *Karin*’s reading and felt herself moving from eagerness to confusion, to pain, to anger . . . but more than anything, she felt stunned. She could not believe what she was hearing. . . . The emotions were rising, and her thoughts running fast . . . is this *Karin*!? Is this the same thoughtful person who works so hard to support every student in her classes? . . . How is she able to put the blame on the RGV because she doesn’t feel part of the community, or that she was not able to blend, or that the beach was so far away from the university . . . I couldn’t keep quiet, it was visceral; I was wordlessly responding to her reading. . . . “the RGV is a community that was here long before the U.S. drew the damn border . . . one more, like there was not enough with the many other colonizers who landed here . . . and we—ALL!! are transplants that actually got the jobs denied to the locals. . . . Does the RGV need to adapt and be blamed because it didn’t fit into the idea of an exotic, vacation land with ‘year-round tropical weather?’” At that point, I stopped. I saw her face, she was genuine, she had no idea what she was saying or how insensitive she sounded. . . . I couldn’t keep quiet, so I asked: “*Do you see how privileged and oblivious that statement appears? Is that what you intended?*”

That day, *Miryam* and *Karin* realized that it was going to be difficult, that our differences were at our cores, and there would be implications to be owned, explored, and addressed. If we wanted this to work, we all would be required to be vulnerable and honest, and besides our feelings, to trust the group process.

UN/HOME . . . A LONG WHIRL AND SOME TWIRLS

Our next methodological iteration of our collective autoethnography moved us further away from our comfort zones. The struggle began with the concept we were pondering.

We were to explore the meaning of “home” from the point of view of transplants in the US southern border. We were dwellers always longing for our original family homes while actively establishing roots.

We moved our weekly meetings away from the academic, formal environment to the intimacy of our local homes. As domestic and international dwellers we brought our “home” stories to our weekly meetings. There, we embraced the journeys as well as we tried, searched, and tasted un/familiar theoretical, methodological, social, and historical references while exploring and tasting local and un/familiar foods, flavors, spices, and delicacies. We struggled with language, words, implications, audiences, and our own domestic distractions—family obligations, illness, expectations of spouses, children, and the ever-present demands of work in academia. All of these brought back and created memories. In our process, “we [went] to find the stories we didn’t know we were looking for in the first place.”⁹ In the collective space, we embraced our autoethnography, sustained our engagement over time; our stories resonated together, and together our dance made more sense—for a moment of our academic lives. Definitely, we found a belonging, yet not our ancestral homes nor a dwelling to spend time with our families but the *home* in which we digress . . . back into the reflective space to continue our work. What follows is our offering, a diverse, intercultural, transnational autoethnographic collaboration among four reflective scholars where we have shared, named, and theorized some deeply personal and lived experiences. We hope for the reader to be prepared to navigate and enjoy our contradictory, confusing, sometimes abrupt, and unfinished stories of searching for home in an HSI at the *frontera* to finding a space where we digress while learning, creating, and producing.

I wanna twerk . . . porrear . . . ‘ta güeno will twirl

Eunice I was invited to join this group as a Mexican American (Hispanic) woman raised and educated in the Rio Grande Valley. The idea was that my experiences as a former student, now faculty, at the HSI would enrich the research project. “Dr. *Lerma* will serve the team as local cultural broker, community liaison . . .” I was a little confused, I had never heard myself described in those terms; however, I was excited—I would provide insight into the community I love and cherish. Both my parents were born in Mexico, emigrated when young to the States, to the RGV, yet their extended families stayed back in Mexico. While growing up, I was a typical border child. During the week, on the US side, I would go to school—speak only in English, and then would go home to be told to speak only in Spanish. My parents were uncomfortable with us children speaking in English because they couldn’t understand us. We were allowed to speak in English, only to interpret/translate for them. On the weekends at the Mexican side, we would stay with Mama Chuy, eat her amazing food, and laugh—lots and lots of laughs. Time was less structured, we had the freedom to go to the corner store, get *elotes* (corn) from the cart across the street, to play unsupervised with cousins and neighbors. . . . I recall those memories with so much fondness. It was fun and safe. I still get the sense of freedom and relaxation, a feeling that was absent during the week in the States side. All my life, I have straddled the border, calling both sides my home.

Academic and Otherwise Family

My mother had been admitted into the hospital—cancer had invaded her body. I kept my mother company while working grading assignments—my students needed the feedback, I told myself. She smiled. I was untenured, so it had to be done, as well as everything else at my job—regardless of whatever was going on in my life. It always unsettled me, and I tried to satisfy both private and public demands. Here I was at the hospital, outside my mother’s room talking to her doctor. He suggested to request FMLA: “There is no more time.” So I did it, followed the instructions, prepared all my courses’ information, met a colleague at Starbucks to transfer my course, and explained what needed to be done during the FMLA. All this time, I was concerned with taking care of my students while keeping my mother company. Her illness advanced so rapidly, there was no time. My mother died a few days later.

Family and friends filled the funeral home to offer their support. The room is lined with beautiful flowers surrounding my mother’s casket. Each card holds some comforting words. I saw one of them, sent by my former doctoral professors. My eyes filled with tears . . . my academic family was supporting me from afar. At one moment, I walked out of the room to get some fresh air, when I saw some of my students. I told them, “You didn’t need to come.” They hugged me and told me, “You don’t understand how much you mean to us.” The pain of my mother’s passing was immense, yet at that moment, my two worlds blended to support me, as I was *derrumbándome* (falling apart).

The FMLA ended with my mother’s passing as well as the *three days* of my bereavement leave. Still in shock, with no space/time for mourning, I had to return to work. I walked into the classroom ready to teach the school counseling content for the week. I saw a couple of students shedding tears. A confused looking student asked, “Why are you back, Dr. Lerma?” I replied jokingly as to lighten the mood: “I am not rich, I have to work.” In my mind, I thought that it was important to have debriefing on grief, loss, work/life balance, and the responsibilities of being a counselor even though you were also experiencing trauma. At that point, I believe it was important for me to model what a strong Mexican American Woman from the Valley should do to be successful in academia. I felt I had no other choice.

Calladita . . . if not, you are a puta and a pendeja

On the identity issue . . . on the strength and expected resilience . . . on family misguided love, rules, and gender roles . . . all bring back to me the so many times I have been called a puta (whore) and a pendeja (idiot).

We load up in the bed of the truck to make the twenty-minute drive across the border. Every time I see the bridge, it brings me so much joy; it’s time to have FUN . . . *so* much fun! At my primos’ (cousins’) piñata, we dance, eat tamarindos and tacos, and enjoy overall laughs. Laughing so hard that our bellies hurt. My cousin mentions something so hilarious, my head rocks back. I open my legs and grab my belly as this is the funniest thing I have ever heard. The funniest thing a seven-year-old could hear. Oh, the joys of being so carefree . . . suddenly my dad appears. “*Parecen chachalacas! ¡¿Se les ven los calzones no les da vergüenza!?! (You look like chachalacas [noisy, annoying, loud bird]!*

You are showing your underwear! Aren't you ashamed!?!)" I turn to my cousin, confused; how could such a happy moment turn into such a shameful experience? Risking a slap in the face, I snapped back with "*¡Qué aburrido!* (How boring!)" and continued laughing while holding my belly.

My dad's passive microaggressions quickly turned into direct, aggressive, and hurtful messages.

While chewing gum with an open mouth . . . making big bubbles. It's so cool to make those big bubbles. My dad comes once again to tell my cousin and me, "*Parecen vacas y putas mascando así*" (You look like cows and whores chewing like that). He made us spit out our gum and informed us we were not allowed to chew gum. My mom taught me how to make those super cool bubbles . . . is she also a "*¿vacca and puta*" (a cow and a whore)? I remember watching TV where prostitutes would chew gum with their mouth open, while popping bubbles and pulling the gum with their finger. My childhood mind concluded that chewing gum put me in the *puta* category.

Teenagers love to transform themselves, and this happened to me when I discovered makeup and hair styles. I was trying out a new red lipstick. I look in the mirror and model . . . I love how the color just pops. My grandma comes in and says, "*Sólo las putas se ponen rojo*" (Only whores put on red). "What?!!!" Another reason to be put into that category. But I like red so much, and I am not a *puta*. I haven't even kissed a boy. Once again, I am so confused . . . red is just such a beautiful bright color. However, I was taught to listen to my elders, not to talk back because the punishment was horrendous. Plus, as my great grandma would tell me, "*Se me hace la boca chicharrón*" (Your mouth will shrivel up like fried pork skin). I take off the red and put on a nude lip gloss. Dimming my light as I put on a sad dull color.

I must really like red since I decided to dye my hair red. That beautiful color, so bright and it makes my big curly hair stand out even more. My mom loves red too . . . it's her favorite color. My dad gets home—he looks at me with so much disgust. "*Sólo las putas se pintan el pelo de ese color*" (Only whores dye their hair red). Before I can say anything, he kicks me out of the house. I decide to walk to my grandma's house. Again, my actions put me in the *puta* category. Am I really that bad?¹⁰

Un/packing, Un/learning

This writing group has taken me on a process of uncovering truths followed by pain as well as healing. It is a constant realization that my thoughts, biases, beliefs are rooted in a colonized/Western mindset.¹¹ As I unpack my memories, I start to work on a painful process. I'm unlearning "my normal." For starters, I've been—correction—I *am* part of a system that actively works to moderate, to educate, to control me and people like me. I see it more clearly now; it is the pipeline of educational systems. It is painful because I had always found refuge in schooling; it helped me escape from my abusive home. With each reading and reflection, I begin to realize that this safety net might have not been as safe as I viewed it.

After wiping my tears, I have a sense of empowerment. I'm unlearning and discovering and understanding my own identity. Unlearning "the normal" is complicated and brings

to the surface so many feelings: anger, sadness, empowerment, hope/lessness . . . and unanswerable questions, why do people not see the value in empowering marginalized groups? Why are we such a threat? Should I give in and stay quiet?

It is safe . . .

it is what will help me survive . . .

Stay quiet and let the abuser abuse.

Calladita te ves más bonita (If you are quiet, you look prettier) . . .

I have never been one to stay quiet against unjust events for other people. However, I am tired. Tired of not only fighting this system but also tired of the toxic cultural relationship and expectations that have been dealt to me. I am like the *India Maria, Ni de aquí. Ni de allá* (Not from here nor there). I don't fit into the box in higher education nor in my family. I never seem to find the space that gives me tranquility and peace . . . but overall, there is no respect. It is a constant challenge to fight off the attacks.

As I read the testimonios of Latina educators, I am comforted to know that I am not alone in this fight. There are many who have not stayed quiet. Many who have fought for me to have the opportunities I have now. I cannot give up on this fight.¹² I will use my writings to claim my voice. Perhaps, not only a voice for myself but also for many who have lost their voices or have not yet found them.

THE CONTINUOUS PROCESS OF DISCARDING BLINDERS

Vejoya

When I joined the group, I was convinced, that writing about “self” would be easy. I had not anticipated how thoroughly I would be rethinking my “self.” The group continues to question what I write and why I write the way I write. I realize with much consternation how deeply colonized I and my writing are. Much like the spoon and fork I had habitually placed near my plate, for decades, even though I eat with my fingers at home. Or how concisely I have learned to describe the heavy rain as a torrential downpour, instead of as “the tears of a thousand anguished mothers grieving the loss of their child,” as my grandmother would have. How I seek out the cool of an air-conditioned room amid a Texas summer instead of sitting outside and calling to the cool breeze as my mother would have, “likhooriiii . . . likhoriiii.”¹³

A few years after I came to the United States, my mother interrupted my animated phone conversation, to ask, “What language do you think in, now?” I was delighted to reassure her that when I spoke to her in Nepali, my thoughts were in Nepali too. She wanted to be sure I wasn't translating my conversations to her! It was important to her, and it became important to me to keep thinking and using the various languages of my childhood. A few years later, my mother questioned me again: “What language do you dream in?” I laughed in reply. But the sad fact is that it does not matter what language I dream in—when I wake up, and if I remember my dreams, I remember and share them in English.

My academic language is English. I speak with my head, not my heart. I do not pour out my emotions. I measure out my language, like my spices, in neat morsels that I have

come to believe others will find palatable. My writing group hurls these tidy, polite morsels back at me “WHAT is it that you want to say?” Never before had I felt the inadequacy of English (the language I strove so hard to master as a child) to give voice to the maturing awareness of who I am. Within this group, I am learning to recognize and cast off my colonized pretensions and become authentically aware and vulnerable. These writing sessions have brought clarity to my remembering, perspective to my processing, and acknowledgment of my plurality.

Using poetic narrative¹⁴ permits me to shrug off the straitjacket binds of the thick, cloth-bound *High School English Grammar & Composition* textbook that was placed before me with as much reverence as the Bible.¹⁵ The mastery of its repetitive exercises, my private boarding-school English teachers believed, would elevate me from the vernacular speaking masses. English would make me more desirable to employers, more successful . . . make me MORE than *the masses*. *The masses* were people whose loving and open arms I ran to at the end of each school year. *The masses* were my family with their centuries of traditions and culture. *The masses* was my grandfather who now eagerly and heartbreakingly repeated the few sentences he knew in English to me. *The masses* was my grandmother who giggled into her cupped hands when she tried to imitate me and my brother arguing in English. *The masses* were my cousins who now treated me with kid gloves because I was a “*missy baba*” (English school kid). *The masses* was me.

Our collective has given voice to my trapped thoughts—understanding, acknowledging, and making meaning of my words beyond the “English” we share. Poetic narrative allows me to fill the spaces created by and between languages known and forgotten. For too long, my writings have centered on explaining my existence instead of celebrating it. The group is a constant reminder that the language that led me away “from the masses” is also able to take me back to my roots by letting me find myself in the uncapitalized “i,” in the unfinished sentences, and the missing punctuations of my poetry.

these blinders! i have been wearing for so long
 only show me the paved roads i am supposed to be walking on narrow . . . long . . . in
 one direction.
 i wonder who put these blinders on?
 did i?
 to stop seeing anything at all
 anything but the roads They built . . . leading toward success.
 “Speak well in English, be demure, uplift yourself,
 follow rules and you will WIN.”
 my alert ears could hear it.
 the stories of my people.
 my nose could smell it . . . the food that i craved,
 the smell of the fields.
 my heart! that beat to a different tune!
 BUT the blinders kept my vision low
 just showing me my feet and the road below
 directing me to damn “success.”

i may have it all, just like they said
 an education, a job, some promotion
 and then what?
 with some help
 i have been trying to take these blinders off
 to see laying strewn, on either side
 of the narrow road i've been made to walk . . .
 colors, smells, and feels of things that i have missed, of sounds that suddenly match my
 heartbeat.
 words and songs and even conversations i had missed.
 i have no fight with the destination i have reached
 these blinders may not yet be entirely removed
 BUT if i can
 remember who i am . . .
 the road is still there to lead me back and forth
 between who i am and who i have become.

EMBRACING A DREAM . . . HOW? WHY?

Miryam

As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered [. . .] I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence [. . .] In the world in which I travel I am endlessly creating myself. And, it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom.¹⁶

i am looking for freedom
 we are looking for freedom
 i do believe i have the right of *la libertad*
 we do believe we have the right of *la libertad*

As Fanon pointed out so remarkably, either People of Color (POC)—follow whatever is laid out for us, or we—as POC—reinvent and recreate multiple paths to invite, share, and develop *nuestro sueño de libertad*. Castillo insists that POC survival depends on how well we read between the lines as, in the Western world of academia, Women of Color (WOC) and POC “exist in the void, *en ausencia*, and surface rarely, usually in stereotype.”¹⁷ As a Mestiza/Latina in the United States, the energizing part while re-discovering traditional knowledge is embracing it and sharing it. One response has been to challenge the individualistic Western “I” for a community shared, social “I/We” and to advance poetic narratives, originated in the Global South, to “connect the self in relation to community struggles and not as a unified fixed subject that speaks of an individualistic ‘I.’”¹⁸ Our response has been the collective autoethnography generated by this *colectiva*.

it is not easy
 it requires vision—to imagine
 what is not there and must be built

connections, coalitions, relationships
cooperation—because is a collective effort
we can't do it alone
strength—to confront difficulties of all kinds
and persistence
un pellejo endurecido, para continuar,
aún después, de recibir tantos golpes
hardened skin, to continue,
regardless if we've taken so many hits.

there is no choice

when get tired of being a punch bag
to reject the idea of fighting
transforming it
re-inventing it and re-creating it
in a world with no space for *different*
looking for freedom “to be me”
may be a preposterous proposal
meeting a secure response

“let me show your place”

however
pellejo endurecido, gracias!
as the secure response
is only one more struck

am i limping?
brings a snarky smile
do i have a job?
shoulders shrugged

hardened skin, thanks again!

just cry
embraced yourself
then,
back to the board
transform it
re-invent it
re-create it

there is no other choice¹⁹

As a Mestiza, maybe a Latina, definitely-not-Hispanic, always a foreigner,²⁰ trusting Fanon's reminder, the proposal is to go beyond the instrumental and elaborate on adding layers into the decoloniality project. In our collective autoethnography, we celebrated and embraced our differences, social agency, and multiplicity. We came together, dis/agreed on a topic, worked independently, received/gave feedback, and started again—our

unchoreographed dance, our untiring whirling while building a plural, organic, vulnerable, and recursive decolonial space.

the no-sounds, no-words language

*listen,
a silent scream
is coming up from unknown deepest regions
no-sounds, no vibrations, no air-waves
the silent scream,
is to be felt,
sensed, cherished
silent screams
mute sounds of other's words held in our hearts,
in the desert heat, in the ocean tides silent screams,
grew louder
yesterday impotent tongues
today
working with tyrants' academic languages
telling the untold stories
they won't be able to erase.²¹*

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NOTES

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3. HSIs are categorically defined institutions that enroll a minimum of 25 percent of full-time undergraduate Latinx students, with at least 50 percent demonstrating financial need. It puts them in a position to compete for grants earmarked for Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)

- through the federal government and private foundations. The U.S. Census Bureau, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) defines "Hispanic" as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. www.census.gov/topics/population/hispanicorigin/about.html on 2/16/2019
4. HSI-SIRGs (Special Interest Research Groups); four female faculty members, who moved to the region to work in our HSI, collaborate on this SIRG project. In this project, we explored our own perceptions and experiences as outsiders who have invested their professional lives in teaching, research, and service in an HSI. Additionally, in this project we explored our Hispanic students' perceptions of and experiences with them, endeavoring to illuminate cross-cultural teaching–learning relationships and instructional practices in the increasingly diverse context of higher education.
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