

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA, CHAMPAIGN
LAST 395- ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
PROJECT- CLIMBING THE LADDER: BRAZIL TO U OF I
Interviewee: Carla Da Silva
Interviewer: Meera Patel
Subject: Latin American Immigrant Stories (Brazil)
Date: May 2, 2010

LEADER

This is an interview with Carla Da Silva for the Latin American Immigrant Stories Oral History Project on stories about Brazil and Latin Americans' connections to the U of I. This interview took place on May 2, 2010 on the U of I campus.

BIOGRAPHY

For my project I conducted an Oral history on Carla Da Silva in order to learn about the Latin American country, Brazil. The purpose of this oral history is to learn about Latin America through the stories of immigrants that have some connection to this campus. My interviewee, Carla Da Silva, is a 42-year-old immigrant from Brazil who is completing her graduate studies here at the University of Illinois.

Carla was born and raised in Rio, Brazil. In Brazil, she completed her primary education and continued onwards to attend a public university. She completed a dual bachelor's degree in Portuguese and English in 1990 and then she taught English as a foreign language when she was only 19 years old. She then went on to do a masters in American Literature in Brazil as well. She excelled in her studies and graduated with

distinction.

Carla moved to the University of Illinois in 2007. It has been 3 years since she has been pursuing a graduate degree in Brazilian literature and she's also focusing her research on Travel Narratives in Brazilian Cinema.

She is currently a recipient of two separate fellowships: the Tinker fellowship and another fellowship. These fellowships aid her in doing her field research and help her during the next academic year.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Before meeting with my interviewee, I did a little background research of Brazil, basically just simple facts about the country. Brazil is the largest country in South America and is the only Portuguese speaking country in the Americas. Brazil is separated into 26 states. Its capital is Brasilia and Brazil is the world's eighth largest economy by GDP (Info Please, 2008). The form of government of Brazil is a democratic republic and the president is the head of state and head of government. Currently, Brazil's foreign policy is based on the country's position as a regional power in Latin America, a leader among developing countries, and an emerging world power. Brazil has a diverse and sophisticated services industry as well, including developed telecommunications, banking, energy, commerce, and computing sectors (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 2010). After having met with my interviewee for the first time, I was able to use her as a source to guide me in other directions in order to

research some things and places she had mentioned. My interviewee mentioned she was born in Rio, meaning the capital city of Rio de Janeiro, which is the sixth largest city in the Americas. This is a very large city, in which 6 million people reside. By looking at pictures of Rio, I saw there are many high-rise buildings and a bay, pretty much a very nice downtown setting. This helped me to better understand how Carla was able to love Chicago so quickly, because it probably was similar to her hometown. Also, there are many universities and colleges in Rio, which showed me that education is probably an important and encouraged aspect of life there.

After having spoken with Carla, she also gave me a lot of background knowledge about Brazil. Carla had grown up during a time of military dictatorship. In most of South America, the military took over the government from about 1964 to 1985. Amid a worsening economic crisis, the military intervened and thousands of people were arrested for no reason other than political dissent (Bamber, 2001). Carla was born in 1967 so about the time when she was going to attend college is when this dictatorship was coming to an end.

She also told me that by the mid 80's many people couldn't find jobs so they migrated to the US to work. They would do anything they could. However, for her, that was not the reason for her migration to America.

Although this time of military dictatorship was a horrible time for Brazil, Carla mentioned to me that it actually was very advantageous for her family. Carla's family was originally very poor. Both of her parents came from poor backgrounds and neither one of them had attended college. Her mother worked as a housekeeper and her father

was in the construction industry. Luckily for her father, during the military dictatorship, Brazil was going through a time of extreme expansion and modernization. Because of these changes and advances in the country, Carla's father always had many work opportunities through the continual building up of their city. Ironically, because of this military dictatorship, Carla's family was able to climb up the socioeconomic ladder from lower class to middle class.

DISCUSSION

During my interview with Carla, I learned a variety of different things. I learned about Brazil and its economic growth. I learned a little about the education system in Brazil and how public universities there are considered more prestigious than private universities. I also learned quite a lot of things about Carla's education and her current life in academia. However, what struck me as most fascinating was when she would talk about growing up during a time of military dictatorship. I had never heard of a military dictatorship before having spoken with Carla, so to me this whole concept was foreign. Also, she kept mentioning "signs of the middle class" which stood out to me as well. I was able to quickly make a connection between all these aspects of Carla's story and link it her migration to the United States.

For this interview I wanted to focus on the upward shift of socioeconomic status that Carla's family was able to achieve. Brazil is known to be a country in which it is extremely difficult for people to move up the social ladder. When I heard Carla's story, I thought it was absolutely fascinating that not only was her family able to pose as an exception to this belief, but also that the timing of this movement was during a time of

such extreme conditions.

Carla also mentioned to me about the minimal amount of education her parents had received. Both of her parents had come from extremely poor backgrounds themselves and for much of Carla's childhood, she was part of the lower class as well. The fact that a man with only elementary-level schooling was able to work and achieve the status of a middle class family in a country such as Brazil where shifting socially is very rare, is quite amazing and very note worthy. I wanted to share an excerpt from my interview with Carla.

The following is a portion of the interview when Carla is talking about her family's shifting status change:

S: That was a time when Brazil was going through, It was, there was a military dictatorship in Brazil from 64 through 85

P: Now what exactly do you mean by military dictatorship?

S: Yes, so it was a time that south America, it was a time of the cold war so the world was divided between the communist and US basically so there was this fear of the communist taking over the poor countries as it had happened to Cuba for instance. So there was this fear south America would become Cuba. So long story short, many countries were really stopping any leftist movement of the people to change the government against the elites. They use this excuse, in my opinion, of fighting against the communist, so that the elites could become even more powerful or that the military could take over

the government in order to stop the communists. So, it happened to Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, they were very famous for military dictatorships in the 60's and 70's and it happened in my country too. So, one thing that happened, although having a military dictatorship is horrible, is that they were building a lot. They wanted my country to like modernize the country so it also implied building roads, building dams, I dunno, building everything. And my father was in this field of civil construction so for my father specifically who was not involved in politics who was just this blue-collar person who was trying to have a better life for his family, but for my father it was a good time because it helped him to ascend socially. My father made it to the middle class because of that. He became a minor partner in a company so he bought his apartment; it was probably his mid early 30's. He had his car, he had a telephone line. Not many people had telephone lines at that time. Eventually he got a beach house. So nothing was luxurious nothing as like the best of the best, but we had, these are the signs we made it to the middle class- my mother didn't have to work and after starting the middle school we started studying in private schools. So we had all these signs of moving to the middle class so I think this time of historical change and economical change in Brazil helped my father make it to the middle class verses I dunno if my father was trying to do it now. You know I think the historical moment was so appropriate it helped my father because at the time because of the military they were building so much.

P: So I think in general the military dictatorship actually benefited you and your family way more than you know anything else...

S: I know it's a horrible thing to say because you know the military were horrible, they tortured people. My country was under censorship and people died and disappeared. But this is the irony and the paradox of everything that happens in life historically. Good people suffer and good people are also benefited in crazy different ways. Ya, so I think I also talked to you before the other time we talked about another thing about my parents. They had very little education. My mother didn't finish middle school, my father didn't finish elementary school. They gave importance to education of course. That is another item that is important to the middle class but I think they learned on the go what was important for their kids because they came from a background from people that didn't study much because they couldn't because I dunno the schools were very far and my brother and I were enrolled in a public school in Brazil and that was good, it was a good public school. But in Brazil the best schools are private school, they are better than public schools. Usually when you belong to the middle class, on of the... great part of your income goes towards education for your kids so I think they saw their neighbors, their friends, their kids would go to private schools, they would go to certain private schools. You also had to choose what kind of private school you're sending your kids to. And I think they realized oh I have to do that to my kids too. I think so it's also their understanding of the importance of a good educational background for their kids. They also learned on the go when they were having more money, more assets, and going up the social ladder.

P: So that was definitely very influential in your educational experience, I feel,

it seems if they hadn't made the move up the socioeconomic ladder then you, there are chances you may have not ended up here today.

S: Exactly, exactly.

P: You know, I feel that your parents had a strong influence, even though it may be indirect or even subliminal, it was a really strong influence.

S: That's true, and there is another sign of belonging to the middle class. Usually the children go to language institutes to learn English. That's another sign of being part of middle class. This is before globalization. Now everybody wants to learn English. But before, and I liked music, I liked film, so I was interested in that too. I think I was also influenced by my parents because I was more driven to learn. My brother, not always, my brother was maybe more into sports. But I was more interested in learning so I would ask my parents to enroll me in a language institute so I could learn English better because English at school was very basic, more for reading. I wanted to learn and understand music and the film so I think that's one more thing because I became fluent in English and eventually I started teaching English.

I think this segment of the interview is absolutely fascinating. It helps to understand so much about Carla's background and her shift in social class and it essentially helps to understand how she could even end up here at the University of Illinois doing what she is doing today.

From the above segment, it's pretty apparent that even though education was something Carla's parents did put an importance on, it wasn't until their social move to the middle class did they really realize that it's something they had to really consider for their children. Carla said "And I think they realized oh I have to do that to my kids too. I think so it's also their understanding of the importance of a good educational background for their kids. They also learned on the go when they were having more money, more assets, and going up the social ladder." I learned through this interview, that socioeconomic status could be a highly distinctive difference between someone who has a very advanced education compared to someone who does not continue to higher education.

This interview helped not only just me, but also Carla, to visualize and think about the connections between her origins and her past to her present role at the University of Illinois. Clearly, if it had not been for the upward shift of SES, chances are very high that Carla would not be a graduate student at our university today. Everything in her past seemed to be connected even though it was not apparent at first hand. When I had first asked Carla why she had decided to come to the United States and to the University of Illinois specifically, she said, "I don't know, I just wanted a career change and I realized I needed to be a part of academia."

At that point, I didn't think I would be able to make the connections I did. If it weren't for this Oral History Project, I would never have been able to dig deeper into Carla's life story and find out that even though that's what she tells people about why she came here, there is really much more to that story. If it weren't for the military

dictatorship taking place during the time of Carla's upbringing, her father would not have been able to get promoted in his job and more than likely would not have become a part of the middle class. If Carla's family had not become part of the middle class, education would still have been important, but not as important as it is for a middle class family. It wasn't until Carla's family became a middle class family that her parents were looking into private schools and even then, they were looking at specific private school because that's what their friends were doing as well. It is also because of their status that Carla's parents were able to send her to English classes because they had the money to do those kinds of things. Because of her interest in English, she was able to become fluent in the language and even teach it as a foreign language. This is also related to her interest in higher education and her chances of getting into a graduate program in the United States. Now that she knew English fluently, she could use that as well as keep her Brazilian origins; in order to do this, she wanted to find a program in which both of these things were offered and that's how she ended up at the University of Illinois's Portuguese Department.

Now that Carla has been here at the University of Illinois for about 3 years and is fully back in academia, she still loves it. She's motivated more than ever to continue on with her graduate degree and her research. She not only helps to diversify our campus but she is also a connection for our campus and our students to Brazil and its culture. Carla teaches courses including Brazilian Cinema, Brazilian Literature and Culture, and Portuguese as a foreign language. Clearly she is staying connected to her Brazilian roots in some way or form every day that she is here. While in Brazil, Carla had decided to go back to school, and now she's entrapped in it and fascinated by our university and the

numerous resources and libraries we have to offer. Everything our university has to offer is only aiding in Carla's current educational goals and her future plans as well.

CONCLUSION

In my opinion, this oral history has been extremely valuable. It's not only a great source of new knowledge for myself, but it was also a great way for my interviewee to gain some perspective on her own life and why she came to make the decisions she made. This interview and all of its contents will last a lifetime and more. It is now a permanent source for research, background information, or can even be a means for family members of Carla generations to come to be able to learn something about her. I think through Oral History, the interviewer as well as the listeners can learn vast new information that is much more interesting and detailed than how it would be learned through a textbook. I know I would never have come to know such details about Brazil such as their military dictatorship and its effects on the country if it had not been for this Oral History project.

As a recommendation to the University, I would highly suggest that students in all fields and majors should have the opportunity to take this type of a class in which they can be exposed to this unique method of research. I think this type of research is valuable data for students as well as the university archives. I think our school should help promote students and professors in conducting Oral Histories by aiding them financially by various grants and also by advertising to students that these types of classes are offered and what it entails. Personally, this class and this experience has been a wonderful opportunity and I am so glad that I did stumble upon this course. Again, I

would highly suggest it for any other student.

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