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The Grass Is Greener on This Side

Beatriz T. Valencia

Chapman University

Abstract

The pathway to education is two sided. The institutional side, and the side of the student. Often, these sides are not in sync. In this essay, I present my personal experience as a student. The process of attainment was both chaotic and filled with personal doubt. Using Anzaldúa's autohistoria as the foundation, I share memories and story to situate the reader in the collective experience of many students of color. The self-awareness gained from the unfolding of pain, healing, and self-reflection throughout this process, is the empowerment of this framework (Anzaldúa & Keaton, 2009). As a consequence of using this method, a new voice emerged. A voice of resistance and persistence. The essay takes the reader on a journey of hope. A journey of choices and adaptations from an immigrant's point of view. A journey of self-discovery. This story, although not unique, traces the history and its relation to my academic struggles and barriers of assimilation, racism, and exclusion. As an immigrant student, the external forces that distract and fill one with self-doubt were in constant motion. It was the acquisition of knowledge and mentorship of kind people that carried me to where I am today, and the realization of my oppression has freed me to share this memoir. This is my story.

It was 1978, and we were preparing for the journey of a lifetime. My two siblings, my mother, and I were headed to California from Mexico City. I was six years old. That same year I had started school in Mexico City. I recall how enamored I was with the structure of school and the process of learning. I especially liked my new friends and teachers. To prepare for this trip, my mother was instructed to cut our long hair. I am not sure why cutting our hair was a necessary step. I suppose it was to blend into the new environment. One day we were living in Mexico City, and the next day we were on a bus ride to Tijuana, Mexico.

I was seated next to my older sister. Between the motion sickness and long hours of travel, we were exhausted. I could not comprehend exactly why we were on this bus, but I knew

we were meeting my father and brothers. The process was not explained to us. We were the youngest four of twelve children, which meant people talked over us and not to us. I later found out the plan was not entirely explained to my mother, and she was traveling on the assurances of my father. No one would have imagined the journey would be both life threatening and life changing.

The bus finally stopped. Exhausted and pale, we were ushered to a nearby vehicle. We arrived at a home where other children, women, and men were gathered. That night, we were fed, and the group was given several instructions. We left the house shortly after dinner. With men, women, and other children, we sat in the dark along a long stretch of land. My mother's hand was wrapped tightly around mine, and I felt nervous. There was no time to process. Spontaneously, we started to run fast and hard. I felt my feet fly off the ground. Along the fence were large cutout holes, and we followed the group through them. In one instance, my shirt got stuck and my mother's hand ripped from mine. My older sister frantically pulled on my shirt, and we were off again. I wasn't sure what we were running from, nor why we had to flee, but I tried to keep up.

Loud blasts sounded. It was shocking! Yelling and screaming followed. We kept running. I was scared. We stopped, dropped to the ground, and were silent. I mimicked what everyone else was doing. My breath stirred the dirt below me, and my white shirt was brown. It was dark and cold. I do not recall how long we were there, but it felt like a long time. Bright lights illuminated the area, and a voice shouted as a helicopter sounded above. I did not understand what the man was saying. I thought if we all stayed still we would not be noticed. That did not happen, and we were forced to our feet.

I recall sitting on my older sister's lap in a patrol car. My mother was not with us. We did not know what happened to her, and we were crying in fear. We were held in a large cold room with one toilet and concrete benches. I did not comprehend why we were in this room. Time stood still. The doors opened, and a woman recovered us. We were soon back at the temporary home. We were scared and confused. In the next room, we were able to see a man being treated for a gunshot wound. He was shot; they shot at us. All of us! People doubt the danger of crossing the border. I can testify it is both real and non-discriminating.

My mother was still missing. We waited for the next night, and we repeated the process. I cannot recall the details the second time, but I do remember sleeping in a van. The next time I

opened my eyes, I could see my mother. She was alive, and I could touch her! Years later, when we finally could speak about our experience, she stated she was taken during a break in the group and put in a trunk of a car with other people. She recalled the feelings of death from lack of oxygen. She was in distress and complete state of terror. This explained her anxiety of small places. She is now 82 years old. This was the beginning of my story. The story of a new life in a new home. We were now in the United States.

It was a strange house, but my family was there. We were together and nothing else mattered at that moment. This made everything we had experienced earlier fade in the background. We were immediately enrolled in the local elementary school. We were excited and impatient. We wanted to be around other children. Everything was new and beautiful. The grass was bright green, and it was everywhere! Every house resembled a mini park. This was a utopia for a small girl from a concrete city. We had our own grass. I touched it, smelled it, and rolled in it. What an amazing place. What a miraculous change! School started and we began our immersion experience. We were introduced to our new teacher and classmates. We wanted to speak, ask questions, make friends, but we could not do any of that. We could not communicate, for we did not speak English. We were immediately informed of the golden rule: “Do not speak to each other in Spanish.” It was English language or silence. For fear of reproach, we used nonverbal communication when our teacher was not watching.

Our elementary school provided one ESL class. It was exciting to learn this language, and we applied ourselves wholeheartedly. The first year we were held back. Our classmates looked at us with caution. They were both curious and upset we were there. Before and after school, we dealt with animosity and harassment. We thought these acts were normal interactions in the new culture. The students had a negative view of foreigners, and made a point to continuously remind us. During school, we felt protected; however, the walk home provided endless opportunities for our classmates, and neighborhood members, to express their dislike both physically and verbally. This was our experience for the next five years.

Acquiring the language eased the harassment. Toward the completion of the sixth grade, we were able to blend in. Being in the GATE program was a definite advantage. We did not speak Spanish anymore, and we denied being part of the Mexican culture. At home, we spoke primarily English. We excluded our parents and older siblings who did not have command of the language.

We denied being foreign born, watched English only television, listened to English music, and tried everything to not stand out. We had assimilated completely.

The transition to Junior high was exceedingly painful. The seventh grade was extremely challenging. The new mix of students and the large environment felt foreign again. There was no protection from teachers, and we had to deal with an entirely new student body. Managing their attitudes toward us was a full-time job. Verbal aggressions and fights continued. The pressure to belong to a group was growing. My sister decided to identify with a group of Hispanics who were intimidating and feared. With low grades, she was still promoted to the ninth grade. In the eighth grade I fell further and further behind, and grades kept dropping, I was kicked out of the National Junior Honor Society, and the discipline issues commenced. I was punished with Saturday detention, and daily after school trash collection. For the first time, I was failing. Graduation was near, and I was told I had to pick up more trash as a way to make up some of my missed credits. I felt humiliated. My name was not included in the graduation program, and I did not attend the graduation.

I started high school and was determined to change the course of my future. My sister was having her own struggles in the 10th grade. I tried out for volleyball and made the Junior Varsity team. I had aspirations of regaining all I had lost in junior high. The 9th grade provided a new environment where I was determined to succeed. The student body was larger than junior high, and finding where I belonged was a constant search. I continued to participate in the volleyball team, and was promoted to the tenth grade with the lowest GPA possible. In the tenth grade I was on the varsity team. As long as I maintained a D average, I was eligible to play. I obtained a varsity letter, and was proud of my physical accomplishment; however, I lacked the money to buy the letterman jacket. I did not have the same success in my academics. During the same time, my sister had become so disengaged with school, she had dropped out before the end of the school year. She started to work, and I was left alone in high school.

I fell further behind, and discipline issues started again. I skipped school and was constantly late to class. A form of punishment for being late three times to class was the use of in-school suspension. In-school suspension (also known as In-house suspension) was used as a way to keep the student in school, while prohibiting any socialization with the student body. Students were to spend the day with security guards. The in-house suspension was held in a trailer. Desks were available with privacy panels. These panels prevented students from speaking to each other, but

were short enough to make sure heads were seen at all times. Lunch time was coordinated earlier, and breaks were during in-class time to avoid interaction with other students. Another disciplinary act was the use of Saturday school.

From the hours of 8 am to 12:00 p.m., students sat in the cafeteria benches and read, worked on homework, or stared at the wall. Rules were clear: no laying the head down, no breaks unless accompanied by a supervisor, no speaking, no eating, and no chewing gum. I spent an alarming time being excluded from my peers and classes. There was no end to the negative attention. There were entire class periods I was required to sit outside the principal's office. I was defiant toward some of the disrespectful teachers. Those same teachers would often kick me out of class to sit on the concrete floor, or send me to the principal's office for the remainder of the period. The principal would speak to me in anger and make statements about my future. I recall one instance the principal told me I would end up pregnant. It was rather confusing since I had no relations. She also expressed annoyance with me, and she felt I was a nuisance to the school environment. She demanded I wait for my after-school ride across the street from the school. The reactions and consequences for missing classes and arriving late seemed excessive.

My anger increased, and I felt more and more detached from my school and my peers. It was a constant struggle to try to catch up. There was no point. I was never going to graduate. Soon a meeting took place between the principal and my mother. It was suggested I attend a different school—a continuation school. My mother was outraged and declined the request. My older brother had attended such a school. They had assured her the move would help him catch up and graduate. Almost immediately after starting continuation school, he joined a gang and left school. She would not repeat the mistake.

Once again, I tried, but failed. I could not understand math and failed every test. Geography was a class entirely made up of drawing maps, while the instructor read the newspaper. History was another painful subject. Our teacher would turn down the air conditioner to the lowest setting. This was his strategy to keep us awake while he read out loud from the textbook. We could not put our heads down, and we were prevented from speaking.

Between the disengaged teachers, insensitive administrators, and students whom I no longer related to, I made the decision to leave school. I did not know where I would go, but I knew I had exceeded my time in that environment. No one cared if I showed up or not. It was

very easy to drop out, and no one ever questioned it. This was the culmination of years of neglect and detachment. I felt desperate and lost.

I left my home and moved into a convent. The convent provided low cost rooms to single women. I wanted to remove myself from my immediate environment. It was a peaceful place, and I started to work. I was hired for an entry level position in a mortgage company. I did not like it, but it was a job. I started to volunteer for different nonprofits and met a woman whom I confided in. I shared my high school experience with her. Once she knew I had dropped out of high school, she insisted I take the GED. I did not have the funds necessary to pay for the test, and I did not understand the purpose. She persisted, paid the fee, and I took the test. I obtained my GED. I thought that was enough.

Soon after, an energetic and persistent nun insisted I meet her friend at a local community college. Out of respect, I hesitantly agreed. Before my meeting was over, I was registered for community college, had a five-year plan, and a parking sticker. It happened so fast. I started college and immediately struggled with English and math. I failed several times and wrestled to stay motivated. I felt the inevitable would happen, and I would fail again. I wanted to drop out and start to work, but I could not disappoint the people who were investing their time and energy in me. Another nun volunteered to tutor me in English, and I went to the math lab religiously. I was trying to stay afloat. I could not let anyone down. I had built social capital with my mentors. Six painful and long years later, I obtained my first associate degree. I transferred to a local university, and I started working on my bachelor's degree. I felt more confident and enjoyed the environment. Before I knew it, I was attending my first graduation ceremony in 1999. I had my first cap and gown. I graduated!

I felt I could stop and be happy, but I still needed to make up for the past mistakes. I continued with my masters. I graduated from the University with my first 4.0 GPA. I was finished. I was finally redeemed. I started my career. After thirteen successful years, I returned to school. I am currently 46 years old and working on my Ph.D. in education with an emphasis in leadership studies.

My experience is not unique, and many students past and present are experiencing the same path of academic failure. Pushout rates continue to be high. My story is not mine alone. It is a story composed of people who cared, mentored and helped me when I needed it. I felt worthy and loved. I succeeded because I returned to my early excitement about education, and

met wonderful supportive people along the way. The story is one of hope and change. Many of us still experience stereotypes and discrimination. In today's climate, I feel compelled to share my story. A private, never-before-shared story. It is important for young people to understand there is hope, and we can achieve the American dream. For many years, I felt guilty and ashamed of my entrance to the United States, my culture, my language, and my high school dropout status.

There was no significant amount of degrees that could override any of the past, but I am no longer weakened by my history. I am an American citizen, a college graduate, a professional woman, and a firm believer in sharing my story of hope. I am strong and proud. I now understand I was not alone in my decision to drop out. This story may serve teachers and administrator who continue to feel discouraged and powerless with students who no longer have motivation and detach. I am here to prove hope never dies, dreams can come true, and the grass is indeed greener on this side. The side of life and self-fulfillment is available to all of us. I cannot speak harsh of illegal immigration, for I was too young to decide for myself, nor do I contend to know what drives a desperate family to seek a future elsewhere. I am simply sharing a story of failures and triumphs. A story of human kindness, and *my pathway to postsecondary education*. Dream big, make a difference and keep moving. This is my mantra. This is my belief. This is my message!

Reference

Anzaldúa, G., & Keating, A. (2009). *The Gloria Anzaldúa reader*. Durham : Duke University Press, 2009.