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BILLIE GASTIC

ABSTRACT
A newly minted Latina Ph.D. reflects on her educational journey. The story begins with her early years attending a Catholic grammar school in Queens, New York, and follows her through the fabled halls of several of the nation’s top universities. The author shares an account of the challenges that she overcame and the lessons she learned. She discusses how family and a sense of history and community helped her find the strength to persevere despite the sadness, confusion, and pain that can sometimes accompany “getting an education.” She describes her struggles with writing and finding her own voice, and tells how, through reading and writing, she moved closer to coming to terms with her past, present, and future. [Key words: achievement, higher education, reflection, resilience, writing]
... I accept the light of this flame which shall burn in my heart and will burn as long as I live. This flame of knowledge I will use with pride and dignity.

— AREYTO INITIATION AATH, ASPIRA ASSOCIATION —
I first spoke these words nearly fifteen years ago during my first Areyto Ceremony, in which I was formally inducted as an Aspirante. I stood proudly and excitedly with my friends in a packed auditorium and carefully passed the light from my candle to that of the young woman standing beside me. I do not remember much about that day other than the recitation of the oath (in both English and Spanish) and the way the candlelight shimmered across the rows of mostly familiar faces.

And then there was the silence just before we blew out our candles, and the family and friends in attendance broke out in applause and cheers. That memory and its softened images comfort me. I have experienced nothing quite like that since. For me, the Areyto Ceremony was that rare moment when ritual enabled me to see myself as a part of history, not apart from it. From that point on, I found myself scouring bookshelves for stories about people like me, stories through which I could see myself—past, present and future. I have gotten lucky a few times: *The House on Mango Street*, *Dreaming in Cuban*, *A Darker Shade of Crimson*, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, for example. On sunny days, I would climb out my bedroom window and carry my paperbacks onto the fire escape, where I would sit and read for hours. Sometimes my mind would wander. I would follow the cracks in the sidewalk below until they disappeared from view. I would stare at the tar-stained rooftops of the buildings across the alleyway. I would stay like this for hours until my father came home from work and my mother called me in to set the table for dinner.

Always disappointed about how few books there were that I could relate to, I promised myself that, over my lifetime, I would write and publish the kinds of stories and essays that I wish I had found when I needed them the most. Now, as I sit down to do that for the first time, I realize that this is much harder to do than I had ever imagined. I fear that my education has conspired against me, whether gradually or all at once, to paralyze me with self-doubt. When did I learn, being the good student that I was, that what I had to say was not important, self-indulgent or not worth the time? I felt betrayed the day that I finally understood that these efforts to silence me were deliberate and intended to make me invisible. Even so, I can still see my mother looking at me with a furrowed brow and a *tsk* on her lips that tells me that somehow it is not good to talk about myself in such a direct way. Why would I want to do this?

Because I have to. I cannot hold my tongue any longer while others spread lies and tell me who I am as a Puerto Rican woman, an Ivy League-educated Nuyorican. My reluctance (fear) lets them do this unchallenged. Do not believe them when they tell you that I do not exist. *I am not a figment of my own imagination*. My writing is an act of resistance and is in defiance of all that I was taught that was intended to make me docile. It hurts and I have cried and the sound of my own voice still startles me.

Given this issue of *CENTRO Journal* that focuses on the education of the Puerto Rican diaspora, this essay is about my own education. My trajectory, although not unique, is one that too many of our youth are told is not possible by those they trust. They are also told another insidious lie that is aimed at dissolving their ambition: that such educational pursuits will require that they betray what it means to be Puerto Rican. This catastrophic deception must be dismantled and our youth reminded of their worth and of our shared history—one of struggle, resistance, victory and hope—that we all write with our lives.

I was born in the East Village of Manhattan and grew up in Queens, New York. My mother was a stay-at-home
mom while my father worked as a security guard. I always had a desk where I could do my homework, draw or color. The first one that I can remember had red hearts in each of the four corners and a matching wooden chair. After attending kindergarten at a local public school, my parents decided to send me to the Catholic grammar school that was within walking distance of our apartment. “For the discipline,” my father would say. Until I was in the fourth grade, my mother walked me to school and we would play alphabet memory games (“We’re going on a picnic and I’m going to bring an apple, banana, carrot....”) and practice the multiplication table (particularly 6’s and 8’s) while we walked. And at the end of each school day, I could always find her sitting on the same fire hydrant, waiting for me. Sometimes on Fridays, my mother would surprise me and we would walk over to Carvel’s before heading home. She would hand me the money and wait at the back of the store while I placed my order: a vanilla cone with colored sprinkles.

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My mother attended every parent-teacher conference and volunteered at my school, going on field trips to the Bronx Zoo and helping out at the annual fundraisers. As early as the first grade, she would take me to the library to find books that I might like (Encyclopedia Brown was an early favorite) and found math and reading enrichment workbooks for me to work through. I especially liked the math ones; they came with a few pages of stickers at the back that I could put on the pages that I had finished. There were few books in the apartment other than mine. My father had a few science-fiction/thriller paperbacks that my mother would get for him at flea markets. Although she read the newspaper everyday, I never saw my mother read a book. It was during an end-of-year lunch for school volunteers that my mother found out about New York City’s specialized public high schools: Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Tech. She told me to ask my math teacher if I could go ahead of the class and use another textbook that would teach me the kind of algebra that would be covered on the entrance exam. During the months leading up to that test, my math teacher let three of us (a Filipino boy, a boy who had recently moved to the neighborhood from Spain, and me, the only girl) move our desks to the back of the room and work from this other textbook while the rest of the class stared and teased. I called my mother from the pay phone across the street from my school on the day I found out that I got into Stuyvesant, contrary to what many people thought was (and still think is) possible for Puerto Rican kids from Queens. Years later, I found out that my paternal grandmother did not believe that I had scored well enough to be admitted and called the Board of Education to verify. She told me this as if it was a funny story; I could not help but be hurt. Why was it so hard to believe that I could have gotten in? Did anyone else’s grandmother call to see if there was some kind of mistake? I joined the Aspira Club at Stuyvesant, attended my first Areyto Ceremony, and
learned about the diversity of the Latino community and our history. I gained valuable experience working with other Latino youth and I developed as a leader. I spent every other Saturday at meetings of the Aspira Club Federation, where representatives of all of the Aspira clubs across the city met to update each other on their goings-on and to organize city-wide events for the full membership.

One Saturday morning, during a meeting break, I anxiously called home to see if a certain thick envelope had arrived. My mother could not hide her excitement. She promised me that she had not opened it, but when she held it up to the light she could read “Welcome to Yale” through the envelope. When my uncle found out that I was going to Yale, he told me about a friend of his who worked in the kitchen of the Freshman Commons and suggested that I give her a call. I knew, somehow, that I never would.

In the late summer of 1994, I made what would be the first of many moves out of my comfort zone in the name of my education. At Yale, I quickly met the other Puerto Rican students in my class; there were about 100 Puerto Rican undergraduates there at the time. I found comfort in the familiarity offered by Despierta Boricua and La Casa Cultural Julia de Burgos.

I remember how surprised—and relieved—I was when I heard other Latino students tell their stories about relatives (in my case, my grandfather and one of my uncles) who initially thought that they were headed to jail when being told that they had gotten into Yale. My Yale is no doubt remarkably different from the Yale known by dozens of world leaders, U.S. presidents, and senators. While they were singing at Mory’s, I danced to the salsa and merengue that shook the walls of La Casa. Sadly, theirs is the only Yale that many people know or ever hear about. But I too bleed blue.

My graduation from Yale was the last that my parents attended. I graduated with a degree in economics and moved back to Queens to start a job in investment banking. I quit after nine months and became a substitute teacher at a local, largely Latino, public high school. I was frequently met by students with a suspicious “Where are you from?”

I knew what they wanted to know. Learning that I was Puerto Rican elicited one of two responses. Sometimes I would watch as my students let down their guards a little and gave me the benefit of the doubt despite my lack of teaching experience. Other times, I would watch helplessly as students shut down and locked me out with icy stares.

Like many others who leave too soon, I left teaching after a little over a year to move away again, this time to Harvard. Waiting for class one afternoon, I started to make my way through the portraits of past and current professors in Longfellow Hall. I then turned the corner to find an exhibit of artwork of local high school students. There I found a painting whose desperation and pain I would only begin to understand a few years later. Taking up about half of a wall was a painting of a girl of my complexion whose long dark hair fell in loose waves around her shoulders. She held a handgun in her hands, her lips wrapped around its muzzle. The artist was in the eleventh grade.

A fire had been set within me. I was twenty-five and had spent the year reading the books of people whose names I had somehow never heard of but whose words I have never forgotten. I applied for Ph.D. programs emboldened, believing in myself, my abilities, and my ambition. I was bursting with ideas and confident that I could change the world. I arrived at Stanford with a sense of purpose and an unwavering belief that what I was about to embark on was important. My mother took that trip with me to help me move into my new,
on-campus residence. She looked so sad during that week. Why did I have to go to school so far away? I think that she was afraid of losing me; neither of us knew then how little time it would take for me to lose myself out there.

Perhaps I was naïve, but I never expected those years I spent working on my doctorate to be as dark as they were. While I was there, a Latino doctoral student in another department hanged himself. We had gone to Yale together, and although we knew the same people, we had never met. I cried myself to sleep, imagining what he had been going through, furious that no one could stop him, and sickly aware of the fact that somehow I understood why he took his own life. I started to hear other—too many—similar stories about other Latino graduate students and faculty members, at Stanford and elsewhere. I watched as some of my friends dropped out or stopped out. I sensed the sadness and desperation that swirled around me. It was like there was a dark cloud over some of us—most of us Latino, black, working class or queer—all of us outsiders. The sunshine and palm trees mocked my agony; I kept my blinds drawn so that I could forget where I was. I could not help but think that I was never meant to have gotten this far and that I was not going to make it after all.

The despair and hopelessness were powerful. I talked to my mother a lot during those years and wonder how well I kept hidden what was going on. I thought that maybe I had had enough. I doubted my intellect, my merit, my worthiness and ached in my own skin. I could not retrace my steps to understand how I had arrived at this place. I had let them wipe away my history but I did not know how. My schooling had never caused me pain like this before. In fact, as a child, I retreated to the safe shelter of my books. I now felt deceived. In the end, I chose the pain that had become familiar over the terror of walking away and, in 2005, I earned my Ph.D. I owe a debt of gratitude to those who cared about me—my advisors and mentors, my friends and my family. At different times, they linked their fates with mine and invested in me. Through it all, I earned their respect and my own.

And so it goes. The theme of this special issue Challenges, Dilemmas, and Possibilities describes a process that is both private and shared; it is a collective exercise in which we all participate in our own way. For me, the challenge was learning that even though I have often been one of the few Latinos in the educational spaces in which I have traveled, this does not mean that I did not belong there or that I owed my place to someone who had let me in in spite of myself. For me, the challenge was learning that even though I have often been one of the few Latinos in the educational spaces in which I have traveled, this does not mean that I did not belong there or that I owed my place to someone who had let me in in spite of myself.
and graveyard shifts so that I would never have to? How would I explain that choice to my mother, my first and most influential teacher, after all she has given me? And what would I tell myself after my years of studying and fighting? Why would someone try to convince me to turn my back on all of that history? Because they are afraid.

I was scared too, and have been driven by a fear of not succeeding for a long time. The dilemma is now learning how to accept—and own—my achievement. Coming to terms with success is much harder than dealing with failure. That is their final weapon isn’t it? By making me somehow ashamed of my success, they try one last time to silence me. If I am not proud, then why would I tell my story? And if I do not tell my story, then they can pretend that it never really happened and that I do not exist.

The voice that I hear when I read these words back to myself is eerily my own, not mediated by the protective veneer of academic writing. I am disturbed and ashamed that my silence had kept me feeling “safe” for so long that I was not even sure if this account was worth sharing with you. What I know now is that it was not comfort that I was feeling but the numbness that comes with becoming invisible. With this essay, I raise my voice as part of the Puerto Rican educational diaspora—generations moving from where we were left to where we belong. It is for the Puerto Rican youth who, like me, have ached to read their stories in another’s life on their way to finding the bravery to write their own. And therein lies the possibility.

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