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My Mother's Research/ My Daughter's Voice: A Twofold Tale

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We
write about
experiences in the field
as mother/researcher/teacher
and daughter/student. How was the
researcher/teacher influenced by her motherly role?
How does a daughter/student experience the displacement
of traveling to a new country for her mother's research?
We write simultaneously and present a twofold tale of
movement, education, and consciousness.¹

I. Xiomara (my mother's daughter)

I was tired. The plane had circled endlessly over the city thanks to the thick clouds, making it hard to see the copper sparkle of the city below and therefore too risky for the plane to land on time. When we finally did land, we spent an endless amount of time going through immigration, so much that I wished I were smaller so that I could demand my already tired and frazzled mother to carry me. But I was thankful that we were in a shorter line designated for families.

I was not thankful for the white florescent lights that were suddenly piercing my eyes after we'd gotten our luggage. They were too bright for tired eyes. I also didn't like the swarm of people waiting just past the escalator for other passengers. I was paranoid about getting lost in them, or losing one of my two sisters, or getting robbed. At fourteen, I definitely wouldn't have been able to stop a thief or a kidnapper. The multiple signs warning human traffickers against coming to this country didn't help matters, nor did the spike of my mother's nervousness once we

II. Ruth (my daughter's mother)

We stepped off the plane in the dark of a January night unsure if my daughters and I were ready for this second international adventure in a country we had never visited. I remember vividly the weight of leading this journey as the only adult and parent of three young daughters. Exiting the Quito airport at 11 pm at night after a day of travel, customs inspections, and lots of luggage to carry us through the next six months, we looked around for the cab that was scheduled to pick us up. A gentleman approached us and helped us with our luggage to a minivan in the parking lot. From the sky, the rain continued to fall.

Our arrival to the hostel was a short 30-minute ride where the friendly staff awaited. Although the hostel was reasonable in cost, the room was quite spacious and comfortable for what I assumed were 'hostel' standards around the world. The girls were now excited and dropped bags and chatted as they decided who would share a bed with whom. Anayansi, 12-years old, decided to share her bed, as always, with her younger sister

¹ As a suggestion, we recommend reading left side first to the break before moving to the right side of the text.

went outside.

Once outside in the dark and rainy night, where cabs roamed the parking lot, I personally didn't see anything to be nervous about. I was too busy enjoying the feel of that sprinkling rain on my too warm skin. A day of traveling and sitting and trying to sleep and entertain myself without much room made for a wonderful feeling to be outdoors. Then again, I only had to concern myself with pulling a large suitcase; goodness knows how many worries my mother was mulling over as she hailed the four of us a cab.

There was a hostel room waiting for us, which my mother patiently explained was a lot like a hotel but cheaper when we all gave her blank looks. The driver was friendly and the ride relatively short, especially considering that the sway of the car and my mother's voice prompted me to doze in and out of sleep. It was against my better judgment. My younger sister, Anayansi, wanted to chat, and I wanted to stay awake in case my mother needed something.

When we arrived at the hostel the still sprinkling rain helped keep me awake as I grabbed one of the bigger suitcases and rolled it behind my mother into our room. Soon, as my mother pulled out toiletries and our pajamas, my sisters and I debated over sleeping arrangements. It didn't take long. Anayansi and Nemiliztli were instantly enamored with the queen bed located on the second floor and, as they were used to sharing a room, immediately decided this was the place for them. I smiled wryly at my mother and pulled out a book to read from my suitcase—a novel that I was too tired to read tonight but wanted at my bedside anyway. Before sleeping, I saw on my mother's bedside an Ecuador tourism book. I chuckled, but hoped we'd be able to put it to good use. After all, we'd only get a few days to be tourists before we had to start school again.

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Nemiliztli, who was six at the time, while my eldest, Xiomara, and I shared the other queen bed.

Flooded with all the responsibilities that lay ahead, it took me a while to fall asleep that first night and several nights after that. It was my first endeavor out of the U.S. as a single parent and the weight was excruciating. It meant I alone was responsible for their safety, education, and overall wellbeing. Although I tried for the entire six months to look content and excited about our temporary new life, I was fragile and confused not just with the move, but also with many other events during the past five years.

In Ecuador, we not only did not have housing or a school for any of the girls upon our arrival, I also left behind a broken relationship of four years and looked ahead in the hopes of new beginnings. Although my partner and I reconciled during our time in Ecuador, it was an initial three months of agony as we tried to put the pieces together.

My unease did not go unnoticed. During those first few months, as we acclimated to our new surroundings and relationships, I could sense my daughters' nervousness. They consistently looked to me for reassurance and a sense of security. In hindsight, it was to be expected; after all, we were in a new country with much to learn and only had each other for support. These instances of uncertainty were the biggest reminder that I was not in the country strictly to attend to the research and teaching expectations of my Fulbright grant. Indeed, I was never disconnected from my multiple roles, especially as a single mother. For the first month, at least, my motherly role took center stage as we attended to the minutiae of housing, schooling, and our overall transition to our new environment. However, as the months progressed, my daughters and I were also often reminded of how fortunate we were to experience this 'displacement' of our own volition and to be fully supported financially.

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III. I found myself annoyed with the first part of my school-search experience in Ecuador—mainly because it was composed of begging schools to accept me only to get rejected over and over again. To be fair it wasn't anyone's fault. We had no idea when we left the United States that we needed a stack of official school documents because, unlike my elementary-aged sisters, I would be attending middle school.

My mother talked about our situation often at these meetings, as I was rarely invited to speak. I sat with my sisters while we waited around trying to entertain ourselves. I knew things had gotten ridiculous when we rode a complicated series of buses for over an hour to meet with a nun at a school who rejected our petition for admittance right off the bat. I was interviewed only once and that mainly consisted of sitting in an office with a man speaking to me while interrupting every one of my questions and talking endlessly.

Our saving grace was an international school that didn't care about governmental paperwork. The catch: They were a Christian school, and I was Catholic. The worse catch: It cost a small fortune a month. Despite this, it ended up being our only choice, so my mother found the means to pay for this school and a bus route to take me there every morning.

I wasn't entirely sure what my mother did all day while we were at school. She mentioned interviews every so often and talked about classes. When she did, I remembered the nice-looking building she pointed out once when we were getting to know the city.

My favorite part of my daily school routine was the end of the day when I finally got to leave, though my reasons were probably different than the average student. Yes, I enjoyed the end of a day at school, but more than that I enjoyed who was there to see me right after. Every day my mother was there, right at the entrance of the school, waiting with a big smile.

Ironically enough, I felt more culture shock in my secluded diverse Christian school than I did in most of Quito. Every

IV. Because I arrived when the semester had already begun at the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales Sede Ecuador* (FLACSO - Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences Ecuador Branch), my teaching responsibilities in the Gender Studies Program did not begin until March when I was scheduled to teach a variation of a course I often taught back in my institution. Before beginning my eight-week intensive course, I had to first worry about the care of my daughters. I left them on one side of the city in our small apartment while I attended to my class. So far, I was only really acquainted with the owners of our apartment—a sweet couple who lived on the first floor—and my good friend Sofia Villenas' aunt who lived down the street. I temporarily resolved the issue when my mother visited during the first two weeks of the course, but was then left with the concern of leaving them under lock and key (with the owners of the building on notice in case of an emergency) during a couple of evenings a week for six weeks. I contended that this was part of the reality of going abroad alone with my daughters.

On the other side of town and in the classroom is where I participated and observed as both teacher and researcher, where I heard of Quito life, began to understand some of the customs, and was informed of the contemporary political history and turmoil of the country. Students clarified for me why it was unprecedented that a president—like Rafael Correa—was still in office after one year. (His term began in 2007 and just concluded in 2017.) I learned that in the years before President Correa, the country had gone through nine presidents in 10 years (1996 – 2007).

My Mexican Spanish variation as well as my academic Spanish were tested and expanded in the classroom. Students were comfortable and forgiving of my Spanglish when theoretical and academic jargon became difficult to produce in Spanish, and students helped translate or provide the Spanish equivalency. I was also challenged to expand my *Education and*

child was different, with different backgrounds (one-third of the student population was Ecuadorian; one-third from the U.S. or Canada; and one-third from Asian) and different personalities, but all had a reverence towards religion that I was unaccustomed to. I got transferred out of my Bible class because my teacher could tell I was overwhelmed. In my defense, it was an hour of loud preaching and “Satan-is-everywhere” talk.

I had trouble relating to anyone in my Bible class even when I was moved to a less ‘orthodox’ class. The stigma toward other religions was still there after all, and I distinctly remember watching two videos about the consequences of believing anything but Christianity, all of which ended with some sort of hell or bad morality. I left each of those classes shell shocked and unhappy. Religion was private to me. I was accustomed to New Mexican approaches to religion—which is to say, no one bothered anyone about their religious beliefs or really tried to push the subject. You thought what you thought, believed what you believed, never once actually reading what was in the Bible and were left to your devices. To have it basically shoved in my face now with such heat and strict judgment—with the knowledge that if I spoke out, my life at school would suddenly become complicated—made my head reel.

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V. The bus routes in the morning were a particular adventure for my mother and me as my sisters’ school was just walking distance from our apartment. The bus we took was often crammed, almost bursting. You had one moment to hop on before it took off, not even paying when you jumped in. At times a man slipped through the crowds, obviously with some sixth sense informing him about what hidden person in the chaos hadn’t paid the bus fee. My mother always handed him the money while gesturing to me, so that he would know I was covered.

If there was ever room next to a pole for me to latch onto, it was a lucky morning. If there was ever a seat available it was a

Gender Equity course bibliography to include text in Spanish—something completely missing in my course offerings in the United States. Quiteños were also challenged to read through Spanglish texts of the likes of Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga and other Chicana writers.

Although my initial thoughts about teaching were really a commitment at contributing something to the local community during my stay, it actually became the most significant aspect of the Fulbright and of my time in Quito. It was the classroom that brought me closest to Ecuadorians and to the issues that most rattled the country and where I gained significant insight from which to later analyze and interpret the interviews I conducted during my stay.

The course ended a few weeks before the end of my daughters’ school year. Anayansi was fortunate to end her academic year with a class trip to the Galapagos Islands, and while Xiomara initially struggled with the faith-based curriculum of her school, she actually ended the school year quite content with the strong friendships she formed there and maintained for several years after.

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VI. Although I was most excited about my research project and work in the field, it was difficult and complicated work. It shouldn’t have surprised me, as research is never clean-cut or straightforward. My problems began when I contacted Leonor, a new colleague who had done a lot of the footwork to connect me with a non-profit women’s organization before submitting my Fulbright proposal. We scheduled a meeting soon after our arrival in January and made plans to visit the director of the organization to begin my research project.

We met in a café near the city’s shopping mall where Leonor and I became acquainted with each other and spoke about mutual friends in Albuquerque. We proceeded to the *Centro Ecuatoriano para la Promoción y Acción de la Mujer* (CEPAM / “Ecuadorian Center for the Promotion and Action of Women”). Our

miracle. My mother always seemed to find those and smiled when she did. I was jealous more than once because standing around trying not to lose your balance was hard, but I figured she'd earned it and never did anything but smile back when she sat down.

There were moments, however, when the heat and the claustrophobic feeling of fifty people shoved together on one bus almost made me lose consciousness. I remember the first morning it happened. It started with a numbing in my fingertips. I couldn't feel the pole I held onto. Then I couldn't feel my legs. And then my vision washed into a nondescript grey. After that, things got a bit blurry, and I felt some sort of oppressive wave all through my body; it wiped out all thought, and I could barely remember how to move. My mother tugged me along through the crowd of people and yelled at them to get out of the way—that her daughter was about to faint. We tumbled down the stairs and off the bus to the cold air. My head was still numb, my ears roaring, but I knew the bus left us there alone and that my mother was panicking. Later she'd told me I'd been sweating and pale. I tried to laugh; with dark skin like mine, how could I ever look pale?

As I gasped for breath outside the random spot where the bus left us, I remembered a little girl I'd seen some weeks back waiting for the bus and felt embarrassed. She couldn't have been more than seven years old, and she was with a younger sister who couldn't have been more than three. Goodness knew how long she'd been riding the bus alone to look so confident about it when I saw her. She stood in her school uniform with a backpack and a lunchbox. In comparison, here I was, almost a grown up, attending a private school with a five-dollar allowance for lunch in my backpack and accompanied by my mother every morning, and I was failing at standing upright.

I pushed the memory of the little girl away focused on standing upright then, with my mother's hands fluttering around, unzipping my jacket, rubbing my back, and brushing my hair away from my face. She

meeting with the director made clear that the realities of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are always precarious and unpredictable. The director explained how the organization was down to its last funding dollars and about to terminate many of its programs. These cuts included a program directed at women that had been the focus of my initial interest in the organization and of my study. I was devastated.

The next couple of months were an odyssey of coming and going with various people attempting to redirect my research focus and the population I would work with. Since my Fulbright was contingent on conducting research on gendered migration and the work of NGOs in addressing the problems that led the citizenry to migrate or ways to impede migration, I soon became aware through the scholarship of Ecuadorian researchers in the area that the migration phenomenon of the country looked drastically different from that I encountered in Mexico.

In Ecuador, many women were the initiators of the family's migration stream and that had drastically different consequences for those that stayed behind. After a colleague from FLACSO, where I was teaching, suggested I speak with a grassroots organization located on the outskirts of the city and where many families who lived there had relatives abroad, I was finally in conversation with a community member who helped me identify sons of women who lived and worked abroad. I did all of this while my daughters attended school. Interviews and meetings were always arranged just in time to pick each one of them at the end of the day and never on weekends. At the time, and while writing up my findings months later, I often reflected on the privilege of receiving a Fulbright to travel *with* my daughters, while the mothers of the young men I interviewed cared for the children of even more privileged parents who left the caregiving of their children to *other mothers*. While not necessarily based on my research with young sons, my daughters and I often reflected on our

kept asking me if I was all right, if I was better, if I needed to sit down, if I felt I was going to throw up.

I could see in front of me again and figured that was a good sign. I smiled and told her I was better as we stood there waiting to catch another bus. We stood there waiting for what seemed like a very long time. I still don't understand how I made it to school on time that day.

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VII. The first stories we raved about when we got back to Albuquerque, were about the cab drivers who flirted with my mother while we drove around Quito. She quickly grew sick of those stories as she scoffed and rolled her eyes every time they were brought up. But it was hard not to share them as they were always crowd-pleasers among all age groups: her professor friends, my teenage friends, and our neighbors. And I needed something to make Ecuador seem real to me when I entered high school and fell into old rhythms with my old friends.

The stories that followed the embarrassing cab driver stories were of Ecuador's amazing geography—of its waterfalls, the lush green canopy of leaves above us, and moist air on our skin as we hiked—and of the pirated DVD stores we frequented so often for family movie night every weekend.

I told everyone who would listen about the glorious banana bread we found in the town of Mindo, about how much a hair that poked out of my sister's teacher's nose bothered all four of us up until the day we left. I told them about getting our shoes polished by young boys in plazas, always wondering why they weren't in school, and spending hours exploring the world's largest outdoor market in Quevedo. I told them anything and everything. And I looked over at my mother every time I spoke, a silent thank you for the adventures I had to tell.

surroundings and privileged position in the country. My daughters most often noticed the amount of work and responsibilities young people their age assumed. Xiomara would point to the young girl who tended to her little sister on the bus on their way to school; Anayansi commented on the heavy responsibility of the young man who oversaw the family business that my daughters visited often for computer and internet access; and Nemiliztli—although too young to understand—felt special as the most fluent speaker of English in her second grade class.

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VIII. After six-months in Quito we boarded our plane back to the States, excited to return home with bags full of experiences and memories. Before going to Albuquerque, we made a few stops to visit family in Los Angeles, and while my daughters spent time with their father in Salt Lake City, my partner and I visited his family in Wisconsin. We all came back together in Albuquerque just in time to start the new school year. We were back to our friends and routine like we'd never left. But we had left, and every so often I would recall our many routines in Quito: the morning run to school, my bus rides across town to the university, our amazing trips to the small towns of Mindo and Baños, and the conversations I had with the young men in my research. And most importantly, my daughters and I would recall the many funny stories of riding in taxis, of missing the concert of our favorite Mexican rock band, Mana, of late night outings for dessert, and the generosity of our landlords—Carmencita and Jorgito. All those memories we brought back not just as part of my teaching and research experience, but as mother and learner. A learner of the country, of the customs, of the people, and even of my own daughters.

Authors

Xiomara Ortega-Trinidad holds a BA in Fine Arts and Creative Writing from the University of New Mexico and is currently in her second term of service in Americorps. She considers herself a world traveler, artist at heart, and an overly complicated storyteller. Her art appears in the book *Women who stay behind: Pedagogies of survival in rural transmigrant Mexico*, and she strives towards one day having her art grace the covers of her own novels.

Ruth Trinidad-Galván is Professor in the Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Studies department at the University of New Mexico. She is a twice Fulbright Research and Teaching Scholar in Ecuador and Mexico and the author of *Women who stay behind: Pedagogies of survival in rural transmigrant Mexico* [University of Arizona Press]. She is also the co-editor of the *Handbook of Latinos and Education*, which received the Critics' Choice Award in 2010 from the American Educational Studies Association. Amongst her most significant accomplishments she includes raising three remarkable daughters who inspire her each day and being a classroom teacher in inner city Los Angeles.