

A Stranger in Charleston: Intersectional Anxiety as a Latina in Academia

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Abstract

Through a personal narrative of my experiences living in Charleston, South Carolina, I consider several problems faced by working-class academics of color. These include: isolation and alienation, being labeled a representative for an entire cultural group, higher service loads, confronting patriarchy and racism in and out of the classroom, and financial struggle. Through telling my story, I examine positionality and the anxieties resulting from the normative expectations placed on academics who are often the first in their families and communities to enter academia. I also emphasize the need for academics facing these problems to form support networks and practice self-care.

Keywords

Positionality, intersectional, self-care, anxiety, immigration, Latino, Latina

On July 28, 2013, I moved from El Paso, Texas, to Charleston, South Carolina. I considered myself fortunate as I arrived in Charleston to begin my new job as Assistant Professor of Latin American History at The Citadel. I was twenty-nine years old, and I had dedicated the previous eight years of my life to graduate school. I achieved the goal I had set for myself as a teenager—to obtain a doctorate in history—and now I was finally going to work in my dream job as a history professor. I left behind my family and loved ones and moved to a city completely foreign to me (the first area I would ever live in without a Catholic church named after the Virgin of Guadalupe). I expected the homesickness, loneliness, and challenges in adjusting to life in Charleston. I also expected a difficult year adjusting to the job and the 4/4 teaching load, especially at a military college with mostly white male students. What I was not prepared for was excruciating alienation. I am a woman of color, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, and the first in my immediate family to obtain a college degree (let alone a Ph.D.). Finding women like me was easy in the places where I previously lived across Texas, in Chicago, and in Mexico City. We supported each other in ‘self-determination’ and forged ahead in achieving our goals, despite our patriarchal Mexican culture in which ‘the oppression that Mexican women suffer which is specific to their gender has hardly been challenged’ (Orozco 2014, p. 266). Yet, in the four years since I moved to Charleston, I have met only a handful of women with similar backgrounds as mine, and this has festered in me a sense of displacement, alienation, and

isolation. In Charleston, my *difference* is clearly marked and exposed, and I find myself continuously explaining and defending my identity.¹

Deborah M. Warnock outlines five themes in the ‘lived experiences’ of working-class academics, including ‘alienation, lack of cultural capital, encountering stereotypes and microaggressions, experiencing survivor guilt and the impostor syndrome, and struggling to pass in a middle-class culture that values ego and networking’. She adds that the recent growth in ‘crippling’ student loan debt and ‘exploitation of adjunct labor’ (2016, p. 28) have contributed to the burdens of working-class graduate students and faculty. My narrative fits well within this framework. As I began my tenure-track job, I quickly discovered what it meant to be a professor with an intersectional identity. I face the pressures of additional service for the sake of promoting diversity, the burden of ‘representing’ an entire ethnic group, having to frequently explain to family, friends, and strangers what ‘I do for a living’ (and why I do not have a ‘normal’ job), questions about being unmarried and childless, anxiety about family planning while on the tenure-track, and the guilt over my many layers of privilege. To top it off, I have substantial student loan debt that prevents me from saving money and having financial security. As I deal with these issues, I have found great support among my family, friends, and colleagues, and I am grateful. But I have found no relief from feeling like I live in an ‘interstitial space’ (Bhabha 2004), where I am constantly pushed and pulled between my longing for home and the realities of being a Latina in South Carolina, my desire to work more for my community and my physical and mental exhaustion as I work toward tenure, and my goal of attaining economic stability that is set back with every unexpected expense.

As an academic, I inhabit a world that often reinforces structures of privilege; yet, as a woman of color from a working-class immigrant family (and first-generation college graduate), the world of academia remains quite foreign to me. Ever since I began the pursuit of a graduate degree, my life has become a series of continuous disruptions (Hurtado 2000, p. 129). My body is disruptive, my identity is disruptive, my ambition is disruptive, my goals are disruptive, and these disruptions are necessary for breaking down oppressive structures and systems. I feel an enormous responsibility to use my academic work for this purpose, especially at The Citadel, where the student and faculty/staff population is overwhelmingly white, conservative, and male. But I am exhausted, and I feel guilty for being exhausted. I also feel guilty for expressing frustration for the inequalities I encounter within my own position of privilege. I know that my experiences are not unique, and it is important to articulate the struggles of academics with intersectional identities. It is also necessary to acknowledge the complex positionality (Alcoff 1988) of academics who are ‘newcomers’ (Maher & Thompson Tetreault 2007, p. 2) in the world of academia. For me, finding peers who share my experiences and/or background has been vital for my well-being. Networks and support systems are crucial for struggling academics who face any number of issues, including isolation, discrimination, higher service expectations, debt, exploitation, and the pressure of representing an entire cultural group. Publicly recognizing these problems is an important step in breaking down stigmas and forces in academia that perpetuate normative standards.

¹ In this essay, I identify myself in various ways, including *Latina*, Mexican-American, and *Tejana*. I use these different terms because my identity is not static, and how I identify myself largely depends on the context. Moreover, I use the terms *Latino*, *Latina*, and Latin American to identify this community in South Carolina. Although *Latinx* has become more commonly used, gender distinctions are important to my analysis.

The American Dream?

I grew up believing in the American Dream. My parents Tere and Javier, Mexican immigrants, embody it. They raised my younger sister Cristina and I in our hometown of Odessa, Texas, and they lifted us from poverty in the 1980s to the middle class by the late 1990s. I saw how much my parents worked—my mom a bookkeeper, and my dad a welder—and they instilled in my sister and I a strong work ethic and the belief that hard work and a good education would give us more flexibility and freedom. We would be able to choose our careers and work in jobs we enjoyed, not jobs that we needed just to make ends meet, which were the paths my parents had been forced to take. They faced many obstacles over the decades—job instability in the boom/bust cycle of the West Texas oil market, learning English, and supporting a family with only their high school credentials. Eventually, they bought a home and saved for retirement, they have good health insurance, and they live comfortably in their fifties, enjoying the fruit of their decades of hard work. My parents achieved the American Dream.

Seeing my parents succeed instilled in me an idealism about the meaning of progress in this country. I believed my parents when they told me that education and hard work were the key to a stable future, and that I would be able to attain financial stability and fulfillment in my career. In 2004, I applied to master's degree programs in Texas and other states, but I was only accepted to out-of-state universities. I accepted the offer from the University of Chicago, though I would only be able to finance my studies with student loans. My parents were in the exasperating position that many working-class families find themselves in. They earned enough income to exclude me from certain need-based financial aid and grants, but they did not make enough to be able to finance an expensive education. Nonetheless, my parents and I decided that this would be a solid investment in my future, and it was only a one-year M.A. program, so I took out nearly \$60000 in loans. Not accepting an offer from an out-of-state school would have meant postponing my graduate studies by at least a year. More importantly, for a working-class minority student from a small town in the middle of West Texas, passing up the chance to attend a school of the University of Chicago's caliber meant missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime. This was my chance at social mobility and expanding my horizons beyond West Texas, and to network and learn from world-renown scholars. I made the correct choice, and having a degree from the University of Chicago has opened many, many doors for me. However, I am literally still paying for it twelve years later. Upward social mobility, it turns out, is expensive.

After completing my M.A., I worked on a doctorate in the Borderlands History Program at the University of Texas at El Paso. I had the typical 'poor graduate student' experience, with a malfunctioning, unreliable vehicle, no health insurance after the age of twenty-five, a small apartment with no space for a real desk, and I worked as an adjunct in the summers to make ends meet. Now as a professor, my standard of living has greatly improved. I own a functioning vehicle, I have health insurance and a pension plan, and I rent a large enough apartment to fit a real desk and office chair. More importantly, I have a stable salary, which unfortunately, is becoming increasingly rare in our profession as schools continuing hiring more adjuncts at exploitative pay rates.

My parents tell me that I am doing well for myself. I compare my life now at age thirty-three to the conditions my sister and I lived in when my parents were that age. Fast food was a luxury for us, and the years of the oil busts were always very difficult, especially because employment was never guaranteed. Today, I buy fast food when I feel too tired to cook at home, and I enjoy doing my writing inside of coffee shops. In many ways, though, I feel I have less stability than my parents at my age. My parents did not have student loan debt, and I am overwhelmed by it. Charleston has poor infrastructure for public transportation, so owning a reliable vehicle is a necessity. I also rent an apartment in Charleston, where gentrification and rising home costs and rents are driving out working-class residents and even professionals. In 2016, Charleston ranked eleventh in cities nation-wide with the highest home rental rates (Wise 2016). By November 2017, rents in Charleston averaged \$1,600/month, 'higher than the national average' (Darlington 2017), and many renters (including myself) struggle to save money for a down payment on a house. By their mid-thirties, my parents were homeowners, and I am nowhere near that prospect.

Economic studies published since the Great Recession calculate that up to half of U.S. households have little or no savings (Bloom 2017) and only forty-seven percent of Americans have enough savings to cover a \$400 emergency (Gabler 2016). An accident two years ago left me with thousands of dollars in medical expenses, extensive credit card debt and interest charges, permanent physical scars, a year's worth of physical therapy and doctor's visits, and it put me in the position where my salary was no longer enough to cover my basic expenses, including groceries. Last summer, I taught two courses and worked on community projects to pay down medical bills. This helped me tremendously, but it also left me without a summer break, which is precious and the only time I have for the research and writing that is necessary for tenure. The summer work relieved some of my financial burden, but I am still in a tenuous position. I have no savings, I still have medical expenses and monthly car, studentS loan, and credit card payments, and I cannot afford another emergency. Yet, when I think of my difficult situation, I remember that I am doing better than many of my peers. At least I have a full-time tenure-track job, health insurance, retirement savings, housing in a safe neighborhood, a functioning mode of transportation, and a credit card for emergencies.

I am most acutely aware of my many layers of privilege when I go to church. Gentrification has pushed many of Charleston's minority groups and immigrants to neighboring towns, including North Charleston, Summerville, Goose Creek, and John's Island. Poverty and high crime rates are common in these areas, and in 2016, North Charleston had the eighth-highest murder rate in the nation in a city with a population of over 100,000 (Smith & Knich 2017). I attend St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, located in North Charleston. It is a multicultural community with immigrants from around the world, including Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In many ways, it is a microcosm of the cultural dynamics in the South Carolina Lowcountry, the southern part of the state that includes Charleston. Language barriers exist between English and non-English speakers, cultural misperceptions and stereotypes cause tensions between ethnic communities (even among the Latin American immigrants), there is a divide between immigrant parents and their Americanized children, and the current anti-immigrant political environment has elevated many parishioners' anxieties and fears.

When I moved to Charleston, my first goal was to find a church community, preferably Spanish-speaking. In my first days in Charleston, I panicked when I realized that there were no Spanish-language FM radio stations, and Spanish-language television channels were not available unless I paid for a cable subscription. I walked around downtown and could hear no spoken Spanish. My parents helped me with the move to Charleston, and one of their first observations after arriving was that they could not find anyone who looked like us. As Warnock argues, 'the working-class academic is first and foremost characterized by a sense of alienation' (2016, p. 30). I will never forget the afternoon when I sat at a coffee shop, speaking Spanish on the phone with a friend, and an elderly white woman walked across the coffee shop and signaled for me to be quiet. The coffee shop was full of people talking, yet I was the only person she attempted to silence (and for the record- I responded by speaking Spanish louder). The realities of my cultural isolation set in that day. I was terrified by the thought of living in a place with a dominant culture that actively sought to suppress any difference, where my culture was not allowed, and where Spanish, my first language, was not spoken. Thus, I desperately searched for a Spanish-speaking Catholic community where I could feel at home.

I eventually found that community at St. Thomas the Apostle, and I joined the choir and became an active member in the self-described Hispanic community, which is made up almost entirely of immigrants from Latin America and their U.S.-born children. In the three years since I became a member of St. Thomas the Apostle, I have formed friendships, participated in weddings, and shared hardships with my community. I also met my partner Luis in the church choir. I have learned a lot about the lives of immigrants in South Carolina through my interactions at church, and their experiences are not much different from those of immigrants in other parts of the United States. Every Spanish-speaking person I have met at St. Thomas the Apostle who is my age or older is an immigrant, and I understand many of their struggles in adapting to U.S. society because I watched my parents go through it. I remember listening to my father practicing English, watching him come home tired from a long day of working outside in the hot summers and cold winters in the West Texas desert, and doing his very best to provide for his family. I see the men in my community, and they remind me so much of my father. I also see how the women form networks and call on each other when they need help with childcare or other issues. Many of the families at my church are small and extended families are uncommon, so these social networks function as a family.

Although I understand the lives of many of the immigrants at my church, I relate much more to their U.S.-born children. I hear the children and adolescents at my church speaking in English to each other, and I see how they embrace American culture. In some cases, these children know very limited Spanish, and it reminds me of when my father prohibited speaking English at home so that my sister and I would not forget Spanish. This policy worked, but it was also easier for my sister and I to maintain our native language because we regularly traveled to Mexico to visit family, our Mexican cousins kept us updated on Mexican popular culture, and we lived in an area where Spanish was so prevalent that non-Spanish speakers might pick up basic vocabulary. This is much different from the environment in the South Carolina Lowcountry, where Latin American culture is still largely confined to certain towns and neighborhoods outside of Charleston. When I listen to parents lament the Americanization of their children, I am reminded of my parents' fear that my sister and I will not pass on our Mexican culture.

There is one significant difference between my experience as the daughter of immigrants and the experiences of my church community. My parents and other family members benefited from the substantially less restrictive immigration laws of the 1980s, including IRCA, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. By the end of the decade, my parents were U.S. citizens, so their legal status was never an issue for me. This is not the case for many families in the Lowcountry. South Carolina lawmakers consistently support anti-immigrant policies, and in 2011, former governor Nikki Haley signed the South Carolina Illegal Immigration Reform Act (SB 20), which required law enforcement officers to check the immigration status of people they lawfully stopped if there was ‘reasonable suspicion’ that the person was unlawfully present in the United States’ (American Civil Liberties Union 2011). This provision was overturned in 2014 after the American Civil Liberties Union and other civil rights organizations filed a lawsuit against the state. Despite the work of activists and politicians including Lindsey Graham, who in 2017 sponsored the DREAM Act to protect DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), nativism, xenophobia, and racism have intensified since the election cycle of 2016. The weeks immediately following the election were tense. Scholars and activists worked diligently to update the community on current immigration policies and how to best protect themselves and their families. One of these information sessions was held at my church, and my heart hurt as I watched my friends, my new family, listen in fear. I will never know the fear of my parents being deported. If I have children, I will never need to make legal provisions for them in case I am detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers. I have a driver’s license, and I can go *anywhere, anytime*, without worry. I am also light-skinned, and my ability to “pass” keeps me from drawing the attention of law enforcement.

I have been working to unpack and understand the extent of my privileges resulting from my parents’ U.S. citizenship. I know U.S.-born children in my community who were told by classmates immediately after the presidential election that they would be sent back to Mexico. I also know children who live without a parent who was deported, who worry about what will happen to them and their families, and I cannot imagine their anxiety. A social security number, the coveted nine-digit golden ticket, can make a remarkable difference, as it did for my family. Because my parents, my sister, and I have social security numbers, we never worried about deportation or visa issues. When I entered graduate school, my parents were co-signers on my loans, and I was eligible for in-state tuition in Texas, unlike young adults in states like South Carolina and Georgia, where undocumented college students are denied in-state tuition, and in many cases admission, because of their legal status. My citizenship status never prevented me from applying for grants and scholarships (including the full scholarship that funded my entire undergraduate education), and my legal status provides the freedom to travel and pursue whatever employment I choose.

As I write this, I am overcome with embarrassment and guilt. How can I complain about my financial situation, especially with a job that offers a stable salary and support for my research and conference trips? How can I complain about medical bills and rising premiums, when many of my friends and colleagues (at church and in academia) postpone important surgeries and preventative procedures because they have no health insurance? How can I complain about the student loans that led to me to a career with a salary that many members of my church may never attain? How can I complain about not being a homeowner, when I have an apartment in a safe neighborhood with basic amenities, including heat and air conditioning? Millions of people have

risked their lives and made sacrifices for the American Dream, *el sueño americano*. But this dream is deceptive, controlled by those in the highest positions of power, and they grant access to just enough people every few generations to continue perpetuating the ambiguous myths about progress in this country.

Positionality and Intersectional Anxiety

I am a nervous person by nature, and I have struggled with anxiety for most of my life. As an undergraduate student, I began having panic attacks, and for most of my 20s, my anxiety stemmed from the stress of school. Moving to Charleston, however, brought on a new series of pressures in addition to my financial strain. Because I am so different from most of the people I have encountered in Charleston, I am constantly called on to explain and/or defend my identity to others. My disruptive presence is more pronounced, and I am unable to shake feeling like a 'stranger in a strange land.' The professional and cultural isolation I felt in my first year in Charleston led me to the brink of a nervous breakdown, but in sharing my struggles, I met other self-identifying Latino/a professionals at The Citadel and at other institutions who have had similar experiences. Together with allies who share our goal of strengthening ties between The Citadel and minority communities, we work extensively to spread Latino culture and to address problems in the Latino community. Our work is important and necessary, but for those of us in academia, it increases our already high service loads.

At The Citadel, I am the only woman of color in the history department, and since most faculty at The Citadel are white, I stand out as 'ethnic.' Yet, people may not identify me as a Latina because of my light skin, and this has put me in the uncomfortable position of gauging peoples' attitudes about Latinos when they do not realize a Latina is listening. For example, last year I listened to students say "build the wall!" during class (without knowing that my parents are Mexican immigrants), so I now make it clear to all my students that my parents are from Mexico. When I taught a course on the "History of the U.S./Mexico Border" in the fall of 2016, I made sure it was one of the first things I said. Fortunately, I have not heard that awful slogan since. My first semester at The Citadel, I talked to cadets about my family, and when I mentioned that my parents are from Mexico, a student asked if they walked around with maracas. He did not make the comment maliciously, but it was obvious that the stereotype was the first thing that came to his mind, and he quickly apologized. I admit that I was left speechless in that moment. I am proud of my immigrant parents, and I had never received a negative, let alone racist, response to that.

These experiences have pushed me to go on the offensive. I have always been proud of my heritage, but I now work harder to show it. My office is full of Mexican cultural symbols, and I celebrate Mexican Independence Day with my students, making sure they listen to *corridos* and eat *pan dulce*. In 2015, two of my Latin American colleagues and I began the tradition of building an altar for the Dead of the Day inside The Citadel's Daniel Library. I also incorporate Mexican history into every course that I teach. Before I moved to Charleston, my graduate advisor Samuel Brunk told me that I would be doing the equivalent of missionary work, spreading Mexican culture into areas where it did not previously exist, and he was right. My job is to teach students about Latin American history, but I also work to get students excited about this region and to think about it beyond a simplistic, paternalistic perspective.

My presence as their instructor is key because I challenge the stereotype of the ‘subservient’ minority (Fraga & Segura 2006, p. 284). For some of my students, I am the first person of Mexican descent they have ever met. For others, I am the first person of Mexican descent *in a position of power* that they have met. Not every student responds favorably to me, but I have found success in facilitating frank discussions with students about race, immigration, national security, colonialism, U.S. imperialism, and other issues (though gender is a more difficult topic to address with a student population that is ninety percent male). Because of my background, I am considered a ‘legitimate’ source, and my students are generally eager to ask questions and learn about Latin America from an ‘authentic’ Latina. My work is slowly paying off, and the most gratifying comments I receive on evaluations are from students who state that my course dismantled stereotypes or ambivalence about Latin America.

Currently, about thirty percent of The Citadel's faculty are women, and women are filling the top administrative positions (including Provost), so it is not uncommon for students to encounter women in leadership roles.² However, in my church environment at St. Thomas the Apostle, which is firmly rooted in patriarchal Catholic traditions, women are relegated primarily to care work. When I joined this church, I immediately realized that I was different from everyone else, and I have since experienced the ways in which my presence disrupts and confuses my community. The women my age or older are immigrants, they are all mothers, most have husbands, and most are housewives or work in housekeeping. I am one of the few women with a college education, the only woman with a doctorate, and I have received many puzzled looks over the years because of my choice to postpone marriage and motherhood. Some members of my community assumed that I do not work outside the home, only to express surprise upon learning that I am a professor. I receive questions from women almost weekly about when I am going to get married and have children, and I have also been told that I need to quit work and let my partner Luis support me financially.

I am not surprised by any of this; in fact, I am quite used to it. My parents always wanted my sister and I to obtain bachelor's degrees, but graduate school was beyond their frame of reference. My decision to pursue a master's degree put me at odds with my parents because they wanted me to be an elementary school teacher and marry the man who was my boyfriend at the time. ‘Good’ Mexican women are not supposed to leave their homes at age twenty-one to move alone across the country to Chicago to study. That is what I did, and I learned to be defiant against the people who tried to impose their patriarchal standards on me, including my parents. Defiance became my survival mechanism, and it is what motivated me in my most difficult moments in graduate school. It took several years, but my parents came to accept my goals and accept that I was forging a singular path, even if they did not always understand or agree with it. My struggles are quite common, and as many Chicana scholars have written, living a life of ‘oppositional consciousness’ (Sandoval 1991) generates tension and even rejection from our families for threatening *machismo* and not submitting to passive domesticity.

Defiance and agency are intertwined for me, but constantly having to identify myself and explain and defend my identity at work and in social settings amplifies my anxiety and feelings of

² In addition to growing numbers of female faculty and administrators, the incoming freshman class of 2017-2018 is ten percent female, the highest percentage in The Citadel's history.

isolation. Last year, Luis mentioned that several people from church had asked him what I am. The question caught me off guard— “what do you mean...*what am I?* I’m... human?” Luis clarified and said that people had asked if I am Colombian, or Central American; they were trying to figure out my nationality and ethnicity, because I look Latina, but I am light skinned and speak English well, which to them made little sense. To problematize further, when Luis told these people that I am from Texas (a *Tejana*), the next question was “well, then why does Nancy speak Spanish so well if she is a *gringa?*” This is one of the peculiarities of being a hyphenated Mexican-American... belonging in both worlds, and in neither at the same time. Gloria Anzaldua’s writing resonates with me because she describes *mestizas* as ‘half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps’ and ‘the battleground where enemies are kin to each other.’ They are ‘neither *hispana india negra española ni gabacha*...not knowing which side to turn to, run from’ (1999, p. 216). I am the ethnic ‘other’ at work, a privileged *americana* at church, too traditionally Mexican, and not traditional enough.

Self-Care

Support networks and self-care are crucial for academics dealing with the burdens of ‘newcomer’ status. As Jennifer Ruark remarked in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

The high stress of the tenure process, the pressures to be brilliant at research and teaching, the cloistered environment, the extent to which internal politics affects people’s careers—it’s a combination that could damage even psychologically healthy people (2010).

When I began experiencing panic attacks in 2014, I found a counselor through my church, and she helped me develop strategies to cope with the stressors at work, as well as my homesickness and loneliness. In the years since, I have learned that my well-being in Charleston depends largely on my ability to maintain a clear sense of personal identity, which is challenging as I frequently encounter people who make assumptions about me or worse, attempt to ascribe identities on me. I also realized that I am not the only academic who has sought counseling, though it remains a taboo subject.

The heightened societal tensions of the last year and half have also contributed to higher levels of stress for myself and many of my colleagues. The growth of extremism and violence, the murder in Charlottesville, the collapse of civic debate, anti-intellectualism, opposition to diversity, and attacks against higher education are only a few of the issues that academic institutions currently face. As academics, how do we respond? Do we use our privilege to stay in a bubble where we can mind our business and work on our research? Or do we use our positions to address systemic problems both within and outside of academia?

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, South Carolina and Alabama had the fastest-growing Latino populations in the nation. The census also reported a Latino population of 36,000 in the Charleston area—an increase of 150% since 2000. This growth is taking place across the Southeastern United States, and scholars and activists have responded by forming networks with lawyers, media, churches, consulates, and civil rights groups including the ACLU and Black Lives Matter. They also host conferences, organize extensive grassroots efforts, and meet with

government officials to address immigration policies. Because of the heightened xenophobia and fears about deportation, most immigrants in the Lowcountry avoid public demonstrations, protests, and meetings with public officials, making the work of activists more pressing.

For me, it also means more work on top of my regular teaching, publication, and service load. As one of the few Latina historians in the Lowcountry, I am asked to give public lectures, work on community projects, attend events on immigration, meet with public officials, and act as a liaison, all of which go beyond the service requirements for tenure. My colleagues and I also organize cultural and educational events for the Latino community, and we have been able to host events at The Citadel and other local schools and libraries, generating a stronger Latino presence in public spaces across the Lowcountry. Furthermore, at St. Thomas the Apostle, I serve as a liaison between the English- and Spanish-speaking communities, I translate documents and answer general questions about how public institutions (schools, hospitals, etc.) function. I love engaging the community, and it has helped me feel more comfortable in Charleston, but I also need to prioritize obtaining tenure. Finding balance between multiple tasks seems to be an elusive goal for academics, and it is challenging for me because there is so much at stake right now for many people I know and love who I feel are counting on me.

I approach that balance by forcing myself to engage in some form of daily self-care. I seek help and advice from my friends, colleagues, and former professors. Their wisdom and guidance on how to navigate academia as a working-class person of color is invaluable, and it reaffirms my belief in collectively identifying our struggles and taking care of each other. I have formed friendships with other Latina professionals in the region, and they remind me of the importance of enjoying Charleston without thinking about work. My partner Luis and I share a love for music, and he plays the guitar and I play the violin in our church choir. I must take care of my physical health, as well. After my accident in 2015, I had to regularly receive chiropractic care. I have continued this practice, and I visit the chiropractor weekly to deal with the physical strain of sitting at my desk for prolonged periods of time. Financially, this is a luxury, so I teach violin lessons to cover the cost.

These strategies have helped me tremendously, and I feel significantly less anxiety than when I first moved to Charleston. I must admit, though, that the anxiety never fully recedes, and Charleston still does not fully feel like 'home.' Thus, I make sure to go home to Odessa at least twice a year—my favorite form of self-care. I am also fortunate that as a Latin Americanist and Borderlands historian, many conferences in my fields take place in Texas, Mexico, or other regions with large Latino populations. When I present at a conference, I immerse myself in familiar sights, sounds, scents, and flavors. Most importantly, I am usually able to see members of my family. These trips take me home, to my place of security, and they provide healing, a moment of existential stability, and they give me the strength to return to my interstitial position in Charleston and resume my work.

Author Bio

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