A First-Generation Scholar's *Camino de Conocimiento*

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Una Autohistoria

Laura Ignacia Rendón

Contents

Abstract

As a first-generation scholar, Laura I Rendón employs Gloria Anzaldúa's radical genre of autobiographical writing, termed *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría,*

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L. W. Perna (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*,
Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research 35,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31365-4_1

which disrupts colonial forms of expression and inquiry and which transcends traditional Western autobiographical forms (Keating, A.L.. 2009. Introduction. In A. L. Keating (Ed.), *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (pp. 1–15). Durham: Duke University Press). To expand on her memoir, Rendón also employs Anzaldúa's (2015. In A. L. Keating (Ed.), *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro. Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*. Durham: Duke University Press) seven stages of *conocimiento* to chart her life story as it progresses from experiencing disruptive life events to undergoing a personal transformation and finding a greater sense of enlightenment. While the first part of the memoir is focused on Rendón's life story, the second part discusses Rendón's views on what the future holds for higher education, including exciting and challenging developments.

Keywords

Autohistoria · *Autohistoria-teoría* · *Conocimiento* · *Camino de conocimiento* · *Mestiza* consciousness · Academic immigrant · Scholarship girl · *Sentipensante* pedagogy · Validation theory · Race · Immigration · Gender identity · Aging population · Sexual orientation · Technology · Post-truth world · Hate crimes

What an honor it is to have been invited to submit this autobiographical essay which blends the personal and professional dimensions of my trajectory in the field of higher education. The first part of this essay illuminates my personal life story, while the second part discusses my views regarding what I believe the future holds for higher education, including exciting and troublesome developments. For me the personal is always intertwined with the professional. Similarly, social, political, and economic trends always impact our nation's educational system.

Nothing in my early life would have predicted that someone like me could have earned the title of renowned higher education scholar which (according to the invitation letter I received) is a necessary requisite to be invited to write a memoir for this publication. I am a first-generation scholar – the first in my family to attend college, earn bachelor's and master's degrees, be awarded a Ph.D., and become a professor and researcher. My journey across intellectual, social, and cultural borderlands has been "*un camino de conocimiento*/path of enlightenment" (Anzaldúa 2015). Anzaldúa notes that the *camino de conocimiento* is a response to a spiritual hunger and the notion that the world is undergoing an extension of consciousness, a sense that not everything that we've been told is correct and that there has to be a better way to live our lives. For example, we have been conditioned to look the other way when vulnerable people are exploited. As a collective, humanity has also become dependent on consumerism, militarization, and greed in the quest for money and power. The path to *conocimiento* requires facing our shadow side, the parts of our being that could lead to fear, shame, and/or embarrassment. A person reaching a higher level of enlightenment is aware of how conventional markers of race, gender, and the divide between mind and body are inaccurate, outworn, and obsolete. Further this form of enlightenment resists binaries (i.e., he/she, colored/white) and recognizes that those in power may seek to hold on to entrenched

practices and belief systems even when they may cause harm and/or no longer useful. *Conocimiento* is a way of knowing that is skeptical of knowledge based solely on reason and rationality. Anzaldúa (2015) elaborates:

> Many are witnessing a major cultural shift in their understanding of what knowledge consists of and how we come to know, a shift from the kinds of knowledge valued now to the kinds that will be desired in the twenty-first century, a shift away from knowledge contributing both to military and corporate technologies and the colonization of our lives by TV and the Internet to the inner exploration of the meaning and purpose of life. (p. 119)

Anzaldúa also elevates spirituality as a valued form of knowledge to hold an equal space with science and rationality. She elaborates: "A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts—writing, art-making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity)" (p. 119). Inner work can lead to greater opening of our senses, liberating ourselves from self-limiting beliefs and engaging in political action. My path toward greater wisdom and personal transformation has come not only from academic engagement and knowledge production, but also from experiencing both the joyous and painful parts of my life, focusing on personal, professional, and spiritual growth, engaging in risk-taking, working with diverse ways of knowing, expanding my consciousness, serving as an advocate for low-income, first-generation college students, and working both at the center and at the edge.

Prelude to the Story of a *Fronteriza*/Border Woman

My accomplishments as a scholar of color need to be placed in context as I am an unlikely success story. *Soy una fronteriza*; I am a border woman. I am figuratively and literally a child of the borderlands, specifically Laredo, Texas, and the geographical area known as the Texas–Mexico border where the Rio Grande river both connects and divides Mexico and the United States. As a child I would join my mother and sisters who would cross the Laredo, Texas international bridge quite often, to go as we used to say, "*al otro lado*"/the other side known as Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. In those days, Laredo and Nuevo Laredo existed as if there was no border. The two neighboring cities were known as "*los dos Laredos*." It was natural "to go across," attend events sponsored by friends and families, buy artifacts at the *mercado*, dine at nice restaurants, buy groceries, and even take advantage of the festive night life. Laredoans crossed the border just as much as Nuevo Laredoans, who would come to the United States to buy groceries, clothes, and technological products such as televisions, radios, and phones. While we understood the difference between Mexico and Texas, we connected as border crossers, as partners in a geographical context that brought us together as one. As I write this essay, that same border is a site of high tension and controversy. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever believe that Mexican drug cartel activity would become so violent that it would cause Laredoans and tourists to fear going into Mexico. Never did I envision

that anti-immigrant sentiment would result in thousands of immigrants, refugee children, and their families being placed in tents and cages in Nazi-like concentration camps along the Texas border. I could not conceive that a proposed border wall to prevent Mexicans and Central American asylum seekers from entering the United States would become the most contentious political issue for an American President and Congress. The Rio Grande, once a river of hopes and dreams, would now turn into a vast rupture of division and fear resulting in a humanitarian crisis not unlike Syrians fleeing their terrorized homeland.

As a border woman, my whole life has been spent in what Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) calls "*nepantla*," an Aztec word depicting a liminal space between two worlds where transformations occur. During my life trajectory, I have learned to operate in many borders, to negotiate dislocations and relocations and to work with a pluriversal (Andreotti et al. 2011; Mignolo 2013) framework that rejects binaries and welcomes all viewpoints even when they seem contradictory. As I reflect on my life experience, I am made aware of my "*mestiza consciousness*," (Anzaldúa 2012), the intersectional consciousness of the borderlands:

> The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in a Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (Anzaldúa 2012, p. 101)

Perhaps living in the Tex–Mex borderlands, knowing what it means to embrace the cultural aspects of two nations, speaking two languages (Spanish, my first language, and English), and crossing the bridge that took me from one nation to another prepared me to work in liminal spaces and to have a high tolerance for ambiguity. Perhaps becoming comfortable living in a world of contradictions and as a child never knowing what to expect have allowed me to negotiate more than physical borders including those that are social, cultural, and intellectual. Mine has been an intersectional life experience. I have an American, Mexican, and Native American heritage. I have experienced both oppression and privilege. I have been married and divorced, and I know what it is like to have the privileges afforded to heterosexuals and to be a target of discrimination and hate ravaged against LGBTQ+ communities. I know what it is like to be economically poor and to have accumulated middle-class wealth.

Since I was a little girl, my dream was to be a teacher. However, in high school, the sponsor of the Future Teachers of America told me I would never be a teacher because I made an *F* in chemistry. My teacher never asked why I received a failing grade. She didn't know that I had sprained my knee so badly that I could not walk to school for at least 2 weeks. She didn't know that we did not have money to see a doctor. That was just the way it was. I have been underestimated, placed in a slow learners class in middle school, and told I should go to vocational school rather than to pursue a bachelor's degree. As a Chicana and as a member of scholars of color and queer scholarly community, I have always experienced what it means to navigate

multiple contexts and to feel what it means to be racialized, minoritized, and sexualized. My academic work has been both at the center and at the edge – "centered on the edge" I would call it. That same woman who in the past was underrated is today hyperdocumented (Chang 2011) with a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and with numerous accolades and distinctions that typically go to affluent people from privileged backgrounds.

Part I: *El Camino de Conocimiento: Mi Autohistoria*

In this essay, I follow the literary path of my fellow *tejana* and iconic feminist theorist, Gloria Anzaldúa, whose internationally acclaimed book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), offers an innovative way to write personal history and to capture the panoramic social, political, psychological, cultural, and mythical landscape of what she calls *borderlands*. Anzaldúa coined the terms, *autohistoria* and *autohistoria-teoría*, to present an innovative, transformational method to write a complex autobiography that resists easy classification (Keating 2009).

Autohistorias are autobiographical writings employed by women of color that disrupt colonial forms of expression and inquiry and which transcend traditional Western autobiographical forms (Bhattacharya 2015; Lockhart 2007). Keating (2009) explains: "Autohistoria-teoría includes both life-story and self-reflection on the story. Writers of autohistoria-teoría blend their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth and other forms of theorizing. By so doing, they create interwoven individual and collective identities" (p. 9). Understanding that her borderlands are never in stasis, Anzaldúa's Latina queer feminist *autohistoria* is a radical genre which employs a mixed media methodology that ultimately disrupts, re-writes, and re-stories traditional Western autobiographical modes of expression. As I write my *autohistoria*, I am fully aware that the path that I have walked seeking to transform higher education, to bring justice and equity to those who are most vulnerable, and to create a vision of education that allows students of color to succeed, is a road that others in underserved communities have walked and are walking alongside me. My struggles have been their struggles. My success has brought collective success. My failures have allowed us to grow. My story is aligned with their story.

I am an American citizen born on July 31, 1948 in Laredo, Texas. At the time of my birth, Laredo was a sleepy border town of roughly 50,000 people. Laredo, which bills itself as the "Gateway to Mexico," has historically been a site of extreme poverty, and while the economy has seen some improvement, poverty conditions persist and certainly characterize my early upbringing. The schools I attended were quite under-resourced (i.e., poor libraries, labs, and classroom facilities) and our teachers and counselors were not necessarily focused on encouraging most of us to prepare for college. During the spring and summer when Laredo heat often topped over 100 degrees, we attended classrooms with no air conditioning. Life was slow and somewhat depressing. Because Laredo is relatively isolated from large American cities (San Antonio is 150 northeast), we did not understand big city life. I knew of nobody

in my community who had graduated from college. Most everyone seemed to instinctively know that upon high school graduation, we could hope to land a "good job" – secretary, telephone receptionist, accountant, or railroad worker. The military was also a viable choice as was becoming a nun or a priest. If I had chosen not to attend college, it would not have mattered much in a community that did not understand how to access college and what the full benefits of a college education could be.

Picture of Laura as a baby. (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

The stereotypes about individuals like me who grow up in low-income areas are not very kind; in fact, they are often offensive and even racist. There are plenty of Americans who believe that all poor people are lazy, that nothing good exists in our communities, and that all we want is government handouts and entitlements such as food stamps and welfare checks. There are those who believe that we are stupid, that we don't want to learn English, that our families don't care about their children (let alone education), and that children who grow up in these communities will likely be failures in life. The deficit-minded perception is that we are at best a drain on the US society and at worst, dirty, good-for-nothing creatures who don't deserve to even exist. Low-income people grow up with none of the privileges afforded to affluent communities (i.e., well-resourced schools, well-prepared teachers and mentors, well-educated/affluent parents). The world of college is alien to low-income communities. We know it exists, but it is somehow unreachable, unaffordable, not well understood, confusing, and uninviting. College, for many low-income people, is an alien universe accessible only to those with the proper social and academic documentation. Low-income communities are not given much validity. Students from these

communities are like shadows; we are dark, blurred, and even invisible – dispensable casualties of an educational system not created for "the other" (Conchas 2006; Gándara 2010; Rendón et al. 2019b). Given that all of this is true, how does someone like me, who grew up with basically nothing, become a well-recognized scholar/keynote speaker who has published in refereed journals and who has authored or co-authored several books? The truth is that I am not alone in this unlikely journey and that there are many others with similar stories who have found great success.

In preparation for writing this essay, I took a tour of the geographical area along the South Texas–Mexico border area that stretches from Laredo to Brownsville. These borderlands have been historically afflicted by high poverty rates. Yet, truly great minds have evolved from this region, including intellectuals, writers, architects, physicians, philosophers, dentists, lawyers, psychologists, school teachers, college professors, and nonprofit organizational leaders. While a full listing of these great minds is beyond the scope of this essay, I want to highlight a few individuals whose work I am most familiar with and who I personally admire and respect. These individuals have been not only my inspiration, but also close and distant role models, confidantes, friends, and mentors. They include:

1. Gloria Anzaldúa (Hargill, Texas) – Latina feminist theorist
2. Alfredo de los Santos (Laredo, Texas) – Community college leader
3. Héctor Garza (Edinburg, Texas) – Founder of the National Council for Community and Educational Partnerships in Washington, DC
4. Norma Cantú (Laredo, Texas) – Folklorist, postmodernist writer, and university professor
5. Aída Hurtado (Edinburgh, Texas) – Social psychologist and university professor
6. Amaury Nora (Laredo, Texas) – Higher education scholar and university professor
7. Francisco Gonzalez Cigarroa (Laredo, Texas) – transplant surgeon, former Chancellor of the University of Texas System, and first Hispanic to serve as President of the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio, Texas
8. Raúl Garza (Laredo, Texas) – Educator and researcher
9. Juan Ochoa (Laredo, Texas) – Pharmacist
10. Hortencia Guerrero Medina (Laredo, Texas) – Accountant
11. Ileana Rendón Martinez (Laredo, Texas) – Teacher
12. Annie Serna (Laredo, Texas) – Social worker
13. Martha Guadiana Sepeda (Monterey, Mexico & Laredo, Texas) – Attorney
14. Julia Vera (Laredo, Texas) – Actress
15. Armando López (Laredo, Texas) – Attorney
16. Robert Alexander González (Laredo, Texas) – Architecture professor
17. Arturo Ríos (Laredo, Texas) – Psychiatrist
18. Santa Barraza (Kingsville, Texas) – Artist and painter
19. Selena Quintanilla (Corpus Christi, Texas) – Singer of pop and Tejano music
20. Amado Pena (Laredo, Texas) – Visual artist
21. Anna Neumann (Brownsville, Texas) – Higher education scholar and professor
22. José A. Cárdenas (Laredo, Texas) – Founder of Intercultural Development Research Association

23. Jordana Barton (Benavides, Texas) – Community Economic Development Authority
24. Maria "Cuca" Robledo Montecel (Laredo, Texas) – President and CEO of Intercultural Development Research Association
25. Jorge B. Haynes, Jr. (Laredo, TX) – Retired senior director of external relations for Chancellor Charles Reed at the California State University system

I am honored to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with these impactful figures and dedicate this essay to them and to the younger generation of great minds of the South Texas borderlands. I also honor all of the phenomenal students who I have been privileged to work with over the past 30 years. These students have been representative of diverse cultures (i.e., Latinx, African American, American Indian, White, heterosexual, and LGBTQ+). Everything I have done in my career has been to lift the most vulnerable students – those who, like me, grow up with hopes and dreams but are unsure about how to realize them.

So many ask me: "How did you do it?" The question has its own subtexts. Perhaps some wonder how I succeeded when I wasn't supposed to lead an accomplished life. Others who might want to keep someone like me in her place might be baffled that I found success despite the formidable obstacles placed on my path. And there are others who genuinely care, who also come from low socioeconomic backgrounds (SES), and who would like to model some of the practices I employed to succeed. My story will show that people like me succeed employing formidable strengths that are often unacknowledged and misunderstood by educators who have little knowledge of low-income communities. Our agency comes from our culture, spirituality, values and traditions, resistance, and our sheer determination to survive.

Seven Stages of *Conocimiento*

As I reflect on my life experiences, I am able to recognize how my path to a higher level of consciousness is reflective of Anzaldúa's (2015) epistemological model she terms seven stages of *conocimiento*. Keating (2015) notes that: "Anzaldúa uses 'conocimiento' in two related ways: (1) as individual insights; (2) as an entire theory of embodied knowing" (Keating 2015, p. 234). Anzaldúa (2015) notes: "The body is the ground of thought. The body is a text. Writing is not about being in your head; it's about being in your body (p. 5)." *Conocimiento* fosters individual perceptual shifts and envisions individuals moving through stages that can cause disruption but that can lead to inner and outer changes in one's consciousness and personal development. Going through each stage can ultimately lead to a high level of enlightenment and the ability to act in the world with both with knowledge and wisdom. *Conocer*, to know, is connected to activism and includes healing wounds of oppression, fighting against fragmentation, and working on integration. Briefly summarized, the seven stages of *conocimiento* include the following:

- Stage 1. *El arrebato* – experiencing *susto*/shock and loss of foundation. El *arrebato/the struggle* represents the multiple challenges individuals face in life. These struggles shake us up and they serve to awaken us from dormant states of

awareness. The *arrebato* speaks to the strength of the human spirit to recognize that from our most difficult times, can come new teachings, tools, gifts, and growth processes that can result in our personal growth, transformation, and empowerment. Anzaldúa (2015) writes: "If you don't work through your fear, playing it safe could bury you" (p. 122). The *arrebato* leads to the second stage called *nepantla*.

- Stage 2. *Nepantla* – finding oneself in an in-between state, *ni aquí, ni allá*/neither here nor there. This is a transitional state of both disequilibrium and possibility where a high level of learning can occur. Anzaldúa (2015) explains: "*Neplantla* is the site of transformation, the place where different perspectives come into conflict and where you question the basic ideas, tenets, and identities inherited from your family, your education, and your different cultures. *Nepantla* is the zone between changes where you struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and your inner relationship to it". (p. 127)
- Stage 3. Despair, Self-Loathing, and Helplessness – finding oneself in chaos caused by inhabiting a liminal space, the third space is one of paralysis and dysfunctionality as one attempts to sort through options, challenges, and opportunities.
- Stage 4. Call to Action – coming out of depression and breaking free from habitual coping strategies; reconnecting with spirit and undergoing a conversion.
- Stage 5. Create a Pattern that speaks to your reality – engaging in scripting a story about one's new reality. Anzaldúa (2015) explains that this can be done, for example, by scanning:

> Your inner landscape, books, movies, philosophies, mythologies, and modern sciences for bits of lore you can patch together to create a new narrative articulating your personal reality. You scrutinize and question dominant and ethnic ideologies and the mind-sets their cultures induce in others. And, putting all the pieces together, you reenvision the map of the known world, creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story. (p. 123)

- Stage 6. Test Your Story in the New World – developing and field-testing new ideas and behaviors knowing that this may result in success or disappointment.
- Stage 7. Transformation – experiencing inner and outer changes to one's personal development. Anzaldúa (2015) explains:

> In the seventh space, the critical turning point of transformation, you shift realities; develop an ethical, compassionate strategy with which to negotiate conflict and difference within self and between others; and find common ground by forming holistic alliances. You include these practices in your daily life, act on your vision—enacting spiritual activism. (p. 123)

Anzaldúa (2015) understood that one can go through stages in a very nonlinear manner. She writes:

> The stages of conocimiento illustrate the four directions (south, west, north, east), the next, below and above, and the seventh, the center. . .In all seven spaces you struggle with the shadow, the unwanted aspects of the self. Together, the seven stages open the senses and enlarge the breadth and depth of consciousness, causing internal shifts and external changes. All seven are present within each stage, and they occur concurrently, chronologically or not.

> Zigzagging from ignorance (*desconocimiento*) to awareness (*conocimiento*), in a day's time you may go through all seven stages though you may dwell in one for months. (pp. 123–4)

My Childhood Years

I am about 4 years old. I am hungry. Displaced and destitute because of parent's separation, my mother, two sisters, and I are now crowded in my grandmother's house where it feels like we are not really wanted. Every afternoon about 3 p.m., my *abuela* has a *merienda*, a mid-afternoon snack. This time she has fresh *pan dulce* (Mexican pastries) spread on a basket. I grab a piece of bread. My *abuela* is upset and tells my mother: "Look what your daughter is doing—taking our bread!" My mother's rage toward her mother lands on me. My mother begins beating me so hard my *abuela* tells her: "Stop, you are going to kill her." "So what! She is my daughter," my mother angrily responds. Years later, my mother tearfully apologizes for this event which had been haunting her for so long, and which, to this day, I do not remember. I forgive her and now understand that my mother's anger was the rage of poverty, frustration, and helplessness.

My mother did her best under very dire circumstances. Her strength and resolve were admirable, and it is her work ethic and ability to survive that served as a model for me to follow. There was the time when as a child I developed some strange blisters all over my body. Nobody could figure out what was causing these painful, bloody sores. We were living in an old, decrepit house, which was all my mother could afford at the time. One night after we went to sleep, my mother turned on the lights only to reveal hundreds of bed bugs on the mattress where I slept. My six-year-old body was covered with them. Hysterical and alarmed, she pulled out the mattress and burned it.

Life brings you many *arrebatos*, but as a child you don't have the skills to understand or to resolve. For many years, I had erased my childhood from my memory. It was too painful. Getting to writing this section, I feel the pain; emotions take over my body. I almost don't want to remember. But I know that my past is part of who I am and that articulating our pain can lead to healing. I begin the story of my early years with the memory of my now deceased parents and how I was given my name. My mother, Clementina Linares, was born in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. She was the youngest of 12 children. A stunning, beautiful woman who could easily pass for White, my mother had reddish brown hair and green eyes. She was the victim of unwanted sexual advances, and she led a life of multiple struggles and challenges. I am very proud of my mother. With very limited resources, including only a second-grade education, she took on low-level jobs such as cleaning motel rooms, waitressing, and picking crops. At one point, she sold Avon products in a downtown Laredo street corner. She single-handedly raised three girls, Elva (from a prior marriage), Ileana (my younger sister), and me. Despite the fact that we lived in poverty, I also admire my mother's ability to save enough money so that all our bills were paid on time. She considered it shameful for our family if we owed money to anybody, and this example has followed me all of my life. When she fell and slashed her leg, she went to the doctor and gave him her entire paycheck which she had just received that day to cover the medical expenses.

I will forever be thankful to my sister, Elva, who is now in a nursing home, because she sacrificed her own education to take care of me and my little sister, Ileana. Struggling to help the family survive and with no money for daycare, my mother withdrew Elva from middle school so that she could take care of Ileana and me. Elva never finished high school, and her career became that of being a sales woman earning meager wages in a downtown ladies' wear store. Ileana went on to college, earned a BA, and became a high school English teacher in Laredo.

My mother's most prized possession was a family journal. She was intent on capturing her family history as she was never quite sure of the date she was born. Over the years she would add to "*el libro*," as she called it, capturing through photos, documents, and her notes, the lives of her brothers and sisters and the dates of their passing, as well as the names of their children. I recall that when visitors would come to the house, she would say, "*enséñales el libro, hija*." She knew she was the only one in her family to capture the treasured history of her brothers and sisters and was proud to show it to others.

Family picture – Laura, Elvira Elva Montemayor, and Ileana Rendón Martinez. (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

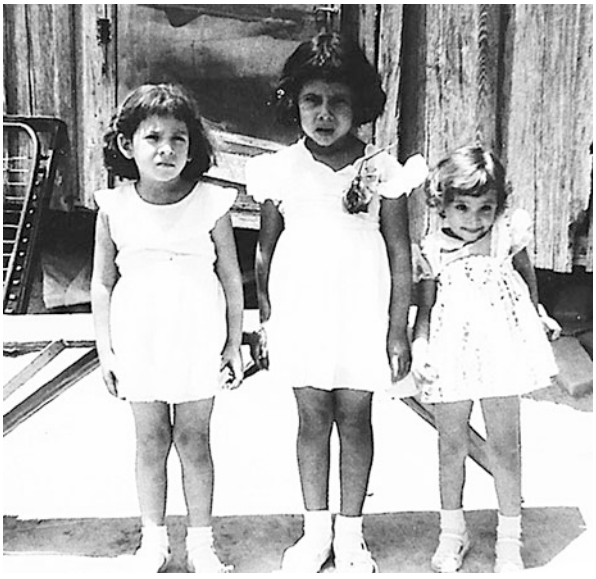
My father, Leopoldo Rendón, was a tractor operator and later a rancher. We affectionately called him "daddy." My dad was born in Laredo and received an elementary school education. My father was a hard-working man's man. He always wore boots and a ranch hat. My dad worked in the sweltering heat clearing roads and fields with his tractor so bridges and lakes could be constructed. Later in life, he saved enough money and bought a 40-acre ranch where he raised and sold cattle. My father believed in the value of experience, as well as education. "*Tendrás mucha educación*," he would tell me, "*pero no tienes experiencia*." Regrettably, my father did not know how to be the best partner, but even though my mother left him, to his credit he never lost touch with us. We always knew he loved us in his own way. After the divorce from my mother, he remarried but had no other children.

Picture of Laura's parents, Leopoldo Rendón and Clementina Linares. (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

I was named after two people: my grandfather, Lauro Rendón, and my uncle who I never met, Ignacio Rendón. My name has an interesting, yet traumatic story, one that my parents and their families were able to only vaguely discuss. The story I heard was that uncle Ignacio was somewhat of a ladies' man who became involved with a woman who claimed that my uncle had fathered her baby, an allegation my uncle denied. It is said that the woman's brothers confronted my uncle as he left a bar. My uncle was brutally murdered; his remains tossed along the train tracks. Seven years later, I was born on the exact month and day (July 31) my uncle Ignacio was born. Even today, I feel uncle Ignacio's spirit is with me.

I barely remember my early years as they were not the happiest times in my life. My parents were not content with each other. There was a lot of fighting and very little happiness. There was the time when, at 3 years old, I was playing with my sister, Elva. Somehow, I fell and hit my head against the pavement. I blacked out with a concussion and crack in my skull. My mother was terrified that my father would yell at her and called a doctor to make a home visit. I vaguely remember waking up, and I was never fully treated for my injury. That may explain how throughout my life, I have had periods of dizziness. Ultimately, my parents were separated and finally divorced. It was a contentious separation with constant fighting, accusations, and tensions that were to leave an indelible mark on me as a woman who later found it difficult to give and receive love.

My mother became a single parent raising three children, but she was also a very strong woman with the qualities of an entrepreneur. With hardly any income and no health insurance for any of us, she endured the hardships of poverty and limited support from her family as she struggled to ensure that we were fed, went to school, and remained in good health. These were the priorities in our life – basic survival. I don't remember having a Christmas tree, enjoying holiday dinners or getting birthday gifts when I was a child. We just didn't have the money. When there was joy, it was listening to music on the radio playing my mother's Mexican favorites such as Pedro Infante, Javier Solís, and Agustín Lara. Joy was going to my grandmother's house where she prepared big *cazuelas* of chicken *mole*, rice, beans, and fresh tortillas. Joy was going to the parade and carnival, which were a part of Laredo's biggest event, the George Washington Birthday Celebration, complete with a colonial pageant, and later a Princess Pocahontas ball featuring debutantes from Laredo's elite families, none of which I have ever attended. This celebration began in 1898 as a show of American patriotism, and the tradition that continues today. The irony is that George Washington never knew about the celebration and that Laredo has always had a predominantly Latinx population which is patriotic but also has deep ties to Mexico.



Laura's sixth birthday picture with her sister Ileana (left) and cousin Elma (right). (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

At one point in my early childhood, my mother started a neighborhood *escuelita*, a sort of daycare prevalent in Laredo at the time, and for 50 cents a week per child, children would receive instruction in basic mathematics and reading. I participated in this *escuelita*, which was taught in Spanish. I began the first grade when I was 6 years old at Bruni Elementary School where I learned my first words of English. In the first grade, I remember that I was one of the best students. I aced reading and writing, something I noticed very few kids were good at throughout my K–12

schooling. As a young girl, I loved to read especially comic books – Superman, the Green Lantern, teen magazines, encyclopedias, and Mexican *novelas*.

I remember that we moved around several times as my mother was always trying to rent a house she could afford and that was close to our school. It seemed like every day was a constant struggle. My mother would come home quite tired from her evening shift as a waitress (10 p.m. to 6 a.m.) where she earned $15 a week plus tips. She had little quality time to spend with us. Often, she would bring left over restaurant food so we could eat. We also ate cheap canned food such as beef stew and spaghetti. At one point my mother received government assistance and picked up food staples such as cheese and powdered milk for us to consume. In junior high school, my mother would give me a quarter which I used to buy a hamburger, chips, and a Coke. One day, she found herself having a tough conversation with me: "*Tienes que ser fuerte, hija*. You have to be strong." She did not have the quarter for me to eat lunch.

I relate these stories not because I want to get sympathy, but because there are so many in higher education who simply do not fully understand the plight of poor students. Even today, low-income students experience hardships such as living in their cars, dealing with incarcerated family members, not having health insurance to pay for their illnesses, dealing with food insecurities, taking care of siblings, and having to work multiple jobs to survive.

Laura's eighth grade photo. (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

El Colegio Es Para Los Ricos

I am in my eighth grade English classroom at L.J. Christen Junior High School in Laredo. The school counselor comes in, forms in hand, and informs us that we need to

fill out the paperwork indicating whether we want to be on the vocational or academic track as we would be transitioning to high school soon. I raise my hand and ask the counselor to explain the difference between the two tracks. She says that if we want to get a job straight out of high school that we should check the vocational track. If we want to go to college, then we should select the academic track. The little girl in me who so wants to be a teacher tells me to select the academic track. I feel so proud and excited about my decision. I come home and find my tired mom, but I gather the courage to proudly tell her: "¡*Voy a ir al colegio*!" My mother does not smile. She looks angry and frustrated. "Who do you think you are?" she says. "*El colegio es para los ricos*."

At 13 years of age, I made the most important decision of my life. I made that decision without any information, with no encouragement, and with no idea of what the full impact of that decision would be. All I knew was that I wanted to get out of poverty. I wanted to be somebody. I wanted to make sure that if I ever had kids they would not have to go through what I had endured. While I was greatly disappointed in my mother's reaction, at some level I knew I had to move forward with my academic goals. I now understand how my mother's total lack of knowledge about higher education coupled with the fact that she expected me to graduate from high school and quickly get a job so she would not have to work as hard anymore created a situation where she could not support my decision. College? How could she support something totally out of her radar screen, something that poor people could not even dream of considering? How do you know what you don't know?

Laura's high school graduation picture. (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

My high school years were noneventful. I was not voted Most Likely to Succeed or considered to be a popular, good-looking girl. I was not a cheerleader, I did not play in the band and I was not invited to go to the high school prom. We didn't have the money to dress nicely or to afford expensive hair stylists. However, my sister Ileana and I developed a network of friends who liked music and dancing. Music has always been a part of my life. On weekends, we looked forward to going to dances at the Laredo Civic Center featuring Chicano bands from south Texas such as Sunny and the Sunliners and Little Joe and the Latinaires. We also listened to Motown music and other artists of the time – the Supremes, the Temptations, Martha and the Vandellas, Smokey Robinson and the Miracles, the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, among many others. We also went to "record hops" held at the Martin High School gym where Laredo's own bands would play – The Rondells and The Royal T's. Some of my favorite songs were "Talk to Me" by Sunny and the Sunliners and "Elusive Butterfly," sung by Bob Lind and Jimmy Webb's "McArthur Park" performed by Richard Harris and later by Donna Summer. I was also drawn to Simon and Garfunkel's "I am A Rock," as I sometimes I just felt that I wanted to be left alone and that I did not need anyone to fulfill me. I loved the poetic nature of some of these songs, and the writer and dreamer in me penned a few poems, something I occasionally do today.

While I generally made good grades in high school, now I understand that I underperformed. I really believe that neither my teachers or even my peers expected that I would amount to very much. However, I did have my own aspirations, and one of them was getting a college degree. I joined the Debate Club, Future Teachers of America and worked on the school newspaper. I graduated from Martin High School in 1966 and immediately enrolled in the only higher education institution available in my home town: Laredo Junior College (LJC), now known as Laredo College. The community college became my gateway to higher education. I always worked while I attended college because I knew my mother needed the money. At one point, I joined my mother working on weekends during the night shift as a waitress at a restaurant. My weekend salary was $5 plus tips. When I ran out of courses I could take at LJC, I transferred to San Antonio College (SAC).

Moving to San Antonio was a big deal for me, as it was a much bigger town than Laredo. I had to take two buses to get to SAC, and with help from my mom and dad, we rented a room in an aunt's home, where I lived on $10 a week. This was a lonely time for me. Sometimes I went to bed hungry because I had run out of money. Regardless, I persevered and really enjoyed my classes at SAC, especially my philosophy class, which opened up a whole new world of ideas for me – perspectives that were never included in any of my high school classes or in courses I had taken at Laredo Junior College. I was particularly intrigued by existentialism, a philosophical

view that the individual is a free and responsible agent in society. I was fascinated with the ideas of Sartre, Kierkegaard, Kant, Plato, and Nietzsche, among other thought leaders.

I completed my last semester of courses at SAC, qualifying me to earn an Associate of Arts degree in 1968, and in 2011 I was named Outstanding Former Student. I then transferred to the University of Houston (UH) because my dear friend, Raúl Garza, was enrolled there. Raúl, also a low-income student from Laredo, loved to collect college catalogs from universities throughout the nation. He encouraged me to join him in Houston. This was the height of the Vietnam War and protests against the war were raging throughout the country.

In the fall of 1968, my mother took the long Greyhound bus ride with me from Laredo to Houston. This was the first time one of her daughters was leaving home so far away, and she was terrified that something horrible would happen to me. When I stepped on the campus at the University of Houston, I was so elated. I had just seen one of my all-time favorite movies, *The Graduate*, and I took delight in seeing the big trees, large buildings, and squirrels that ran across campus. We had nothing like that back home. The academic nature of the university filled my soul. The movie soundtrack featuring Simon and Garfunkel's song lyrics ("Sounds of Silence," "Scarborough Fair") ran through my mind. At UH, I lived with four White roommates, and we got along very well. This was the first time I had experienced living and closely interacting with White people, and I believe it was my roommates' first time being that close to a Mexican American woman. I majored in English and Journalism, as these were the classes I hoped to later teach. My first semester at UH was stressful as I was getting accustomed to a new academic culture that was foreign to me. I never came across any Latinx professors, and there were not very many Latinx students at UH at the time. When times got tough, I would go to the student union and listen to two albums which calmed my soul: Stan Getz and Astrud Gilberto's Brazilian bossa nova album featuring "The Girl from Ipanema" and famed composer Armando Manzanero's album of romantic Mexican songs, including "Esta Tarde Vi Llover." It was during this time that I began to develop a new sophistication about life – absorbing the world of ideas, developing relationships with people who did not look or think like me, and viewing myself as a real success. I wasn't thinking about it then, but I became the first in my family to attend a community college and a 4-year institution. In 1970, my first big dream was realized. I earned a bachelor's degree, and was ready to be a teacher. I had successfully crossed the academic border which before had seemed so inaccessible. This redefined my family history as my little sister, Ileana, went off to college a couple of years after I did. Ileana's three sons also went to college.

Picture of Laura as eighth grade English and reading teacher, L.J. Christen Junior High School, Laredo, TX. (Photo from Rendón personal collection)

Realizing My Childhood Dream: Becoming a *Maestra*

Upon graduation from college, my parents insisted that I return to Laredo even though that is not what I wanted to do. I wanted to continue living life away from my hometown. I was intrigued with the Peace Corps, teaching in big cities, and exploring new careers. But my mother and father would have none of that. They thought I belonged safely at home. The outside world was too foreign for them, and they were afraid to take the risk that their daughter would be harmed if she steered too away from the family unit. Angry with my parents, very reluctantly I returned to Laredo, and my first professional job in 1970 was to teach at L.J. Christen Junior High School at a salary of $6500 per academic year. I think this was the most anyone in my family had ever earned. From the ages of 21 to 25, I taught eighth grade English and reading. I also became the sponsor of the school newspaper and yearbook called the *Big C*. I taught low-income *barrio* kids in very hot, overcrowded classrooms without air conditioning. I was a popular, well-liked teacher, and after my first year of teaching I was assigned accelerated English classes where I interacted with some of the smartest students. My teaching style was different from other teachers. I used the Beatles and other music to turn the kids on to poetry. I connected literature to contemporary themes. I had the kids work on their own

plays which they performed in class. Some of my students went on to become lawyers, politicians, poets, and physicians. It was exciting and fun to work with these kids, and I could have easily stayed working with them for the rest of my professional life. But there was something in me that wanted more. My intuition was telling me that my work at this school was done, and that I should prepare for my next stage in life. It was also during this time that I noticed people would look at me as an intelligent leader. My overall appearance was also changing – more attractive, better dressed, and more polished. I was dating and having a good time with my friends, but I never lost sight of my overall objective to be as educated as I could be.

I had now set my sights on becoming a school counselor, and I began to take evening graduate-level courses at what was then known as Texas A&I University–Laredo (a branch of Texas A&I University–Kingsville), which functioned as an upper-level institution for juniors, seniors, and graduate students. This university later changed its name to Laredo State University. Ultimately the institution became a 4-year university when it joined the Texas A&M system and is now known as Texas A&M International University. At the time I was taking graduate-level courses, students could not complete a master's degree in Laredo. Instead, we also had to take courses at Texas A&I University in Kingsville. I was teaching during the day, which meant driving to Kingsville at night once or twice a week, and taking summer courses in residence at the Texas A&I campus.

Nothing comes easy to low-income communities, and it often takes a legal battle to move forward with real change. It is noteworthy to mention here that it took a lawsuit by the Mexican American Legal Defense Education Fund (MALDEF) to improve higher education opportunities along the Texas border, including the areas around Brownsville, Corpus Christi, Laredo, San Antonio, and El Paso. In 1987, MALDEF filed the *LULAC V. Richards* lawsuit challenging decades of discrimination against Mexican Americans in the Texas–Mexican border. In 1990, I was proud to provide legal testimony as to the dire socioeconomic conditions and limited higher education opportunities available to students living along the border. As I took the stand in a Brownsville, Texas courtroom, my mother was recognized. She stood up, beaming with pride, knowing that her daughter was standing up against injustices that for so many years had remained unaddressed.

For so long, there existed a pernicious, misguided belief that the border area was not the right location for the highest levels of education and that the best that could be done was to prepare students to enter the workforce. At the time the entire border region was the largest and most populous area in the United States without a comprehensive university offering doctoral and professional programs in diverse fields of study. Students in the border area averaged about 225 miles of travel to attend a comprehensive public university, while students in the rest of Texas traveled only 45 miles. The situation was so dire that in 1993, all the universities in the border area were in the lowest two of five tiers of higher education. Until the 1970s, San Antonio was the largest city in the United States without a public university. MALDEF won a court order requiring Texas to improve border higher education. The result was greater college access, more doctoral programs, research laboratories, libraries, and improved employment opportunities (Kauffman 2016). Texas A&M International University in Laredo as well as the University of Texas–Rio Grande

Valley, which boasts a medical school, are examples of new higher education opportunities that were created along the Texas–Mexico border.

Beginning a Career in Higher Education

I earned a master's degree in Counseling and Guidance and Psychology in 1975. This opened the door for me to land my first professional job in higher education. I was being considered for a position as a counselor in the Coordinated Bilingual Studies Program at Laredo Junior College (LJC). I had actually gone to the Laredo Independent School District superintendent to see if they had a high school counseling position, but he told me nothing was available. A friend told me about the position at LJC, which was a Title III federally funded program. I applied and immediately got the job as a counselor and psychology instructor in a learning community of 150 low-income, Mexican American students who were just initiating their freshman year in college. This was my first job in higher education. After a year, I was promoted to Director of the program. I supervised two counselors, two English instructors, one reading instructor and two paraprofessionals. I was now in a position with department chair status at the age of 26. I reviewed faculty and counselors for promotion and merit pay, wrote funding proposals, made organizational changes, and collected data to assess the effectiveness of the program. Looking back now, I realize that this was one of the first learning communities and first-year experience programs tailored especially for Mexican American students. We were very proud of our success as we had a high first- and second-year student retention rate. Every year consultants from the faculty in the University of Texas–Austin community college leadership program would come to Laredo to evaluate our program and offer suggestions for improvement. We always received high marks. This is how I learned that there were higher education programs which offered doctoral degrees, and I was excited by the prospect of actually entering such a program.

24 June 1976

Arechiga tells project personnel changes

Administrative personnel for Title III programs in research and planning, curriculum and development, and coordinated bilingual studies have been reassigned at Laredo Junior College.

The changes were announced by Dr. Domingo Arechiga, college president, while advising of receipt of a $273,000 federal grant for the total program. He said the college drew an additional $50,000 over last year's funding level.

Dr. Hector Farias Jr. of Laredo will be the overall coordinator for Title III programs effective July. He currently serves as director of research and planning.

Farias will as be assisted by three coordinators assigned by Arechiga from present administrative personnel. Jacinto Juarez, now the director of personnel and computer services, will be the coordinator for research and planning.

Juarez will double as supervisor of the computer center. He previously worked for Laredo Model Cities.

Ray Feiger, the coordinated bilingual studies project coordinator, will become the coordinator for curriculum and development.

Laura Rendon has been promoted to be CBS coordinator. She formerly was a counselor with the same program. A counselor now with the program is being reassigned to a faculty position.

The CBS program and staff recently came under administrative fire as a result of an incident involving students while on a year-ending trip to New Braunfels. Arechiga, however, gave the program a clean bill of health after an in-house investigation.

"These assignments reflect our policy of increasing productivity with the assistance of federal funds," Arechiga said. "Instead of adding programs and personnel when federal monies are available, we study methods of reorganization of for maximum efficiency and ecomomy."

Appointed to LJC in 1974, Farias holds a doctorate from Northwestern University and master's and bachelor's degrees from Texas A&I University at Kingsville.

Rendon holds a master's degree from Texas A&I University at Kingsville and a bachelor's from the University of Houston. Before joining the CBS program last fall, she taught in Laredo public schools during 1970-75.

Appointed to LJC as direc-

(See ARECHIGA Page 10A)

Jumping, rocking plus anything

DR. HECTOR FARIAS ...Title III head

LAURA RENDON ...CBS director

Laura I Rendón hired as administrator at Laredo Junior College. (Photo courtesy of Laredo Morning Times)

I applied to the UT–Austin community college leadership program but was not accepted because I was told my GRE scores were too low. This was disappointing because these faculty members were the same ones that would come to evaluate the program I directed at LJC. Since then I have never believed that test scores are indicative of all that students can do or that they measure a student's full potential. Often used as filters to keep people like me out of college programs, tests can be harmful and exclusionary.

I also applied to the University of Houston's higher education program. A UH faculty member called to tell me they could grant me conditional admission, which could be removed after 1 year if I made good grades. Around the same time, one of my high school classmates had completed a doctorate in the higher education program at the University of Michigan. He spoke to me about the program, and encouraged me to apply. The University of Michigan accepted me without conditions and offered a terrific financial aid package, a significant show of confidence in me and my potential that I will forever appreciate. Going to Michigan opened up opportunities and world views I never knew existed. Looking back, I believe that leaving the familiarity and sameness of my hometown and going to Michigan was a much better choice than staying in Texas. When I opened the acceptance letter, I jumped for joy. I knew my life was about to change.

Around the same time, I was dealing with personal challenges. I had gotten married while working at LJC and things did not work out between me and my then husband. He was someone with much less education than I had, and he seemed to have little ambition in life. I think I married him just because it was expected. I was 28 and thought maybe it was time to get married, but deep inside me I felt I was making a mistake. This proved to be true, and I divorced him after less than 2 years of a chaotic marriage. Another challenge was that my mother did not want me to leave home again. She was very stressed with my decision to leave Laredo. She developed an unusual pain in her chest, lost a significant amount of weight, was depressed, and told me that if I went to Michigan, I might not catch her last breath. Chicana mothers can be like that.

My father was also not supportive of my decision. All of this was stressful for me, but I decided to take the risk and go to Michigan. I told myself that if my mother continued with her physical pain that I would return to Texas and go to Houston where I could both enroll in doctoral study and take her to the best doctors in Texas. In the fall of 1979, I packed a few boxes and took a plane to Detroit where a couple of friends met me and drove me to Ann Arbor. My mother had chest pain one more time and never again after that. Relieved, I continued my doctoral study at UM, and that decision proved to be the best I have ever made in my life.

Living the Life of a Scholarship Girl

Getting to Ann Arbor was fun, exciting, intellectually stimulating, and ultimately life changing. Everything in Ann Arbor was different than Laredo – the climate (cool in the summer and snow in the winter), the people, the intellectual ambiance, the food, and the way people talked and presented themselves. During the fall, the leaves turned beautifully yellow and red, an experience I could not get in Laredo. I was so pleased that two

other people from Laredo were also in Ann Arbor – Sandra Mendiola, who was working on a doctorate, and Armando López, who was entering law school and who had been one of my students when I taught English at L.J. Christen Junior High School. There was also a small group of Latinx undergraduate and graduate students, and we all knew who we were. On weekends we would have parties, and we knew that if we needed anything – a ride, food, support, anything – someone would reach out to help. We also had small group gatherings at local pubs where we shared what we hoped to do with our education, how college had changed us, how our families really did not understand what we were doing, and how our lives, while now close, would soon be broken apart as we went our separate ways. It was at UM that I met graduate students who influenced my life: Héctor Garza, Aída Hurtado, Anna Neumann, Kathleen Smith, Kathy James, and Jaime Flores. The sense of support coming from the Latinx student community at UM was phenomenal. Without that support I would not have had a sense of family, and it would have been much more challenging to complete a doctorate.

Laura I Rendón as doctoral student at University of Michigan. (Photo reprinted with permission from The University of Michigan)

The first semester at UM was a little disconcerting. I entered the higher education program with a strong cohort of mainly White students, some who had attended very prestigious, elite colleges and universities (some of which I had never heard of before), and I was in awe that I was a part of that entering class. I never really felt like an imposter with this cohort. My feelings were more related to the tension of being in a place I had not experienced before and the notion that somehow, I was going to figure out a way to succeed. Here I was, a Chicana from south Texas, who had attended community colleges and regional universities, sitting in class with students who had graduated from places like Kalamazoo College, Princeton, and Yale. But those concerns were quickly dispelled as I participated in classes and was able to hold my own in terms of viewpoint, intellect, and academic ability. The caliber of faculty in the UM higher education program was outstanding. At UM, my goal was to become a community college president. I remember meeting my adviser, Joseph Cosand, who had been Chief Executive Officer at three community colleges in California and President of the Junior College District of St. Louis. Joe was a nationally known, distinguished leader in higher education. He had also served as Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education, member of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the American Council on Education, and Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education. I loved Joe. I believe Joe saw in me what I could not fully see in myself at the time. In his classes, he would look directly at me with his intense blue eyes and say, "Laura, when you are community college president, what would you do?" This was a tremendous validating action because it affirmed my capacity to be a higher education leader. Here I was being told by one of the nation's foremost higher education leaders that it wasn't a question of if, but when.

Joe retired a year after I arrived at UM, and my new adviser became Richard Alfred, who took over the community college program. Dick, who had held several leadership positions in community colleges, became my dissertation chair. I also met Carlos Arce who directed the Chicano Project at UM's Institute for Social Research (ISR). My days were spent reading and writing, working at the UM Office of Minority Affairs in the School of Education and taking classes. The Latinx community on campus was quite concerned about the lack of Latinx students and faculty, and we formed an organization, Coalition of Hispanics for Higher Education, where I served as President. Our organization lobbied the UM President, Deans, and Director of Affirmative Action to recruit more Latinx students and faculty. These experiences helped to fine-tune my leadership and advocacy skills and to gain stronger sense of agency. Unlike my experience in high school, at UM I was all over campus – popular and considered a leader and strong advocate who was unafraid to speak truth to power.

Regardless, I did experience some microaggressions. A White female graduate student told me: "You know Laura, I think you're kind of smart. But I have to admit that when I first met you, I thought you were kind of dumb." When I submitted a research paper to a White professor, he said: "This is very well written. Do you write like this all the time?" There was also some reluctance from a faculty member who asked me if studying Chicano students would constitute a valid research study. And a state policymaker said he knew exactly where I was coming from: "hot off the migrant trail," as he put it, referring to migrants who came to the Midwest to pick crops during the summer months. I had never been a migrant worker, but I had utmost respect for them and knew that some people stereotyped migrants as inferior human beings. Some of my high school friends had taken that yearly long trip from Laredo to the Midwest to work in the fields and live in deplorable housing conditions. Working in the fields was excruciating, backbreaking work which involved waking up before sunrise, stopping at sunset and sometimes being sprayed by pesticides. This was a way of life for migrant families, including their underage children, who wanted to earn and save enough money that would last them the entire school year.

At UM, Carlos Arce, who headed the Chicano Project at ISR, received a grant designed to provide support (summer housing, statistical analysis, preparing the dissertation for submission to Graduate School, etc.) to previous Ford Foundation Fellows who had not yet completed their doctorates. I had not been a Ford Fellow, but my friend, Aida Hurtado, convinced Carlos that I should participate in the program, which indeed pushed me to the finish line. In the fall of 1982, I defended my dissertation before my committee comprised of Richard Alfred (Chair), Carlos Arce, Gerald Gurin, and Norma Radin (outside member from the School of Social Work). My research study, *Chicano Students In South Texas Community Colleges: A Study of Student and Institution-Related Determinants of Educational Outcomes,* received Dissertation of the Year Award – Higher, Adult, and Continuing Education Department. I was among the first in the entering cohort to complete my doctorate. Michigan was too far for my family to travel to my doctoral graduation, so I did not participate in the hooding ceremony. However, my dear friend Norma Cantú had also received her doctorate at the same time from the University of Nebraska. Together, we hosted a big party, Laredo style, with a band, great food, and family and friends. Norma and I weren't thinking of it then, but having two Laredo Latinas earning a doctorate at the same time was nothing short of a big deal, and the local paper featured a story about us. Now here I was, a Chicana with a doctorate from the University of Michigan. I was now ready for the big time.

Times staff photo

New PHd's

Norma Cantu, left, and Laura Rendon recently completed their dissertations to earn doctorate degrees. Both women live and work in Laredo. Their degrees will be conferred upon them in December.

Laredo women earn doctorates

Laura I Rendón and Norma Cantú as new Ph.D. graduates. (Photo courtesy of Laredo Morning Times)

Bright Lights and You, Girl!

In the late 1960s, Tom Jones, a popular pop singer, released a song, *Bright Lights and You, Girl*, and I connected to its lyrics about a woman who achieves stardom and fame. As a young woman, I wanted my life to be exciting, Hollywood style, to have national prominence and to have my work highly regarded. Now I had a doctorate and everything about me, my struggles during my poverty years, my experience as a middle school teacher, my role as a community college administrator, and my graduate experience at UM, had prepared me for center stage. I felt ready for the bright lights.

In 1982, as I was close to completing my doctorate, the President of Laredo Junior College, Domingo Aréchiga, called to offer me a job as Director of the Ford Foundation funded Mathematics Intervention Project with an organization called The Border College Consortium. The grant had been written by Manuel Justiz and Paul Resta at the University of New Mexico. The consortium included six community colleges located along the US–Mexican border – two in Texas, two in Arizona, and two in California. I took the job, which was based in Laredo, and this role put me in an exciting position where I interacted with individuals representing highly regarded organizations that were trying to address the underrepresentation of students of color in STEM fields of study. In my early 30s, I was interacting with important people representing the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Educational Testing Service, and the National Institute of Education. Working with Héctor Garza and Antonio Flores, we co-founded the Hispanic Caucus of the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) where I later served on the Board of Directors. I became Chair of the AAHE Hispanic Caucus, and this put me in touch with higher education leaders from across the nation. The Caucus evolved into the current American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education (AAHHE), where I co-founded the yearly Student Success Institute and a policy brief series featuring an analysis of contemporary Latinx education issues called *Perspectivas*.

When Manuel Justiz was appointed Director of the National Institute of Education (NIE), he recruited me to become a Research Associate and to join Paul Resta and him in Washington, DC. Again, my parents were very reluctant to have me leave Laredo, but I felt this position would be very good for me. In the fall of 1984, Kathy James and Raúl Garza drove with me to DC, and when they left, I felt stressed and overwhelmed. I was fortunate to find an apartment close to the metro, and I purchased a condo the second year I lived in DC.

My first day at NIE, which later become the Office of Education Research and Improvement and now known as Institute of Education Sciences, released the report, *Involvement in Learning* (NIE 1984) as a follow-up to the acclaimed *A Nation At Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983), which drove school reform efforts throughout the nation. *Involvement In Learning* helped launch a large-scale higher education first-year experience initiative and an assessment movement. At NIE, I worked on the technical aspects of creating a new higher education research center, which was awarded to the University of Michigan, and I also worked to establish connections between the Institute and community colleges. Here I interacted with federal policy makers, well-known faculty, administrators, and program officers.

Living in DC was truly another culture shock for me. With so many people, there was also so much loneliness. With so many projects, shifting deadlines, and people to meet, there was also a sense of craziness and disequilibrium. I did not like DC living, and when Manuel Justiz left NIE to assume a faculty position at the University of South Carolina, we wrote a grant to study transfer students in the Border College Consortium. The grant was submitted to the Ford Foundation, and I left DC

in 1986 to join Manuel as Director of the research study. I was now located in the deep south – the University of South Carolina where I held the title of Visiting Assistant Professor. Along with working on the research study, I taught community college courses in the higher education program geared to student affairs administrators. This was my first type of faculty experience in a 4-year institution of higher education. The best thing that happened to me in South Carolina was meeting John N Gardner, who had taken charge of the nation's First-Year Experience initiative. John and I developed a long-lasting friendship, and today I proudly serve on the Board of Directors of the John N Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education.

In the late 1980s, I became involved with a major national initiative, the Quality Education for Minorities (QEM) Project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and headquartered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). I was part of a prominent panel of faculty and administrators that held hearings throughout the nation to learn about the issues afflicting minority communities, what was working and not working in the educational system, and what could be done to foster greater access and success especially for African Americans, Latinxs, and American Indian students. The result was a nationally disseminated report, *Education That Works*: *An Action Plan for the Education of Minorities* (1990), and the creation of the Quality Education for Minorities Network in Washington, DC. I found myself gaining national visibility and respect for my work. I began to get speaking engagements, and I was presenting my work at national conferences.

Also in the late 1980s, I wrote my first and only two-act play, *C/S Con Safos* (Rendón 1988), a coming-of-age story of Laredo students about to graduate from high school in 1966. The play was inspired by the film, *American Graffiti* and Janis Ian's song, "At Seventeen." The play featured American and Tex-Mex music of the 1960s, and was the first-place winner of the Chicano Drama Contest, Teatro El Sol, Tucson, AZ. My play was staged in Tucson, AZ (1988), San Antonio, TX (1988), Laredo, TX (1999), and Austin, TX (2000). Acquiring the identity of a playwright and seeing my work being performed on stage was nothing short of thrilling.

Becoming *Una Profesora*

As the research project in South Carolina was ending, my UM adviser, Dick Alfred, called to tell me about a faculty opportunity in the community college leadership program at North Carolina State University. In 1988, I applied and was hired as an untenured Associate Professor and Associate Editor of the *Community College Review*. In North Carolina, I met Ed Boone, who was chair of the department. Ed was extremely supportive, and it was clear he believed in my potential to be a leader and scholar in higher education. Ed is one of the reasons I became a faculty member in higher education. At NC–State, I worked with community college administrators, taught adult and community college courses, and directed the summer Community College Leadership Institute. I was coming into my own as a scholar and leader in the higher education community.

In 1991, I received a call from Alfredo de los Santos, then Vice Chancellor of the Maricopa Community College system in Phoenix, indicating that Arizona State University (ASU) was interested in hiring me in their higher education program. Loui Olivas and Robert Fenske were also instrumental in recruiting me to ASU where I became a tenured associate professor. When I arrived in Phoenix, I finally exhaled. It was great to be back in the southwest after spending 7 years in the south. I remember being at Target and hearing people speaking in Spanish. I smiled and thought, "I'm home." I loved my time at ASU, and I thought I would never leave. I became President of the ASU Chicano Faculty and Staff Association where we worked to advocate for Latinx faculty and students. I was meeting with the ASU President and top administrators on campus. During this time I was very driven, working long hours and dealing with an extensive travel schedule. I published my first book while at ASU, *Educating a New Majority* (1996) co-edited with Richard Hope, who I had met through the QEM Project, and who was at the Woodrow Wilson Foundation. I was told I was the first Latina to become full professor through the promotion and tenure process at ASU.

I attended many conferences, but my primary professional network became the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) which I started attending since the mid-1980s. There were very few scholars of color attending ASHE at the time, and I remember hearing that some senior scholars were calling those of us in our 30s the "Brat Pack" of the organization, a term used to refer to a group of young actors who starred in 1980s coming-of-age films such as *The Breakfast Club* and *St. Elmo's Fire*. We thought being called the Brat Pack was rather cute. Around that time, Millie García, Wynetta Lee, and other scholars of color initiated the ASHE Council on Ethnic Participation to address the limited visibility and participation of underrepresented scholars. Today there is much more diversity in ASHE, and I am proud that we helped to open the doors for so many other scholars of color who now hold leadership roles within the organization. One of my most significant professional honors is being the first Latinx scholar to be elected President of ASHE, first serving as President-Elect with both terms occurring between 1998 and 1999.

During my 8-year tenure at ASU, I always had grants. I was Director of the Ford Foundation's Urban Partnership Program (UPP), which was the precursor to today's federally funded GEAR UP Program. My role was to lead the effort to assess the progress of 16 urban cities throughout the nation which organized city-wide alliances to address the participation, retention, and graduation of underserved students. The partnerships included the K–12 system, 2- and 4-year institutions, community-based organizations, and elected officials. I worked closely with Steven Zwerling, program officer at the Ford Foundation, and a team of assessment consultants to collect and analyze data related to the progress of students as they moved from middle school to high school and ultimately to college. An outgrowth of the UPP was the National Center for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP) located in Washington, DC. Héctor Garza (NCCEP President), Peter Dual, Millie García, and I co-founded NCCEP which provided technical assistance to all GEAR UP sites across the nation. I succeeded Peter Dual as Chair of the NCCEP Board of Directors, and the organization is still in existence.

I also served as a Research Associate with National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, Learning and Assessment headquartered at Penn State University and funded by the Office of Education Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. In this Center I worked closely with prominent and up-and-coming scholars such as Patrick Terenzini, Ernest Pascarella, Vincent Tinto, Jim Radcliff, Amaury Nora, William Tierney, Estela Bensimon, and Romero Jalómo, my ASU graduate research assistant. This team worked on research projects related to improving college student outcomes. It was through this research that I developed *validation theory* (Rendón 1994) which later became the framework for student success initiatives such as California's Puente Project and Texas' *Ascender*/Catch the Next Program. The theory has also been employed in research studies and as a framework in dissertations capturing the experiences of underserved students (Rendón-Linares and Muñoz 2011).

From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American "Scholarship Girl" (Rendón 1992) became the most popular article I have ever written. While working on my doctorate at UM, I came across an essay written by Richard Rodriguez (1975) where he related his experiences as a "scholarship boy." This essay was a poignant story of the cultural separation Rodriguez found students must endure in order to attain academic success in college. As I read the Rodriguez narrative, I reflected on my own college experience. I believed people like Rodriguez and I needed to act with resistance against total cultural separation (i.e., giving up use of Spanish, having limited power to enact institutional changes, totally assimilating into the institutional culture, etc.). I argued that our family and culture were strong assets, and that while we would surely be changed by higher education, the academy itself could also be changed by us. This now classic piece has been employed in diverse fields – English, ethnic studies, sociology, psychology, etc. Even today I get people telling me they have read my essay, and that they can relate to what I wrote so many years ago.

It was a joy to work with outstanding students and faculty at ASU, too many to specifically mention here, but I trust they know who they are. As I was leaving ASU in 1999, I left some funds to the Chicano/Latino Faculty and Staff Association which employed the money to set up the endowed Laura Rendón Scholarship, still in existence today. I had the honor of attending a couple of ceremonies where scholarships in my name were awarded, a very touching moment for a scholar like me who had spent her professional life advocating for low-income, first-generation students.

Focusing on Spirituality and Overall Well-Being

I am with three young assistant professors at ASU, and we gather together to visit a dear friend and fellow professor who is fighting colon cancer. Our friend is only 44 years of age, but she is now in a hospital and the end of her life journey appears near. Slowly, we each leave her room and huddle outside hugging each other with tears in our eyes. One of the things she told us was that what really mattered in her

life right now was not her academic undertakings, but simply being able to sleep. It was to be the last time we saw her.

As I was working my way up to full professor at ASU, I came to realize that something in my life was missing. Three dear friends had passed away in their 40s and early 50s (heart attack, colon cancer, and AIDS). I was concerned that I was missing out on other important things in life besides work: spending quality time with family, having love in life, having a deep sense of purpose, and attending to health and overall well-being. I knew there were professionals who suffered from ailments such as anxiety disorders, cardiovascular issues, gastrointestinal disorders, and chronic stress. My own issues with debilitating neck and shoulder pain at times kept me from performing at 100%, though I did everything possible to not let the pain get in the way of my work. Yet it appeared that there was little to no space in higher education to entertain issues not related to academic work. I came to realize that there were other prominent scholars, in fact people in every professional field, who were also concerned with larger issues in our lives. I attended meetings focusing on spirituality, authenticity, and wholeness with scholars like Alexander Astin, Helen Astin, Donna Shavlick, and Art Chickering, among others.

In the late 1990s, one of the most exciting things to happen to me was becoming a Fellow of the Fetzer Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan. When I received the application to be considered as a Fetzer Fellow, I was quite excited. I was even more excited when I actually got the fellowship opportunity which ultimately transformed my life. As a fellow, I spent the next 3 years attending quarterly retreats at the Fetzer Institute where all fellows engaged in inner work and coming to terms with the strengths and shadows of our lives. The retreats were led by Angeles Arrien, author of several books, including *The Four-Fold Way* (Arrien 1993). Each fellow also benefitted from the expertise of well-known advisers which included: (1) Margaret Wheatley, a management consultant with expertise in systems thinking, chaos theory, leadership, and the learning organization; (2) Arthur Zajonc, physicist and author of books related to science, mind and spirit who later became President of the Mind and Life Institute; and (3) Mel King, a Boston political activist, community organizer, and writer who created The New Majority aimed at uniting Boston's communities of color around candidates for elective office.

Each fellow was engaged in an "independent learning quest." Mine was a study of holistic and contemplative teaching and learning practices that allowed students to engage in deep learning through the use of contemplative practices such as meditation, poetry, journaling, music, and arts-based projects, among others. My quest also involved learning more about Latinx spiritualities in Puerto Rico, Mexico and Central America, and this brought me to visit archeological sites and to interact with shamans and spiritual leaders in these countries. Through this extraordinary experience, my consciousness was expanded to be able to see what was beneath unconscious belief systems, apply the wisdom of Indigenous People, view the world as a connected system, and learn the difference between knowledge and wisdom. While the fellowship ended in 2003, I am still in touch with some of the fellows, and we aim to reunite when we can as we value the very special bond that connected us. This fellowship experience enhanced the spiritual dimension of my life, not so much

in a religious sense, but in a way where I began to appreciate the wonder of life, to know how to give and to receive love, remain authentic, practice forgiveness, and remain unattached to outcomes knowing there is a greater plan at work that I may not be able to see at the present moment. Being a Fetzer Fellow also brought new connections with individuals from diverse fields of study and organizations interested in contemplative practices, introspective methods, personal well-being, and the exploration of meaning and purpose in our lives. For example, I served on the Board of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, was named a Fellow of the Mind and Life Institute, served as a Trustee at Naropa University, and presented my work at the Garrison Institute. By the early 2000s, I had undergone a full personal and professional transformation as I was now being recognized not only as a leading higher education scholar, but also as a thought leader in the field of contemplative education.

Maturing as a Faculty Leader

I left ASU when I was named Veffie Milstead Jones Endowed Chair at California State University–Long Beach (CSULB) in the fall of 1999. Jean Houck, Olga Rubio, John Attinassi, and Dawn Person were instrumental in recruiting me to CSULB. One of my dreams was to have a home overlooking the ocean. After selling my home in Phoenix, I bought a beautiful condo overlooking the ocean, a peaceful space I shared with Nana Osei-Kofi. Here I could do my academic work and entertain friends and colleagues. I spent 6 years at CSULB where I engaged in a number of projects most notably serving on the President Robert Maxson's Enrollment Management Committee where we designed admissions models to ensure that the entering freshman class was diverse. In the College of Education, I developed monthly *Sentipensante* (Sensing/Thinking) Dialogues designed to help faculty explore their inner lives and to attend to self-care and well-being. I also taught courses in the master's student affairs program. During this time, I was invited to join the Board of Trustees at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

In 2005, I was to undergo another transition. I was asked to apply for the position of Chair of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Iowa State University (ISU). The faculty, staff, and students at ISU were outstanding, and it was a real privilege to work with them. I had the opportunity to work with senior scholars like Larry Ebbers, John Schuh, and Frankie Laanan, and we had also had a dynamic group of tenure-track faculty who went on to be successful scholars in their own right. We also had a highly ranked student affairs and community college program, and we started one of the nation's first social justice concentrations in the higher education program. Serving as Chair at ISU was one of the most rewarding experiences of my professional life. I could have stayed at ISU forever were it not for Iowa's geographical location and frigid winter weather.

While at ISU, I published a book, which was the culmination of my Fetzer Institute fellowship experience. The book, *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation* (Rendón 2009), is

based on interviews I held with 2- and 4-year college and university faculty who were employing contemplative practices in their classrooms to provide learners with deep learning experiences. *Sentipensante* offers a blueprint for the development of a holistic, deep learning experience grounded in wholeness, justice, equity, and social change. The pedagogy blends rigorous academics with contemplative practices that cultivate a capacity for deep concentration, insight and spiritual activism.

By 2010, I decided it was time to step down from my position as Department Chair at ISU. While there are many rewards to holding such a distinguished academic position, there are also some challenges. Being Chair can be a lonely experience as you can't really be close friends with anyone in your department. There are always those who feel you are paying too much attention to one or two faculty or who feel you are not being supportive to their particular program area. Unfortunately, this can happen no matter how hard you try to be fair to everyone. It was difficult to come home to an empty house, especially when I dealt with tough, stressful times at the office. Being Chair can be an almost a 24/7 job, and while the position holds many rewards, it can also take a toll on your overall well-being.

Around the same time, my mother was undergoing the end of her life journey. I took a sabbatical after stepping down as Chair to be with my mother in Laredo. She passed away in her home peacefully about 2 months shy of her 100th birthday. While on sabbatical, the University of Texas–San Antonio (UTSA) made me an outstanding offer to join the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. I accepted the position which brought me to work with my dear friend Amaury Nora, who had actually attended middle school with me in Laredo. Amaury and I had agreed that someday we would be working at the same campus, and we were both excited when that special time was now before us. Amaury and I co-founded the UTSA Center for Research and Policy in Education. We hired Vijay Kanagala, one of my ISU doctoral students, as a postdoctoral associate. Together we worked on research, policy, and practice projects related to Latinx student success. For example, we worked with Café College and the *Ascender*/Catch the Next Project modelled after California's Puente Project, as well as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities and TG Philanthropy. Returning to Texas also brought a new network of friends and a partner, Chilean-born visual artist Liliana Wilson. While in Texas I never felt alone. I felt my life was now complete.

In 2016, I decided to retire from UTSA and to pursue a new role as an education consultant. I felt my job at UTSA was done and that it was time for me to pay it forward. I wanted to leave my coveted seat as professor to a scholar from a new generation. I became part of the network of speakers connected to SpeakOut – The Institute for Democratic Education and Culture, a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing education, racial, and social justice. Today, I am a frequent speaker at conferences and at 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. My archives can be found at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas–Austin, one of the premier libraries in the world focused on Latin America and Latinx Studies, and also known for housing the academic archives of Gloria Anzaldúa.

Allegory of an Academic Immigrant: *Una Transformación*

My journey across intellectual, social, and cultural borderlands depicts the transformational story of a *fronteriza* (border woman), a first-generation, low-income student who finds success in the elite academic world. In these respects, I view myself as an academic immigrant, as a protagonist in my own life who imagined and fashioned a powerful dream to become an academic leader and to confront and overcome multiple *arrebatos*/struggles to achieve what no one in my family had ever even conceived of accomplishing. For me earning a college degree was the coveted ticket to economic and social mobility, as well as the opportunity to give back to my community. As an academic immigrant, I experienced Anzaldúa's seven stages of *conocimiento*/enlightenment (not always in a defined order) which begins with Stage 1, ***El Arrebato***. Certainly, I confronted several *arrebatos*/struggles in my life journey, beginning with living my early life in poverty, attending poorly resourced schools, not having mentors and role models, lacking resources to attend college, and dealing with macro- and microaggressions throughout my academic trajectory. Lacking academic and social capital that is typically afforded to affluent students meant that I did not have the full, proper *papeles*/documentation to present at academic border checkpoints. My grades and test scores did not reflect all I was capable of doing, and I could have easily slipped out of the college pathway as so many students who lacked required documentation and privileged social status often did.

Stage 2, ***Nepantla***, represents a liminal stage of tension, disequilibrium, and adjustment. I crossed the academic border to gain access to college as a foreigner, as a stranger in a strange land. While the transition from high school to my hometown community college was not so disruptive, once I left Laredo to attend the University of Houston, I found myself with one foot in my home world and the other in college. I was caught in the middle space between the world of the Laredo, Texas *barrio* and the new language, customs, conventions, and traditions of college. Nothing in the university resembled my home environment, including the way people talked and carried themselves. The college curriculum did not reflect my life experiences, and the faculty who were nearly 100% White were not representative of my culture. I also had to dislocate from my home world to relocate in a new academic culture with little to no assistance. In Stage 3, ***Despair,*** I experienced what Anzaldúa (2012) calls "*un choque*" (p. 100), a culture clash when I interacted with two distinct worlds. In the world of college, I experienced separation anxiety, financial stress, and microaggressions. I sometimes felt guilty that I was not home to help my mother, and I took on work study jobs so I could send money home and to ensure that I could cover my living expenses. While I had financial aid, I never used all of it for myself. I must say that despite facing multiple challenges, never once did I consider dropping out of college. In Stage 4, ***Call to Action***, I relied on my Latinx cultural capital (Yosso 2005) to persevere, resist, and overcome challenges that could deter me from earning a college degree. Through my scholarly work focusing on low-income, first-generation students, as well as through my own life experiences, I have learned that underserved students employ unacknowledged, misunderstood

assets to complete their college education. These assets include: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, resistant, *ganas*/perseverance, navigational, giving back, curiosity, pluriversal (i.e., ability to negotiate contradictions and to hold multiple, competing systems of meaning in tension), and spirituality/faith (Rendón et al. 2014, 2019a; Foxen 2015; Yosso 2005). Leveraging these kinds of assets, I was able to navigate diverse educational and geographical contexts. For instance, I benefitted from my parent's modeling of a strong work ethic and survival skills, as well as from my ability to form social networks and to navigate the world of college. I also benefitted from skills related to resisting poverty and microaggressions and from unrelenting *ganas*/determination to succeed. All of these assets combined to give me formidable resilience to overcome adversities and to thrive even when I wasn't expected to flourish. As I moved forward traversing and navigating academic, social, and cultural borderlands, I grew stronger. I found myself mastering the academy's language, values, and traditions, and I was able to complete both a bachelor's and master's degree.

Ultimately, I was able to undergo a conversion that took me to another academic checkpoint to pursue doctoral study at one of the nation's most elite research universities – The University of Michigan. With extensive education, teaching, and administrative experience, I was a more sophisticated student at Michigan. Here my aim was to get a doctorate because there was so much work to be done to improve educational, social, and economic conditions of my community. Armed with a Ph.D. and with academic and Latinx cultural capital, I found myself in Stage 5, ***Creating a New Pattern of Reality***. This new life pattern was in stark contrast to that of my early beginnings. Instead of poverty, I now had middle-class wealth. Instead of powerlessness and marginalization, I found a new sense of agency and social acceptance. Rather than focusing only on intellectual understandings, I now reconnected with my Indigenous spirituality, challenged entrenched structures and practices, and gathered inner strength to take social action. Instead of lack of intellectual documentation to enter elite academic, social, and cultural borderlands, I was now hyperdocumented (Chang 2011) with a Ph.D. and with numerous accolades, recognitions, academic publications, and national visibility that made me an expert, spokesperson, and advocate for underserved students. I was elected or appointed to prestigious boards, became the first Latinx scholar to be elected President of ASHE, interacted with high-level academic leaders and foundation representatives, and was invited to present my scholarly work at conferences, as well as at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. This hyperdocumentation allowed me to work in Stage 6, ***Testing A New Story in the World***. Through my research, I became a scholar and thought leader testing ideas especially about the importance of working with students through an ethic of care that I called validation and with a holistic, integrated teaching and learning approach I termed *sentipensante* (sensing/thinking) pedagogy.

Today, the academic immigrant has been transformed to become a respected senior scholar whose long scholarly journey is drawing to completion. I find myself in Stage 7, ***Transformation***, a space of *conocimiento*/enlightenment. I reached a level of *conocimiento* using writing as an intellectual, spiritual, healing, and art form.

As a student advocate and contemplative educator, I called attention to the plight of underserved students. I took risks and challenged entrenched belief systems to shift realities about the nature of knowledge (i.e., decentering Western ways of knowing, educating the whole person, engaging the learner in deep learning experiences through the use of contemplative practices, and liberating students from self-limiting views). I emphasized the harmonic, complementary relationship between the *sentir* of intuition and the inner life and the *pensar* of intellectualism and the pursuit of scholarly endeavors. My spiritual work allowed me to fine-tune inner-life skills (i.e., self-awareness, sense of purpose, the connection between spirituality and social justice, etc.) and to confront and learn from the shadows of my existence.

Conocimiento (with higher levels to come) allows me to draw on my intellectual and spiritual development to walk in the world armed with both knowledge and wisdom. *Conocimiento* allows me to put my knowledge to good use, especially with vulnerable populations. Today, I find it important to pay it forward, to give back to new academic immigrants – the next generation coming behind me. I support scholarships, serve as a student advocate and continue to publish to lift knowledge about how educators can best work with underserved students. Recently, I felt that it was time to give up my academic position and tenure to a new generation of scholars who are destined to change the academy, even as the academy changes them. This new cadre of scholars will inherit the lessons learned from my generation, and they represent the hope that higher education can serve not just the elite few, but also the broader group of students who in the past had been left behind. Democracy, justice, and equity suffer when we leave large numbers of students behind, when they are not given the opportunity to blossom and when they become dispensable casualties of the nation's academic system. In the end, I remain hopeful that the older and newer generation's collective impact will be significant and enduring.

Part II: The Future Is Touching Us Now

> You must give birth to your images. They are the future to be born. Fear not the strangeness you feel. The future must enter you long before it happens. Just wait for the birth, for the hour of new clarity. (Rilke 1987)

In 2016, I made a presentation for the AERA Division J Committee on Inclusion. I spoke about the need for creating a new scholarly imaginary. I argued that scholars needed to take risks as they worked against entrenched belief systems and structures that privileged some and marginalized others. I also noted that our work must take us not simply into the realms with which we are most familiar, but also guide us into the growing edges that allow for new insights and expanded viewpoints. Working at the edge is often uncharted territory. It takes courage because often we may be trolled and attacked when we engage in offering radical ideas to shatter belief systems and practices from which others have benefitted and that the system rewards to maintain complacency and a privileged academic order. I believe that the future of higher

education lies working especially at the edge, where strangeness, uneasiness and discomfort can be felt.

In this section, I highlight some of higher education's opportunities and challenges. There are, of course, the obvious challenges which have been the focus of my research – college access, affordability, and completion. These topics have been extensively addressed and will continue to dominate the discourse about student success in the higher education research literature. However, I want to focus on what I consider to be newly emerging areas that are bound to re-shape how higher education functions and addresses its student body.

America's Four Transformational Demographic Firsts

The future is touching us now as the nation is presently beginning to experience demographic and cultural changes. US demographic forecasts indicate our nation is headed toward four demographic "firsts." These population shifts are expected to transform the nature of American society and the nation's educational system.

1. *No Clear US Majority Race*. Within the next two decades, no ethnic/racial group will comprise over 50% of the population. The United States will become increasingly less white (self-definition), leading to questions as to what counts as "Whiteness," and who is "minority" or "majority." According to the National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering (NACME 2013) by around 2050, no one race/ethnic category will be a majority. Moreover, while the white population will decrease from 63% in 2012 to 48.2% in 2050, the Latinx population will increase from 17% to 26.8% and the Asian American/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander cohort will increase its population from 5.1% to 7.3%. The African American population will remain rather static, growing slightly from 12.3% to 12.8%. It is going to be interesting to watch the growth of the two or more races category that will double from 1.9% to 4.2% (NACME 2013).
2. *Migration Increases*. In a report documenting population projections, Vespa et al. (2018) note that beginning in 2030:

> Because of population aging, immigration is projected to overtake natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) as the primary driver of population growth for the country. As the population ages, the number of deaths is projected to rise substantially, which will slow the country's natural growth. As a result, net international migration is projected to overtake natural increase, even as levels of migration are projected to remain relatively flat. (p. 1)

There are now over 44 million immigrants living in the United States. About three million were refugees who entered the country after the Refugee Act of 1980 (Migration Policy Institute 2018). Consequently, it will become important for higher education to address the education of refugees and immigrants. Another important issue relates to the immigration policy known as DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a policy established by President Barack Obama in 2012. DACA is intended to protect eligible immigrant youth who came to the

United States as children, allowing them to benefit from temporary protection against deportation and to qualify for work authorization. The future of the policy is unclear, but DACA college students are faced with continued stress regarding their citizenship, as well as their ability to complete their education and to work in this country (Gonzalez 2015; Muñoz 2015).

3. *Single-Race Identity Becoming Obsolete*. The Two or More Races population is projected to be the fastest growing over the next several decades, followed by single-race Asians and Hispanics of any race. The cause of growth for Hispanics and biracial and multiracial people is due to high rates of natural increase as these groups are relatively young. The growth of the Asian population is due to high net international migration (U.S. Census 2018).
4. *Aging Population*. By 2030 all Baby Boomers will surpass age 65 with one of every five residents becoming of retirement age. Within 15 to 20 years, older people are projected to outnumber children for the first time in US history (U.S. Census 2018).

These demographic and cultural shifts will have a significant impact, particularly with the student body. Student identities are becoming more complex and there will be radical changes in the way we have conceptualized race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The Changing Nature of Higher Education's Student Body

What we call identity is becoming more complex as the nature of college students becomes more multiracial and more willing to embrace multiple aspects of their identity related to, for example, politics, migration status, religion, history, language, geography, sexuality, gender, and world view.

Reconceptualizing the Concept of Race. A more spacious intersectional consciousness is emerging with a new, multidimensional student culture that is not trapped in binaries and that embraces not one or two, but multiple aspects of their identity. Identity combinations are seemingly endless and not easily categorized. Take, for example, a student whose father is Peruvian and Chinese and whose mother is Irish, German, French, and Cherokee. Another student might identify as Muslim, American, and Bengali. Still another might reject being forced to choose between her Chinese and American heritage and decides to make sense of her identity by embracing both aspects of her ancestry. The five major classifications of race (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White) based on skin color and genes are becoming obsolete, and the future student body of the United States is multiracial and multidimensional (VOA News 2011). Moreover, students have ways of referring to their identity that transcend race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Identity may also include, for instance, whether a student is undocumented, "hyperdocumented" (Chang 2011), first generation, and/or disabled.

Filatino, Chicanese, Korgentinian, Blaxican – these are some of the mixed-race terms students are using to describe their race identification. The era of employing racial binaries to categorize people as Black or White, colored, and not colored is basically over especially with the youth population. As the United States moves to a context where all races fall below 50% of the population and with the biracial and multiracial population growing at a faster pace than those in the single-race category, very interesting dynamics will occur as Americans will begin to reconceptualize the meaning of race. It is important to note that racial classifications are not free of social consequences especially for vulnerable groups which have a long history of being the targets of racial attacks. As Onwuachi-Willing (2016) has noted: multiracial adults who are viewed as Blacks "experience prejudice and interactions in ways that are much more closely aligned with members of the black community" (p. 1).

For colleges and universities, working with the complex characteristics of its newly emerging demographic profile can be both exciting and challenging. Clearly, there will be a need for investing in the nation's diverse youth as their population continues to grow. This is important given that educational preparation can produce a working population that can contribute to the economy and to Medicare and Social Security, programs on which the White senior population will depend on for their well-being. Moreover, new issues are bound to arise with no easy solutions. For example, Yi and Kiyama (2018) note that educating refugees and migrants will require addressing barriers to access and success (i.e., cultural differences, discrimination and racism, language issues, financial hardships, and documentation needed to access college). Also, as more students identify as multiracial, what does this mean for institutional designations such as Hispanic-Serving Institutions and Predominantly White Institutions? What other terminology will be needed?

Reconceptualizing the Concept of Gender Identity. Gender identity is evolving to no longer being a binary representation (i.e., feminine or masculine; he or she). The term genderqueer, also known as nonbinary, falls outside what is known as cisgender, where an individual's gender identity matches the sex they were assigned when born. Genderqueer captures gender identities that are not exclusively male or female and gender expressions that combine masculinity and femininity. Moreover, new terminology is evolving with gender categories such as bigender, transgender, trigender, nongender, pangender, genderless, other-gendered, and genderfluid. Some students will avoid commonly used pronouns such as he and she because they do not feel like or identify as a "male" or "female." New gender-neutral pronouns are emerging and are now in use, for example, ze/hir/hirs. The title of Mx. is sometimes used instead of Mr. or Miss. Terms and definitions will continue to change, and educators will be tasked with keeping up with evolving language (Hines and Sanger 2010; Nicolazzo 2017; Trans Student Educational Resources n.d.).

Reconceptualizing the Concept of Sexual Orientation. A growing number of students are choosing to identify or not to identify with a sexual preference. Consequently, the traditional binary classification of sexual orientation as gay or straight is no longer proving to be useful. Like those who identify as cisgender, genderqueer people can have varied sexual or romantic orientations, and several terms exist to define one's sexual orientation. For example, terms such as asexual

(little or no sexual attraction or desire for others) and pansexual (potential for emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to people of any gender) are finding their way into the lexicon describing sexual orientation that transcends more commonly employed terms such as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual (Human Rights Campaign n.d.).

As race, gender, sexuality, and identity become radicalized, what does this mean in terms of the kind of curricular programming, institutional accommodations, and student support services that higher education needs to deliver to students that are not easily categorized? A case in point is the so-called "bathroom bill" in North Carolina and Texas which proposed that transgender people use restrooms in public buildings that corresponded to their sex at birth. A legal battle ensured with the LGBTQ+ community citing discrimination against transgender individuals who argued that they had experienced verbal, physical, and sexual harassment in public facilities. Many institutions of higher education have taken steps to protect the transgender community with gender-neutral toilet facilities and unisex toilets.

There is also a need to consider institutional policies, entrenched behaviors, power structures, and contextual conditions that favor some students over others to determine how they impact individuals to create vulnerability, stigmatization, and discrimination in the form of exclusion, racism, sexism, and homophobia, among others (Crenshaw 1991). At one university, an African American woman had placed her feet on the desk, and the instructor called the campus police to escort the student out of class. How many times have White students placed their feet on the desk without consequence? Would the professor have called the police if the student was a White male dressed in a suit? In this example, the Black woman found herself powerless and at a disadvantage due to the interlocking nature of her race and gender. Another example is that of Chang (2011) who describes her hyperdocumented status as an effort to accrue awards, accolades and even a Ph.D. to compensate for her once undocumented status. Chang understands that regardless of possessing multiple forms of academic documentation, individuals with interlocking, marginalized identities related to, for example: race/ethnicity, gender, citizenship, sexuality, physical ability, and religion can face oppressive, discriminatory situations and even have their status and legitimacy challenged.

A Technological Revolution

Unquestionably, I believe technology will continue to have a significant impact on education and on our society. We are already being touched by the future of technology as there are numerous examples of artificial intelligence (AI) in use today. Examples include: Siri, Alexa, self-driving automobiles, Tesla cars, Amazon, Netflix, and Pandora, among others (Adams 2017). The advent of 3D printing will allow for building homes and produce toys, food, and even body parts. The rules of cyber ethics have emerged to promote responsible behavior when using the Internet and technological devices (Center for Internet Security n.d.).

Within the past 5 to 10 years, our society has embraced technology to the point that a large segment of the population now has a cell phone, laptop, and/or tablet and is using this technology in numerous ways. Consider that within a very short period of time we have moved from:

- Talking on the phone to texting on our cell phones
- Using landlines to relying on cell phones
- Using telephone conference calls to using Skype or Zoom
- Relying on face-to-face teaching and learning to using online or blended formats
- Making formal, face-to-face presentations to presenting on webinars
- Buying records and CDs to streaming videos and songs
- Going to the movies to downloading films from Netflix, Hulu, or Amazon Prime
- Playing with toys to interacting with video games

These are just some examples of how our society and the youth culture, in particular, have embraced technology. The Henry J Kaiser Family Foundation (2010) reported that daily media use among children and teens, especially minority youth, has dramatically increased. Specifically, adolescents aged 8–18 spent more than 7.5 h a day consuming media, including using more than one medium at a time. Interestingly, black and Hispanic children were found to spend more time with media than white kids. Our digital addictions have managed to, in some ways, define our lives: In 2015, the Pew Research Center (Lenhart 2015) indicated that aided by constant access to mobile devices, especially smart phones, some 92% of teens were online daily and 24% of them are almost constantly online. Among teens, Facebook was the most popular and frequently used social media platform with half using Instagram and nearly as many turning to Snapchat. Adults aren't any better: Most adults spend 11 hours a day or more consuming electronic media, including watching TV, using apps on their smartphones, and other media (Rodriguez 2018).

While technology has certainly made our lives easier in many respects, there are certainly some challenges. In a society that prizes relationships and community, to what extent is technology, especially among younger groups who are addicted to high-tech devices and to the use of social media, diminishing the capacity for attention and presence? With attention spans getting shorter, what will that mean to building a solid relationship with another human being? What is the role of technology in high-touch learning environments? There is also the consideration that students can be exposed to harmful content and that technology can have an adverse effect on young children and even adults. Moreover, there is still a digital divide with low-income students and those living in rural communities facing inequitable access to broadband services and to innovative technology (Barton 2016). There is also the notion that technology, when misused and abused (i.e., deepfake, doctored videos), can have a harmful effect especially in a post-truth era. What is truth and what is "fake news?" How is technology being employed to create disinformation campaigns? To what extent can the public truly believe what they see in a growing number of websites that purport to offer their version of truth? To what

extent have we allowed technology to colonize our lives to the extent it shifts attention to our outer realities as opposed to our inner lives?

Defining Truth in a Post-Truth World

Education researchers are concerned with uncovering truth. We are a part of the intelligence world, and we align ourselves with evidence, facts, and notions of reason, validity, and reliability to present our findings which can be employed to make changes in educational policy and practice. With post-truth politics, debates are disconnected from proven facts and politicians appeal primarily to emotions such as hate and fear and employ so-called alternative facts. In the 2016 presidential campaign, social media like Facebook and Twitter, among others, were used to disseminate false reports about candidates. Some people believed these reports which created chaos and confusion. While respected news outlets such as CNN and the *New York Times* had previously been commended for presenting real facts, now some politicians were arguing that these same outlets should be condemned for presenting "fake news" to the American public. Similarly, scientific evidence supporting the overwhelming consensus that the earth's climate was warming was touted as a myth by some politicians and news outlets.

As researchers we should be very concerned with attacks on evidence-based information. We should be a part of a larger dialogue that concerns itself with matters such as: What constitutes truth? How do we arrive at truth? Is truth really disappearing even when we have a large segment of a public that recognizes lies and that wishes to hold politicians accountable for their attempts to suppress truth? What can we do to preserve our democracy and to affirm the primacy of reality based on proven facts?

Rise of Racially Charged Incidents on College Campuses

At the beginning of this essay, I noted the intertwined nature of what happens in society and what is experienced in our educational systems. One of the most troubling societal issues relates to long-standing hate crimes against vulnerable populations such as people of color, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, and the LGBTQ + community. Indeed campus hate crimes appear to be rising (Bauman 2018). The most recent glaring example was that of August 11, 2017 when hundreds of torch-bearing protesters marched through the University of Virginia campus. The protestors were representative of White supremacist groups who chanted slogans such as "Blood and Soil" and "Jews Will Not Replace Us." Extremely troubling incidents transcend vandalism and destruction of property to include incidents where a door is defaced with homophobic and transphobic slurs or a swastika is drawn on the student's door (Bauman 2018).

Aligned with these very troubling developments are campus responses to controversial speakers and protests as institutions of higher education become entangled

with political activism, some of which can generate significant campus disruption. The implications of hate crimes on campus are serious. How should universities respond when controversial figures who spout fear and hate wish to speak on campus? Are university leaders doing enough to protect free speech on campus?

An Unfolding New Reality and the New American Scholar

We can observe and feel a part of the future as we are in the middle of an evolutionary sociocultural context imbued with complexities and where possibilities are seemingly endless. This calls to question: What kind of a higher education scholar is needed in an increasingly complex world where solutions defy a choice between one or two options? How do we work in contexts of uncertainty and even chaos? I agree with Anzaldúa (2012) who states that the future belongs to the person who is able to operate within paradox and contradictions and who embodies both mastery of knowledge and wisdom. A higher calling is upon us as a new, hybrid consciousness emerges.

In her classic text *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa (2012) presents a vision of hybridity termed *mestiza* consciousness to identify a growing population that is not trapped in binaries, is able to straddle multiple cultures, and navigate race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality identity borders. *Mestiza* consciousness is a feminine way of knowing *una conciencia de la mujer*. This philosophical perspective is pluriversal in nature, meaning the ability to negotiate contradictions, move beyond either/or thinking, operate in a both/and mode, and recognize that analyzing opposite perspectives can lead us to more in-depth understandings (Mignolo 2013; Andreotti et al. 2011). With this pluriversal consciousness, rigidity gives way to flexibility; certainty gives way to openness to learning; narrowness gives way to spaciousness. Operating with a *mestiza* consciousness can be rather difficult as it defies traditional practices and belief systems. It means dealing with complexities, tensions, and uncertainties and requiring a high level of tolerance for ambiguities and contradictions.

The future Anzaldúa envisions is touching us now. We are in the mist of "*un desdoblamiento*," the unfolding of a new reality where all things are possible, where old belief systems can be transformed, and where we can indeed create a new vision of what it means to operate with wholeness, integration and spaciousness. But as scholars we cannot work in a space of *desdoblamiento* employing tactics that keep us sidelined, unable, and perhaps even afraid to speak out against injustice and oppression in all forms. In accepting the Best Director Academy Award for the haunting film, *Roma*, Alfonso Cuarón said: "As artists our job is to look where others don't. This responsibility becomes much more important in times when we are encouraged to look away" (Da Silva 2019). I agree with this sense of responsibility, and I believe that higher education scholars should not look the other away.

To work in this unfolding new reality calls for a redefinition of a scholar that transcends the traditional view centered around being an expert in a particular branch of study and an intellectual who is engaged in rigorous research. Certainly, this definition will continue to constitute how a scholar can be defined. However, there are new, expanded roles that I believe scholars can and should play in the quest to investigate where we might be encouraged not to probe. Moreover, I believe scholars should actually take risks and entertain new ideas that might be considered audacious, courageous, and bold.

- *The scholar as a social activist and change agent*. I am heartened to see, particularly in the new generation of higher education scholars, a real focus on addressing social issues and taking the lead in advocacy and involvement in our nation's political and social change processes (i.e., women's rights, the MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, climate change, etc.). Higher education research should address some of the most pressing social issues of our time, for example: immigration, undocumented students, racism, systemic violence against people of color, women, and the LGBTQ+ community, guns on campus, religious intolerance, hate crimes, and the rights of differently abled people. In 2018, the conference theme of Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) was Envisioning the Woke Academy, and engaged critical scholars in shedding light on what it meant to work with woke research that could keep us keenly aware of what was happening in our communities and the world. For me, staying woke means not looking the other way, speaking truth to power and staying present with the realities of vulnerable communities.
- *The scholar as a public intellectual*. As scholars uncover new knowledge, this information should get maximum exposure. Scholars can and should offer their perspectives as experts in their fields with cable news networks, podcasts, social media outlets, blogs, opinion pieces, and television shows. Our influence should spread beyond the academy, and we should seek to influence social movements and shape public debates on the important issues facing our nation and the world.
- *The scholar as an innovator*. As scholars we have opportunities to work both at the traditional center and at the creative edge. Working at the edge means taking risks, creatively introducing and testing new ideas, and being fiercely unafraid of failure.
- *The scholar as a healer*. I believe scholars can and should be caring humanitarians as knowledge ultimately exists to help people reach their full potential. The work of fairness, justice, and democracy is not only about calling out injustice, it is also about healing the wounds that divide us. Moreover, much of higher education research is employed by student affairs practitioners who work with so many students afflicted by, to cite a few examples, stress, isolation, racism, homophobia, mental health issues, and lack of a sense of purpose. The true value of our work can be seen in the extent it improves the condition of education and well-being for all students, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Mi Autohistoria: Final Thoughts

Today I live an intersectional life with multiple, co-existing identities, all of which make me whole; some which expose me to harm in certain contexts. I have come to understand that there has been a grand design in the tapestry of my life – to do the work of light, to be the voice for the most vulnerable among us, to shatter harmful beliefs and practices, and to work with others to create a newly-fashioned imaginary of higher education that is just and liberatory in nature. The humanitarian in me is gratified that my work has been useful in the educational arena and that my students have moved on to be the next generation of scholars and student affairs practitioners.

Mi camino de conocimiento has been quite extraordinary – from growing up in poverty to having the transformative experience of an academic immigrant who crossed multiple intellectual, social, and cultural borders to find privileged presence in the elite network of scholars who study higher education. My message to a new generation of scholars is to remain authentic, be who you are, engage in being co-creators of change and possibility, and work through and learn from your own *camino de conocimiento*, which deepens understandings and wisdom and that helps you to stand in your own power and authority.

There is a Spanish word called *despierta*, to awaken. As purposeful *caminantes*/journeyers, we are being called to wake up and to leverage the full power of our intellectual, social, cultural, and spiritual strengths. We can, individually and collectively, play a part in creating a new consciousness that recasts entrenched, flawed belief systems and that reshapes old policies, practices, and structures that do not support our personal and professional growth. Our greatest tools on the path to *conocimiento* are to remain open, leverage our formidable strengths, connect with our sense of purpose, embody love, focus on healing and bridge building, and stay present. Many before us have cleared a path so that we might engage in creative imagination and implementation of new ideas, solutions, and approaches. We must do the same and carry this tradition forward. I end with a message of hope for all *caminantes* that I expressed many years ago on my path to *conocimiento*: "Many more like me will come to partake of the academy, classic scholarship men and women who leave home to find success in an alien land. We will change the academy, even as the academy changes us. And more and more of us will experience academic success with few, if any, regrets (Rendón 1994, p. 63)."

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