“The personal’s political, the political’s academic”: Intersections of race, class, and gender in narratives of Latina graduate students

“The Power”

Sometimes it is hard to understand why we were put on this Earth.
Feelings of uncertainty are lonely and wish to be held.
Held by a power of knowledge, knowledge that tells us, “we are going to make it!”
Having Faith and Belief in oneself is the “power.”

One must know that Believing in oneself will prevail in any situation...good or bad.
This is where most have trouble, Believing in themselves.
When they do, they are strong and ready to battle any situation.
But these thoughts do not remain and are often lost in the search for answers.

–Mario Urbina, La Carta Informativa, 1985

The poem above was written in 1985 by a Latino student at a university in the Midwestern section of the United States. In the poem, the student discusses the powerful influence of education, and says the recognition of knowledge and strength in oneself can ‘battle any situation’. For Latina doctoral students at this same university, the power of knowledge and self-empowerment are critical tools for survival. As a McNair Scholar, I was informed of the difficulties that historically underprivileged students of color experience throughout their years of graduate school. For this reason, I decided to construct my project for my Ethnography of the University class around the personal and academic experiences and struggles of Latina women, both who have completed their degrees and who are on the way to completing degrees.
The following pages include what I would like to call, a vault of knowledge. In this vault there are published research and narratives that discuss issues of race, class, and gender and the conflicts that come with those intersections during one’s graduate education. I am going to open this vault and unleash these stories to the world of academia and to those people who are unaware of what it can be like for a Latina doctoral student at a Midwest university.

**Methodology:**

For my Ethnography of the University research project, I conducted eight interviews throughout the 2006 Fall semester. I contacted the few Latina graduate students, faculty, and staff members I knew on campus. With the help of those women, I gathered a snowball sample of other Latina graduate students. I interviewed one Mexican American from Texas, a Mexican/Anglo American from Chicago, a Puerto Rican from New York, a Puerto Rican/Anglo American from New York, a Cuban/Dominican American from New York, a Puerto Rican/Jamaican American from New York, a Chilean who grew up in parts of South America and the United States, and a Cuban born in Cuba and who grew up in New Jersey. The ages of the women range from 24 to 47 years old. The number of years each woman has been at the University cumulatively ranges from four years to over ten years. All the women were in departments in the humanities and social sciences. Each interview was conducted separately and at various locations throughout campus, such as their offices or public eatery spaces. On average, the interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half.

Although I did not conduct any formal observations of my interviewees, I do make reference to a few occasions in which I came into contact with these Latina women
throughout the semester. Also, as a way to understand the campus climate in regards to underprivileged students of color, I include a few texts I came across while spending some time in the university’s Archives Research Center. Much of the texts I include were published in the 1980s because two of my interviewees attended graduate school during that time. Including these texts, such as the poem at the beginning of this project, are important because they reflect the general atmosphere and struggles Latinas experienced at the time.

Finally, for the literature, I consulted sources that discussed issues of students’ familial upbringing, stressors, personal time, and department climates. As a way to include theory into this ethnography, I decided to use a source that discusses critical race theory and LatCrit theory. Both theories will ultimately be used help to support the concept that issues of race, class, and gender hold significant implications in the narratives of each of my interviewees as well as this ethnography.

Literature Review:

Although limited in quantity, issues, and people studied, a significant amount of research has been published regarding Latinos in education. When I reviewed the literature on Latinos in higher education during the summer I completed my McNair research paper, I came across a great deal of information on the experiences of Latino undergraduates. The fact that I was able to read about myself and my peers in education was great, but as I began searching for articles on Latina graduate students, I was faced with a challenge because little has been published, specifically, research on the Latina experience in graduate school. What I did find, however, was a number of articles on the general graduate experience, which seldom mentioned Latinos let alone Latinas. Many of
the articles discussed specific research fields and then somewhat more relative, the
gender dynamic within doctoral programs. I also came across scholarship about Latino
faculty experiences. Even though the issue of gender discrimination and the stress put on
Latino faculty members is important for everyone who participates in education, and
although I refer to these topics throughout, what I found to be interesting was that the
lives of Latina graduate students have been somewhat non-existent.

The majority of the scholarship I encountered and decided to include in my paper,
which I used to stimulate questions and discussion topics for my interviews, have all been
written in some form of personal narrative by Latino faculty and graduate students. The
fact that these forms of educational literature use personal stories as a tool for inquiry,
research, and resistance reveals the marginalization of people of color within higher
education, as well as the need for a space to expose and express the intricate experiences
of underprivileged students of color. In their research on critical race and LatCrit theories
in relation to the lives of Chicano graduate students, Solorzano and Yosso (2001) write,
“Delgado (1989) uses a method called counter-storytelling and argues that it is both a
method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e. those on the
margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power
and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse-the majoritarian story
(Delgado, 1993)” (p. 475). With counter-storytelling and the interviews I conducted,
Latinas can acquire the space and power necessary to include themselves in academia.
Along with the interviews I use,

“These counter-stories can serve at least four theoretical, methodological, and
pedagogical functions: (1) they can build community among those at the margins
of society by putting a human and familiar face to educational theory and
practice; (2) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society’s center
by providing a context to understand and transform established belief systems; (3) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (4) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone” (p. 475).

For Reyes and Rios (2005), first hand accounts of educational experiences can stimulate open dialogue and concrete change. Unlike Solorzano and Yosso’s use of Delgado’s counter-storytelling technique, Reyes and Rios say, “Consideration of autobiographical experiences, coupled with careful analysis of policy making regarding Latino individuals, needs to be cultivated in higher education” (p. 378).

With their technique of writing an autobiography, Reyes and Rios (2005) discuss their personal experiences in education. Each of their autobiographies begins with their family and personal histories and perceptions of education. Both authors discuss how despite a limited amount of college degrees within their families, education was important and was seen as a tool for opportunities. The first author, Reyes, writes, “In my family, education was always emphasized as the marker of becoming someone to be respected and someone who could have better opportunities in life” (p. 379). They also discuss their backgrounds and how as a result of their economic and ethnic backgrounds, they encountered some challenges, but managed to overcome challenges of cultural capital and later succeed in education. They also write about how high school and undergraduate years are difficult to complete for Latinos, but how graduate school also comes with another set of obstacles and complexities. In one section, Reyes focuses on her graduate school experience and writes, “Three themes come to mind as I remember my experiences: (a) low expectations, (b) nurturing of codependency and overreliance on mentors, mostly the overextended Latino faculty, and (c) isolation from mainstream
students” (p. 381). Through these three topics, it becomes evident that being in graduate school is not easy, especially for Latina graduate students. Both authors go on to write about their first-hand experiences as faculty members and the continual struggles they face as Latinas in academia.

Along with providing counter-stories as a tool for resistance and change in higher education, Solorzano and Yosso (2001) also discuss the importance of critical race theory and LatCrit theory in examining the relationship between education and Latinos. For these scholars,

“A CRT (critical race theory) in education starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic, permanent and, in the words of Russell (1992), ‘a central rather than marginal factor in defining and explaining individual experiences of the law’ (pp. 762-763). Although race and racism are at the center of a critical race analysis, we also view them at their intersection with other forms of subordination such as gender and class discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993)” (p. 472).

With the idea of racism being permanent and part of the focus of discrimination, LatCrit theory also states racism is institutionalized and influential to educational experiences, especially among Latino experiences. Solorzano and Yosso write,

“A LatCrit theory in education is a framework that can be used to theorize and examine the ways in which race and racism explicitly and implicitly impact on the educational structures, processes, and discourses that effect People of Color generally and Latinas/os specifically…LatCrit scholars in education acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize co-existing with their potential to emancipate and empower” (p. 479).

In their study on gender differences among graduate students, Kurtz-Costes et al. (2006) interviewed graduate students about the impact gender has on their graduate school experiences. Although this study lacked information on how race and class interact with gender, a number of issues discussed are beneficial to understanding the
general atmosphere graduate students interact with and experience. This study is also significant in that the information discussed is without a doubt relatable to the Latina graduate students’ experiences. Kurtz-Costes et al. begin by saying, “…women may face greater obstacles and may approach the challenges of doctoral studies differently than men” (p. 137). The authors go on to say,

“Numerous theorists have argued that academia continues to be traditionally male and patriarchal, in spite of growing numbers of women faculty and doctoral students. The majority of senior ranks and powerful positions at most universities are occupied by men, and especially White men. Women tend to be less well integrated in their departments than men and frequently do not benefit from mentoring and networking that is available to male faculty and students. Perhaps most importantly, the values found in academic departments—emphasizing status, productivity, competition and self-promotion—are traditional male values. In contrast, the traditional female values of nurture, cooperation, service and humility are a liability in such settings” (p. 152).

Although these words are debatable, it is valid to say that white men do hold positions of power throughout university campuses. Even though these statements have been made to include all women, these ideas of white power and the challenges women face are relative to Latina graduate students specifically because of their complex lives and limited positions and voice in higher education.

Other issues that resulted from this study were the lack of balance between graduate students’ personal and academic lives, various levels and types of daily stress, and relationships with faculty. Kurtz-Costes et al. write, “Although conditions vary across countries (e.g., in Belgium, financial support of doctoral students is relatively generous), some of the common stressors experienced by doctoral students are finances, time management, family and sexual relationships, self-expectations, frequent evaluation and volume at work” (p. 140). With their study and similar research the lives of graduate students’ have been constructed as nuanced; no longer are graduate students perceived
simply as teaching assistants and academically focused. More specifically, for Latinas, the intersections of race and class will further complicate these dynamic lives.

The other major issue that arose in the Kurtz-Costes et al. research study was the importance of positively stable student-faculty relationships. They write for graduate students,

“Relationships with faculty supervisors are regarded by many students as the most important aspect of their doctoral study experiences. In addition to influencing the quality of training the student receives and access to professional opportunities, the mentoring relationship often shapes motivational and affective aspects of the student’s progress, such as his/her level of self-confidence, commitment to the field of study and whether the student persists. Student’s perceptions of respect and friendliness on the part of the faculty may affect their goal setting and achievement, and have been found to be a better predictor of success than any demographic characteristics of students” (p. 139).

Along with establishing quality relationships with faculty, Kurtz-Costes et al. also found for some students, similarities with faculty members were important and influential in their relationships. They write, “According to a number of psychological theories, people look to individuals who are perceived as similar to themselves in terms of personality characteristics, background, race and sex as models to emulate; thus, women role models would demonstrate and legitimate the professional role for women students” (p. 139).

Just as Reyes and Rios write about the personal struggles they encountered throughout their educational tracks, Garcia (2005) exposes the frustration felt in graduate school and at the level of faculty membership from feelings of being silenced as a result of race, gender, and class differences. As a way to address the racialized, gendered, and classed issues that Latinas face in higher education, she specifically uses counter-stories of faculty to help navigate through the nuanced experiences of Latinas in higher education. Some of the issues that surfaced include the difficulty in finding quality
mentorship, internal isolation and blame, “academic ethnocentrism” and an ethnicized
double standard, a hostile environment, and subtle discrimination. Concerning the idea
that Latinas in higher education demonstrate academic ethnocentrism, Garcia writes,
“Scholars are often socialized and/or determined by and conform to western elite interests
(Harrison, 1991). Thus, faculty of color often encounter particular obstacles when their
research falls under issues of race, ethnicity, or post-coloniality or challenges mainstream
theoretical approaches” (p. 264). Here she refers to the idea that Latina scholars receive
criticism when their scholarship interests with minority issues. Not only are Latina
faculty members marginalized when they study and possibly breakdown issues related to
discrimination, but they also experience hostile situations when it comes to the general
atmosphere around their departments and university. Garcia writes, “Dra Valencia
reflected on the fact that if she didn’t get along with others, the blame was placed on her
because she was not ‘friendly.’ She counters that issues of collegiality have nothing to do
with issues of friendliness; rather they have everything to do with race, gender, and
power hierarchies” (p. 269). Finally, Garcia discusses the routine acts of discrimination
that Latinas face as she writes,

“Gender and racial micro-aggressions-automatic acts of disregard that stem from
unconscious attitudes of superiority, which often materialize in private
interactions and conversations-are incessant reminders that one does not belong
and/or is inferior. Although they are pervasive in the lives of Latina faculty, they
are seldom recognized, investigated, and/or policed” (p. 270)

At this point, the idea of power in academia surfaces and it becomes evident that Latina
lives have been ignored in academia.

Although Torres (2006) focuses on the experiences of Latino faculty, just like
Garcia, he also presents valid issues that are lived and recur as challenges for Latinas. In
his essay on Latino visibility in academia, Torres sheds light on how efforts to create a diverse atmosphere within higher education are often contradictory and under par. Like Garcia, Torres reflects on the idea that Latino scholars are perceived to conduct research on their own people, and how because of their minority status, they are also pressured into this type of research. Torres writes, “In some sense, there’s an expectation that we will study our own, that we will somehow magically ‘bring’ diversity with us, not only in our daily interactions, but also in our work in the classroom” (p. 66). Not only are Latino scholars pressured, and even stereotyped as the bearers of ethnic studies, they are perceived as strategic and necessary to universities. Although this is true to the extent that more Latinos are needed to stimulate a critical learning environment, for Torres, universities have grown to be one-dimensional in that their missions of multiculturalism are not supported by action:

“Having read their bell hooks (or, at the very least, having heard some of her arguments), diversity and hiring committees at many universities understand the power and transformative potential of having the voices of ‘others’ in the classroom. They know that these voices have the potential to create spaces that challenge the hegemony of Anglo and Western culture in new and creative ways. But what many of these same people do not admit to or understand is that we cannot take the transformative potential of diversity that hooks advocates seriously until real material changes are put into practice in the everyday performance of the academy” (p. 66-67).

For Torres and other scholars, it has become increasingly difficult to openly critique and change the dynamic of white power and privilege within academia. He writes that “Until the academy can make these deep structural changes, it remains an institution in which diversity is always already prescribed and predictable, a superficial ‘celebration’ that demands an odd performativity on the part of its captured subalterns” (p. 67).

Archived texts:
As mentioned in the introduction, the poem written by Mario Urbina sheds light on the pertinent concerns Latinos have within higher education. While looking at various boxes in the Archives Research Center at this Midwestern university, I also found an issue of “La Carta Informativa”, a monthly newsletter, from 1980. In “La Carta”, the editorial discusses how the 1980s will be a critical decade full of assessment and implementation which will be used to effectively help Latino people. The editorial states, “A review of the social issues of the 70’s will reveal that for the majority of Latinos in the United States, the present is a time of economic crisis, of cultural indifference, of irrelevant and deficite education, and of unequal representation in professional jobs and institutions of higher learning. Thus, the 1980s’s will demand from all of us a more critical analysis of the issues that are confronting our people and a determination to change the present conditions under which the majority of our people live. So that as we move into the next decade, our people and our community, ‘el barrio y la colonia’, will develop a new consciousness and a new resolve.”

Another important document I found was the list of demands that came out of Latino students’ protests for fair treatment of Latinos on campus. The following are some of the demands that specifically referred to Latino graduate students, faculty, and staff: “We demand more recruitment of Latinas/os to the…Graduate School,” “We demand for more recruitment of groups that are historically underrepresented,” and “We demand more recruitment of Latinas/os in higher offices of Administration and Deanship.”

All three documents (the poem, “La Carta,” and the list of demands) help to establish and reflect the unstable climate that existed at this particular university in the 1980s and 1990s. While looking as these texts and listening to my interviewees tell their stories, it became evident that although there has been some general progress at this university, much of the same issues of the “brown” struggle and low rates of Latino enrollment and retention continue to exist.
Perceptions of and reasons for education:

Six of the eight Latinas interviewed were raised in working class homes. A number of their parents did not complete high school or college. Beatriz, a fourth year doctoral student from Texas, said her mother did not complete second grade and her father did not complete third grade. There were, however, parents of these Latina graduate students who did receive bachelor’s degrees. Anastasia, a sixth year doctoral student from New York, said her mother received a master’s degree. The parents who did receive higher education degrees were non-traditional students. Rosie, a third year graduate student from Chicago, said,

“My mom really valued education. She was a nontraditional student so she took a few classes at community college while she was working after she graduated high school. But then joined the military and went back to school much later while she was raising us. So she really pushed education as a vehicle for mobility.”

What is interesting here is that these Latinas represent diverse levels of education attainment among Latinos. And because of these various, and often times, low levels of educational attainment which exist throughout their immediate and extended families, each of their families perceived education as important.

One of the most significant statements said by a couple of the women was how for Latinas in doctoral programs and their families, education was perceived not only as a tool for social mobility, but also as a tool of resistance. Celia, a Latina PhD who was born outside of the United States, but grew up mostly in New Jersey, said, “‘Education is the one thing that cannot be taken away from you!’ That was shoved down our throats ever since I could remember.” Anastasia also mentioned how education was perceived as
critical for social justice: “My mom used to say, ‘Education is the only thing [higher powers] can’t take away from you.’”

Although educational attainment was viewed as crucial for economic and social reasons, many of the women shared thoughts on how going to graduate school to obtain a PhD was not necessary, and that the process of each of their doctoral programs was not always completely understood. Cynthia, a seventh year doctoral student from New York said, “They don’t really understand what I’m doing. I mean, they know what college is. They want their kids to graduate high school and go to college. But beyond like a bachelor’s they don’t, you know what I mean, like they don’t really know the difference between like a master’s or a PhD.” Beatriz also expressed similar thoughts about her family’s understanding of her enrollment in a PhD program: “They ask me about what I do, but I don’t think they necessarily understand the whole process…They value [education] very much, but in my particular case, I don’t think they expected that I would go on to pursue a graduate degree.” It can be said that because of general low levels of education attainment among Latinos, these parents and other family members do not or cannot completely understand the pursuit of a degree higher than a bachelor’s. Cynthia goes on to later explain the idea of Latina women in graduate programs is “foreign” because economic stability and graduate degrees are limited throughout her home community.

For these Latinas, education is important in their lives, but at the same time, some said they could have survived had they not continued onto graduate school. And just like some of their families, a few of my Latina interviewees also expressed they thought pursuing a graduate school degree was a foreign concept. Cynthia said,
“I think like where I come from, it’s so foreign too that it’s hard to think of something as so vitally important when it’s not anything that’s ever been really a part of your life, like you’re family life, you know what I mean. Umm, so it’s a priority, meaning that I want to finish, but I also kind of feel, that if for some reason I shouldn’t, I’m not gonna be jumping off any rooftops if I don’t finish this. Umm, and I’m not sure if that’s because I was working for ten years before I started grad school, so I kinda feel like I know that there are bigger and more important things in the world. So, I have a different take on it than someone who went directly from undergrad to grad school. That’s what I’ve noticed coming here.”

For Salma, another Latina PhD born outside the United States, but who also grew up in various parts of the US, did not know much about graduate school. However, her curiosity and confidence in her educational abilities led her to pursue a graduate degree. She said, “…I never heard of grad school. And then I went to college and everybody there was much richer and much whiter than I was. And they were all talking about grad school, and I never heard of it. But then half of them were real knit wits, and I thought, well if these knit wits could go to grad school, I could go to grad school.” The idea that Salma could survive graduate school just as much as the whiter and richer students suggests a type of resistance to the dominant society that is often represented in higher education.

Thalia also perceives education as type of resistance, but one that is economic. She said, “I’m in graduate school because I need to help my family move to a better place. And, you know, that means just so that my mother doesn’t have, like we don’t have to worry so much financially…I know it makes [my mother] really proud.” Thalia’s statement of being in graduate school to help her family’s economic advancement is significant because a few more of my interviewees expressed similar thoughts, which suggests that for Latinas educational attainment is not always an independent act.
From the discussions about Latinas being enrolled in graduate school and because they have been historically underrepresented, many of them expressed feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence about their academic abilities. Along with familial pressures, financial burdens, and hostile environments, for some, self-doubt was viewed as an additional stressor.

Cynthia: “The other major level of stress for me is more kind of self-imposed. I go through a lot of, umm, ‘I’m not smart enough.’ And I’ve said this to like a couple of people in private, and we all kind of agree, but nobody ever says it out loud. A lot of us feel like we’re gonna get found out and we they find out, they’re gonna ask us to leave. Not that they’re gonna find out that we’re people of color, but they’re gonna find out that we’re really not supposed to be here, and we’re not as smart as everybody else…Especially a lot of other women of color feel like that. It’s amazing to me, but yet we all act like we know what we’re doing. And I guess nine times out of ten we do know what we’re doing, but for some reason we keep thinking like we’re not smart enough. So that stresses me out all the time.”

Thalia: “I tell people, ‘I’m not smart. I just work hard.’ Things don’t come really easy to me…There have been lots of moments of like, self-doubt and not feeling like you have the confidence. But I’ve been really blessed, again, like with people that will push me when I don’t have that push.”

**Family/ Social sphere:**

When Thalia mentioned she is in graduate school to help her family, it became evident how important and influential each of these Latinas’ families are in their lives.

None of the women, except for one, are from Illinois, and as a result, many of them at times found graduate school to be difficult. Thalia said,

“Being away from my mom is really hard. I think it’s really hard for her to be away from me…That makes me really sad because I don’t like her to feel distraught about anything. She relies on me a lot. So when I’m not there, and things get chaotic, or what not, yeah, it causes me a lot of stress because I can’t do what I gotta do to kind of handle or take care of her or calm her down or what not. But in terms of being away, sometimes it’s good because like when there’s like a whole bunch of crap going on, if you’re away, you could sort of handle it from a distance and you’re not involved in the immediacy of it.”
Beatriz also felt being away from home, despite its pressures, can also be beneficial.

“You know it’s only in the last couple of years that I really felt that I need to go back home because at first, to tell you the truth, I don’t know and that surprised me a lot, but I felt pretty comfortable being away. In a way, I felt like I needed to get away from home. Even though I was twenty six, I felt like I was in a way very sheltered by my parents. I’m the youngest of eight…And so I kind of felt in order for me to grow I needed to get away. And so the first four years I didn’t really miss it that much…But in the last two years, as I’ve seen that my parents are aging, I’ve really felt that I need to go back.”

However, the statements she said about her family seem to suggest her family may feel more uneasy than the other families with the idea of her being so far from home. In a way, her family appears to be more traditional than some others as she says,

“I’m the youngest and I’m single, so this is a big deal for them, the fact that, umm, that I’m here, but I really don’t have any responsibility to anyone other than myself. So for them it’s difficult to understand and to accept the fact that I’m away from home, and that I’ve decided to be away from home to pursue something. It’s not that they don’t want me to succeed academically or anything like that, but I think they just wish, especially my father, that, umm, after having graduated with a bachelor’s, I would have started working and stayed home.”

Although Rosie is the only Latina from Chicago and is the closest to her family, she also said it can be difficult and demanding having to commute and spend personal time with her family while being a graduate student:

“My family likes to have me and my sister around, especially since my sister’s here. If my sister has to go in for anything, I will go in for anything…I think had I gone to school far away, my family wouldn’t be used to me, but they’re used to me coming down whenever they want me to come down. And that kind of takes its toll. Driving two hours to Chicago, and then going to Chicago, you don’t get any work done.”

Although there appeared to be various pressures, which were not necessarily bad, for many of these Latina women, the time spent with their families was seen as an activity to relieve stress and occupy their personal time. Not all the women were in romantic relationships, but for the few who were, overall, they viewed having a
companion as helpful, especially in times of stress due to academic work and department politics. Beatriz, who has been dating her boyfriend for about ten months said,

“I feel like it’s helped me emotionally. I just feel more relaxed. And I feel like I can at least talk to someone and tell him about my, a group of friends and I call it academic sorrows, penas académicas, so I feel like at least there’s someone I can talk to and who will listen to me. And also with him being outside the academic world, I don’t know, I just find that comforting, in a way.”

Along with boyfriends, friendships were also perceived as invaluable throughout graduate school. Above, Beatriz mentions how her and her friends discuss penas académicas because of the high demands and departmental issues that exist. For some Latinas, discussions about penas académicas are weekly rituals and occur in social spaces, such as bars.

One of the most significant and consistent topics that sprouted from discussions about personal lives and friendships was the idea that specifically in graduate school, friendships (along with relationships with mentors) are representative of academic and personal politics. When asked if they could balance their personal and academic lives or if they felt they were separate, a few of them said their personal and academic lives coincide and cannot be viewed or lived as dualities. Rosie said, “Yeah, I have a personal life, but the more I’m in graduate school, the more my personal life intersects with my politics and my work….” Anastasia also had similar feelings stating, “They’re not disconnected to begin with, right. So the personal’s political, the political’s academic. They’re all intertwined.”

There was no doubt these Latinas were influenced by what they studied and their statuses throughout society of being Latina women from predominantly working class backgrounds. For these reasons and the access to research and knowledge about the
world, many of them mentioned how they try to surround themselves with people who are socially aware of race, class, and gender oppression. Rosie said, “I think after you experience some time in the department, you form friendships along political lines. That’s not like a racial line. I think those people whose politics are intersect with their research who intersect with how they live their lives kind of gravitate to each other.” She went on to say, “I put people on my intellectual committee who are also, who I think are committed to the same things that I am, not only my in education, but in real life. So people who live their politics…And that faculty tends to be supportive because they’ve come from similar situations, some of them.”

Although both Anastasia and Rosie said they surrounded themselves by positive and socially conscious individuals, Cynthia said the politics that she lives by can sometimes be problematic, especially when she interacts with family members who are not necessarily as educated. She said, “You know it’s funny, I think like when you come from where I come from and you get like book smart and then you get like politically smart, too, it makes going home hard.”

However, a couple of the women stated they experienced moments of loneliness and tension with friends from back home and the social spaces around campus. Thalia, in particular, stated that attending school in a small town away from her family and friends sometimes made her feel lonely and unsatisfied with the social settings of graduate school:

“I don’t think it’s a really big social life, personal life. Probably the majority of the time, I feel very lonely. And that graduate school is like this bubble that encapsules you, that even if you want to have a personal life, you’re like, ‘Oh shit, I gotta meet deadline’…And I think also too, like, sometimes I feel really different than other graduate students, and this is why graduate students of color too in that, you know, I’m not here on some elitist movement…and there’s like
this streetness about me that just doesn’t fit well with grad life...But also, graduate students are kind of boring...And they sit around and talk about research all the time, and I don’t really care to talk about research all the time...it’s like it’s not my identity.”

Thalia has been in graduate school for five years and will soon complete her degree, and not only did she find her fellow peers to be less stimulating, she went on to mention how her relationships with her friends back in New York have changed (this is also due to her enrollment in Midwest universities for the past eight or nine years). She said,

“I think that recently, particularly as I’m getting older, and maybe this just comes with age...I don’t talk to my girlfriends back home as often like I used to...there’s a little bit of that disconnect...People back home sometimes get upset, umm, it makes me feel guilty that I don’t take more time out, but I can’t be on the phone for hours when I need to write a paper or I need to go collect data.”

Both Anastasia and Rosie, who are also good friends, said they try to go out to local bars and clubs to unwind and de-stress. Because Anastasia is in her sixth year of graduate school she was able to reflect on the social dynamics of the campus and local community, which over the past few years have begun to culturally diversify their entertainment spaces. She’s says,

“Culturally and personally it was very difficult, coming straight through, there was no type of really preparation in terms of the graduate school experience or transition...When I got here, there was like no radio stations. I mean La Casa [the Latino cultural center] was primarily, it wasn’t until this year they had a grad outreach, which we’ve been waiting here for a long time. So there was not outreach at all.”

She goes on to say,

“Culture wise there wasn’t really a space on campus at all. The Regent was every other Friday. They played Latin music, which was mostly geared towards white crowds who were taking salsa lessons or tango lessons or anything like that. There would always be like a table of undergrads. But I mean it’s changed drastically now, where I can go to Soma tonight. I can go to KoFusion on Saturday. There’s at least three to four places now that I can go just to hear Spanish music.”
Funding:

Seven of the eight women interviewed stated funding their graduate education was a major source of stress. Many of them related their economic strains to their economic backgrounds of working class families and to their general upbringing. All of them have had a combination of the following funding plans: fellowships, teaching assistantships, graduate assistantships, tuition wavers, loans, and personal savings from outside employment. Among all the women, the general consensus was that receiving a fellowship was the best type of funding because it provided less stress, and more time to focus on coursework and writing a dissertation. Out of all the women, Cynthia seemed to have more financial problems because she had significant amounts of loans to pay back. Many of the women also said at times they received comments from their family members about their economic situations and the current state of employment, or lack thereof. A few, like Rosie, mentioned she knew her family was supportive of her decision to attend graduate school as long as they knew she would be able to support herself. She says,

“As long as I could convince them that I could support myself, and that I wasn’t gonna have to rely on them for money or wasn’t gonna be without a job, then I would be fine. So when I got the letter from U of I saying that I would get funding, then my mom was like, ‘OK, then take it.’ even though at times she’s like, ‘Don’t you just want to get your masters and a get a job now cuz you still don’t make a lot of money’.”

Salma said she was poor when she was a graduate student during the 1980s because not only did she receive low wages, but she had to support a husband and two young children on the amount of money she was paid during her graduate school years. She said,
“First of all, I was poor. You know you have children, you can’t afford to buy as many books, make as many copies. So you had to spend more time in the library. Lots of time constraints because, you know, you can’t just study. You had to nurse babies and stuff like that. But also a huge inspiration to get done because you had to feed babies. I had no time to have like theoretical or existential crises because I just had to get done and feed those babies. It actually makes you be more productive.”

Here, Salma discusses the economic strains that can be placed on women in graduate school. She goes on to say, “When I was a grad student I was really poor. But it’s hard to say, according to cultural capital I was middle class. But according to economic capital, I was certainly poor; below the poverty line the whole time I was in grad school-on food stamps; not enough money to pay the bills.” Although Salma dealt with tensions of being financially poor while simultaneously being perceived as socially wealthy due to her education, she found her familial stress helped her with her over all success.

Although Salma was able to complete her degree and move her family into a higher economic and social bracket, many of the current Latina graduate students said they were struggling to maintain adequate funding. Similar to other interviewees, Thalia said having to work during the first year of graduate school can be detrimental. She said, “I think as a first year, they really need to go out of their way to make sure that first year graduate students aren’t really working…That is really the best sort of position for you to be in. It’s not just academic stuff that’s crazy, but it’s transitions. And there’s lots of psychological cause that comes with transitioning and stress and everything. So, while some students just get to be students, I’ve never had that option in my entire life, I had to work and I had to teach…it was very, very stress. The transition, trying to see if I fit into this graduate life and then having all of these responsibilities, and being this authority figure, you know, for a class of undergraduate students. But I think it’s also really rewarding.”

Some also mentioned how in graduate school, funding given to graduate school is one way Latina students, in particular, have been marginalized and have been deprived of certain opportunities. Rosie said even though pursuing a graduate degree will help her in
the future, she said education in general is problematic for a number of reasons. In terms of funding, she specifically said, “I think there’s a certain deadline for fellowships. But I’m also not a great test taker. And I think a lot of fellowships rely mostly on your GRE scores. It’s probably really class bias, and class bias usually means a racial bias and other kinds of bias….” Anastasia also experienced difficulties with funding her graduate education. She said because she has had personal conflicts with her department, funding her dissertation research was especially difficult to come by. She said, “I applied for funding, and I was told my research was offensive. So I didn’t get funding.”

**Department Climate:**

The idea that Anastasia was denied funding for research by her department is one example of denial that can exist at the graduate level, particularly for Latina women. Although the denial for funding can be perceived as a subtle way to deploy racialized, classed, and gendered discrimination, it can also be viewed as an extreme act of discrimination. Out of all the women interviewed, Anastasia’s experiences within her department were the most challenging and disheartening to listen to. Anastasia said for her first couple of years on campus there were a number of conflicts between her, faculty, and her peers which dealt with issues of race, class, and gender. She also said because she was not a passive student, the use of her voice to make changes within her department were viewed as problematic. The idea that she used her voice and only expressed her opinions about her department created a great deal of frustration for her and in turn she was targeted about a variety of issues. Because Anastasia made her department feel uncomfortable, she said there have been conflicts regarding her research, which deals with Latina/o Studies. She went on to say she thinks her department is racist and that
“Faculty in the department have said that ethnic studies doesn’t constitute a legitimate field of study. Latino studies, or ethnic studies isn’t something that you’re trained in. If you’re of color, therefore you can do it. So they think that we’re talking out of our asses even though we theorize in the same way they do.” Along with perceptions that research on Latina/o issues is irrelevant and not receiving adequate funding, other conflicts in the department, such as the use of derogatory words and unfair treatment compared to white faculty and students, have caused Anastasia to become disconnected from her department. She said, “If I didn’t have class, I was not in that building, and there’s reasons for that…When there’s a bunch of us in the room, they really get scared whether it’s faculty or some of the other white students they’re very uncomfortable because that was their space. They don’t know how to handle it.”

Rosie also mentioned conflicts regarding race, class, and gender. Many of the issues Rosie talked about were similar to Anastasia’s experiences. She said faculty felt her research interests were not legitimate because she also studies social issues, and said, “For me, when you’re interested in studying something like race or racism, you’re thought of to be something less than a scholar…I’ve had faculty members tell me you shouldn’t study theory because they’re just not relevant for you….I think all people theorize their own lives…to be told that, I think, is kind of to degrade my scholarship.” She went on to say that when students of color inhabit an activist identity in order to combat internal departmental conflicts, those students are perceived and stigmatized as outsiders:

“We have forums where students are demonized in a certain way…one of the students in our organization was like, ‘Yeah, you know, there are students who have come up to me and said to me faculty have told me not to hang out with you. Why did they tell me not to hang out with you? And other students have told other
white students not to hang out with you. There’s a Latino problem in this department, so watch out for the Latinos. You don’t want to hang out for the Latinos.’ And I know for sure others students in the department do it, but faculty do it too…Part of it is because we’re Latina, and there’s only two African American students in the department…if you talk to them, I’m sure they might have similar stories, but the department is just a hostile place.”

Not all of the Latinas experienced consistent episodes of discrimination. Jennifer said her department within the past decade has been good about maintaining diversity and being culturally sensitive. However, she did mention there have been moments or tension between white faculty and students of color. She said white faculty are “not very approachable…It’s sad and really limiting…A lot of white faculty don’t take on students of color and I think that’s problematic.” In the classroom, she said there was an incident where a white faculty member targeted her and her writing. She said she felt was she picked on in class because of her ethnicity and gender. She said, “It really opened my eyes to the fact that those things [incidents of discrimination] do happen in the academy…I never spoke ever again in that class.”

The most significant comments made about departmental experiences between Latinas who attended graduate school in past decades and current Latina graduate students were the racial and gender demographics of their departments. Both of the older women who were on campus during the 1980s and 1990s said there were more conflicts regarding gender than race.

Alicia: “Oh, gender was more prominent than racial. Umm, the gender component, umm, working with one of the faculty who’s no longer there as a TA, umm, he’d be making comments on the way you look, on your dress, prettiness, that kind of stuff. And it wasn’t just me, it was other women.”

Valdivia: “Well, I think, we always had a lot of women grad students, which makes you kind of wonder. Even though we had majority women students, the faculty was still all but one male. What did women do with their PhDs? It’s kind of scary. But now we still have about the same ration of women to male students,
which I would say is one of 55 to 45…But now we definitely have more diversity in the student body. We traditionally had international students here. Everybody does. But national minorities, that’s something else. And now we regularly have Latina people, African American people, Asian American people…”

For Celia, in particular, racial tension was not as significant in her department because it was known to be diverse in terms student and faculty demographics, but also the research done in the department was generally progressive compared to other departments, and thus attracted diverse people. However, she said if there were conflicts surrounding the department, it usually came from people outside the department. And because her department was known for its emphasis on the minority presence in society and in academic research, once again, the issue of academic legitimacy and relevancy resurfaced:

“Things that happen with the increase of minority enrollment and the increase in diversity and the increase of people of color, let’s just say, generally speaking, is the perceptions outside are that it’s not as rigorous, it’s not as good a program because of that. So those kinds of racist perceptions come out from things that we hear from people outside the program, whether they be in this university or elsewhere. Umm, belittling the program because of high diversity, high ratio of students of color, and professor of color, for that matter.”

As a current Latina in the same department as Celia, Cynthia also acknowledged how her department, in general, has not had any major internal conflicts regarding issues of race. However, she did state she heard critiques outside her department because of its diversity and its advocacy for multiculturalism:

“Some people will say, you know, ‘Oh, [these] students…are like so political and you know, they graduate more students of color you know on the whole campus. I mean we do. We graduate more PhD’s of color than the whole campus. And then there are other departments that’ll say we’re not well read, they’re not theoretically sound, they can’t back up their arguments. So we get both, and I think professors really struggle with that.”
Although Cynthia said her department is culturally sensitive and conscious, she did mention how occasionally her department can be contradictory when it comes to subject matter studied and real life practices. She mentioned when issues of discrimination are present on campus and strong activism is needed, many students and faculty tend to retreat. During one particular incident where she helped her friend who was dealing with severe legal issues, she said she

“realized how professors and graduate students, like, they could study things in the classroom, like everybody was studying critical race theory, and everybody was like studying social injustice in schools, but like trying to organize people to come to her hearings was like getting blood out of a stone, and raising money for her lawyers. I was so just disillusioned. I was so done, through. I thought like everybody was like full of shit. Everybody was like talking all this crap, but when it came down to the real deal nobody really wanted to do anything.”

Reflections:
The sections I discussed above (perceptions, social sphere, funding, and climate) were included in this ethnography because they provided thorough reflections of the experiences that exist for Latinas in doctoral programs. Unfortunately, because of time and space limitations, I was unable to provide more information from and subsections from my interviewees’ narratives. However, this does not mean the information excluded is not significant in understanding the lives and experiences of Latina graduate students. One topic that was mentioned and should be further discussed was the tension between Latina/o students and students from Latin America. Between these two groups, tensions rose out of different class dynamics, as well as the unequal treatment given by the departments between both groups. Also the topic of graduate student organizations on campus came up in various discussions. For further research concerning Latina doctoral students, it would also be beneficial to inquire in depth about various organizations and
other support resources. Inquiries should include how and why these types of support systems are useful and even necessary in graduate school.

Despite not being able to cover everything that was discussed with my interviewees, the statements from my interviewees listed above have been extremely helpful in trying to understand how intersections of race, class, and gender are deployed and experienced throughout graduate school for Latina women. The statements within each category are significant in that they are real-life narratives that reflect the research that has been done regarding Latinas in academia, as well as reveal the struggles of Latina women in academia. Through these narratives, critical race and LatCrit theories can be used to outline the tensions of race, class, and gender that are embedded and exist throughout graduate school departments and in the lives of the people in those departments.

While selecting who to interview, I knew it would be especially helpful to contact older Latina women who have received their PhDs from this university during different historical moments. What I found particularly interesting was how the same issues of familial influence, self-doubt, limited funding, and hostile departmental environments that scholars in my literature review discussed were represented in the narratives of the older and younger Latinas.

As the daughter of a Mexican mother and a Puerto Rican father, who have both been economically, educationally, and socially disadvantaged throughout their lives, I have also been told educational advancement is critical and the source of liberation. One of my favorites sections of this ethnography is reading how Latino parents tell their children, “Education is the one thing they can’t take away from you.” When I heard these
powerful words, I was taken aback because I realized how important education is for Latino families. Non-Latinos may think we are unintelligent and unworthy of anything above agricultural or domestic work, but the fact that Latinos believe education will advance their families and hold educational attainment high says they are intelligent enough to know that for many, education has and will take people out of a working class status (Salma and Celia are examples of this). I also realized how even though I may be writing this paper by myself, I did not get to this university by myself nor am I here or will later enter graduate school for myself.

I was extremely intrigued and amazed by all of these women for a number of reasons. However, the most fascinating thing to me was how independent and strong-willed they appeared to be. Despite experiencing high levels of stress and hostile environments none of them said they overextended themselves in order to make friends or fit nicely into their departments. I was inspired by all the comments on how these Latinas do not “give a fuck” about how people perceive them. Other comments about how they surround themselves with strong, dedicated, and socially conscious friends and mentors helped me understand the importance of these relationships. Those comments also helped me understand what maturity truly means and encouraged me to live me life with passion, knowledge, and resilience.

As the texts found in the university archives and the narratives provided above have all mentioned, whether indirectly or directly mentioned, Latinos, in general, continue to struggle with visibility and equality on campus. For this reason and for the specific struggles of Latina doctoral students mentioned in this ethnography, it is important that these narratives are widely distributed as a way to influence policymakers,
university faculty and administrators, and future graduate students. While consulting materials in the archives, I occasionally became frustrated because based on published research and what my interviewees said I knew the goals of those archived materials had not been completely achieved. And because of this, more cross-cultural and cross-generational counter-narratives need to be explored, as well as university, state, and federal policies need to be re-assessed and properly implemented.

Ever since my summer of research as a McNair Scholar and after talking with Latinas who are pursuing or who have already received a PhD, I have realized the significance of that rare opportunity. Although I will not enroll in graduate school right after I complete my bachelor’s degree in May, had I not been given the opportunity to participate in the McNair summer program, I would have never considered going onto graduate school. For many Latinas particularly in graduate school, higher education is not always an option, and even when it is, because of its “foreignness,” the complexities of higher education are not always understandable. Jennifer’s statement, “I didn’t know what it meant to get a PhD,” is common among Latina women, as well as their families. It is because of this concept of foreignness that this ethnography is significant and essential for people to read, but in particular, for younger Latinas like myself to read.
Works Cited


