



Unblocking *Tapones* and Finding Pleasant Places

Ofelia Garcia



Tapón is the word that comes to mind when I think about this piece. The tapón of my bathtub in Cuba when I was a child that prevented the water from streaming out. The tapón of the traffic jams in Puerto Rico, leaving my mother-in-law's house to go anywhere, as the traffic stopped flowing. And the tapón I feel today, in NYC, in the midst of a pandemic that has hit poor communities of color the hardest, and as a smooth transition to a new president has been slowed down by lies and innuendos of fraud.

I have written many academic articles, but never have I struggled with the tapón I have felt in writing this piece that urged me to take a “*viaje a la semilla*,” the title of a book by Alejo Carpentier, a Cuban author. Taking a trip ‘to the seed of it all’ is painful, and I have resisted lifting the tapón that has kept me from looking inward, linking my today with my past. I thank Sonia Nieto, a beacon and inspiration to all Latinas and all educators, for asking me to unclog

memories of who I am, and how my who is related to the work in which I have engaged. In so doing, I recognize those who have been with me in the streams of my life as a woman, a student, a mother, a wife, a grandmother, a teacher, an academic. As I have done so, I have realized more than ever that as Psalm 16 says: “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places,” and it has been my family, teachers, colleagues and students who have given me more than I deserve.

Donald Trump's presidency and the turmoil over the elections took me back to my *semilla*, reliving the chaos that surrounded my life in Cuba in 1961 at the age of 11. I remember 1961 as the year when my family and world fell apart, when my school closed, and when the songs I had learned with the Cuban Revolution were silenced, as my parents made their way to New York City, one parent, one sibling at a time. I still remember all the songs I marched to as a child: “*Marchando, vamos hacia un ideal*.” Marching toward that ideal of an “*hombre nuevo*” took on a new route, and I didn't understand how my father, who had been a committed “*Fidelista*” could turn away from it all. Bewildered by a new language, a new country and city, a new family configuration, I started to build a safe world for myself, as I went to school and grew up in the city that I learned to call home, New York.

When the pandemic started in March 2020, “the city that never sleeps” became silent, its sounds muted, except for the sirens, bringing the sick and dying to hospitals. This came on top of the presidency of a man who maligned everyone and everything I loved, calling Mexicans “criminals” and “rapists,” separating families

of immigrants at the border, fueling racism, mocking supporters of Black Lives Matter, ignoring the illness and death of so many, declaring New York City as “anarchist.” My world had again fallen apart, but this time the “democracy” that my parents had told me “saved” us from communism, was also crumbling. El Imperio del Norte no longer felt like an imperio, nor did it feel safe. I was ill in March of 2020 and did not open the door of my apartment for a month and a half. As I battled the sadness that came after my COVID recovery, I picked up the guitar that I had played as a child, and it was the songs of protest of my youth — songs by Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, but also by Mercedes Sosa, Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanes, Victor Jara and Violeta Parra — that nurtured me back to health and that give me the voice today to try to tell my story *desde la semilla*, understanding that I cannot move linearly forward in time or space because my life straddles worlds that are seen as enemies, contradictory, separate — one visible and powerful, and one having been made invisible. Despite the tapones, I have been blessed, and so I speak today about the lessons I learned from people who have prepared my caminos, my paths in this journey.

Cambia, todo cambia/The times they are a'changing

The songs of Mercedes Sosa, known as “la voz de los sin voces” because she gave voice to those who did not have one, remind us that “todo cambia,” an important message as I age. Sosa talks about everything that changes in nature, in life, in love, in ourselves, but she warns us that the only thing that cannot change is our commitment to our *pueblo* and our *gente*, to our people. The songs of Bob Dylan issued a call for political change — time to wake up to the suffering of others, to political contradictions. What is the meaning of change? How do I remain awake to what needs to change and what has kept me grounded? As I reflect

As I reflect on my changes, starting from la semilla, I recognize others.

on my changes, starting from la semilla, I recognize others. On one side is my inheritance, those who have been with me to ensure that the semilla falls on pleasant and fertile places. But on the other side is a younger generation — students, my own children and grandchildren — who are taking the semillas and growing *árboles* where a future generation can seek shade and solace.

My caminos: De la familia to graduate school

A Cuban cannot talk about opening caminos without mentioning Yemayá, the Orisha that is the Goddess of the Sea in Santería y que “abre caminos.” And so, I start my life on that island in the sea where I was blessed to live in an intergenerational household — a house shared with abuelos, an unmarried tía/aunt, my parents, a brother and sister, and surrounded by cousins and otra familia. My childhood flowed with little recognition from me of the tapones caused by the dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and *la lucha de los barbudos*/the struggle of the bearded men led by Fidel Castro. But the harmonious flowing stream that was my childhood was interrupted by family fights stemming from “la revolución.” The revolution may have stirred politics and movements, but for me, it was my childhood’s tapón.

My mother, Emma González, shares a name with the student activist, Emma González, who called out the “B.S.” of politicians after the shootings at the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in 2018. She also shared the other Emma’s sense of outrage, and she likewise used the word *comemierda* quite frequently to rail against things she considered wrong. While my gentle father, Pablo, who had been a young lawyer in Cuba, worked 12 hours a day, 6 days a week in a delicatessen at Grand Central Station, it was my mother who pushed us ahead, always repeating

something she had first heard from Fidel Castro himself: “Pa’t ras ni pa’coger impulso” [“Backwards, not even to gain momentum”]. Her life and family had fallen apart, and she was determined to keep her children (another one born a year after arriving in NYC) looking forward. In life, my younger siblings —Emmy, Frankie and Sweepee — have rocked life, never standing still, and continuing the movement pa’lante/forward.

Even though externally I thrived from the time I left Cuba at 11, I lived with a tapón that stopped me from feeling pain, disorientation, confusion. I was the oldest of four children, in a family that was now poor and struggling economically. I was cut off from family left behind, from friends from childhood, from my history, poems and dreams, from my own language. I remember the first words I understood in English. My “good friend” was talking to the teacher, obviously about me. I remember understanding when my friend said: “She’s just a stupid Cuban girl.” I decided then and there that I would speak English and not be considered “stupid,” or even “Cuban.”

I grew up in NYC without understanding more than my own neighborhood blocks, where all my friends were Latinas, only one of them of Cuban descent. I was fortunate to have been given a scholarship to attend a Catholic High School in the Bronx. I rode the subway for an hour and a half and took three different trains to get there because my mother thought it was a good opportunity. There were only a few Latinas in the school, all considered “charity.” We referred to ourselves as “las criaditas” [the little maids], doing menial tasks after school in order to earn our scholarship. Compared to who I was, I thought the other girls were “rich.” Now looking back, they were middle class

Irish and Italians from the Bronx. I never made friends in the school, other than the Latinas who were the criaditas.

And yet, it was one of my high school teachers who first started unclogging my identity. Back then, classes were streamed according to ability. Because of “my English,” I was put in the “slow” group. My English class during my first two years of high school consisted mostly of remedial grammatical and vocabulary work, and the reading of novels as if they were informative texts, not literary texts. Our class was never asked to know more about the novel we were reading other than: Who are the characters? When/where did they live? What did they do? When I was a junior, my English teacher started engaging me, encouraging me to write and speak about myself in relation to the books we were reading. At the time, none of the books we read had characters that looked like me or talked like me, but my teacher enabled me to make the links necessary so that I would find emotions, feelings, circumstances, actions and options that were akin to my experiences. She fought hard so that I would be changed from the “slow” group to a more advanced English group in my senior year. It was then that I understood for the first time that a subject might have the same name, both called “English,” and yet do and expect from students completely different things. Students in the advanced English class had opinions, thoughts, feelings they could express through multiple means, including poetry. Students in the other English class could only regurgitate information.

Up to that time I had not thought much about who I was. I knew, however, that I was unsure of a Cuban-American identity, one that I didn’t share with almost anyone I knew except my immediate family. Despite the tapones that I had built in me so I didn’t have to face the sad histories of the politics of Cuban/American relationships, there were leaks that needed to be addressed. Again, it was books, always with the support of my parents, that helped me understand

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first who I was, as I searched for Cuban authors in the island who could unlock for me the sounds, sights, and smells of a Cuba that had been forgotten since 1961, and would not experience again until 20 years later.

I went to Hunter College, a public college of The City University of New York, as an undergraduate. I was the only one of my friends who went to college. All my other amigas got married immediately after they finished high school, and soon were mothers. This created another tapón, for it separated me in some ways from my friends and community, friends who wondered why I was not doing *lo que tenía que hacer*, what I had to do. But here again, it was my mother who kept calling out “comemierda” when friends criticized me for going to college.

I knew that I wanted to reclaim the Spanish that had been pushed to the deep dark corners of my home, and I understood that I needed to take some college classes in the department known as “Spanish.” My first experience with these classes was less than satisfactory. I was given a grammar book that presented Spanish as a system of grammatical structures that had to be strictly followed. I was in front of la Profesora Bonilla, a Spaniard who took pleasure in telling the Latinas in the class (Rosa del Cuadro and Rosa Rosario) and one Latino (George Yúdice, who went on to become a leading scholar of Latin American culture), that “Así no se dice.” [You don’t say it this way.] I name these few classmates to honor their role in destaponarme, unplugging me. I remember their pain every time that la profesora Bonilla told one of us that “así no se dice,” but I also remember their support and their courage (more than mine) in reclaiming our ways of speaking.

Becoming a Teacher

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. When other children played outdoors, I played mostly inside. When many played “house,” I played “school,” where I was always the teacher and I was always assisting my ragged and dirty dolls. So of course, I

pursued a teaching degree, even though there was a tapón there too. I had “refugee” status and therefore could not make the “pledge of citizenship” that was required to be certified as a teacher. Fortunately, the issue with my papers was solved before I graduated. This taught me to be mindful of my privilege as a Cuban American, since the U.S. government welcomed those seen as fleeing from a Communist regime and turned Cuban refugees into permanent residents overnight.

I got married for the first time at 20, two weeks after I graduated, completing college in three years because while I wanted a college degree, marriage was the role that was expected of me as a Latina in my community back then. I proceeded to get married, even though my mother warned me not to do it from the time I started dating my ex-husband when I was 15. I had my first son, Eric, the joy of that life, a few years after my marriage. I was later divorced.

I remember discussing with my colleagues that teaching these students in English made no sense. When my colleagues asked what I was going to do, I told them, “I’m going to do it bilingually.” They asked me what that meant, and I told them I had no idea.

I was fortunate to be hired as a teacher in a progressive public school in what was then Hell’s Kitchen. My colleagues in the school also had a most important role in unblocking my tapones. A product of the Civil Rights Struggles of the 1960s, the school had a unique structure, without a bureaucratic principal and with an ethos of community consensus to educate. I was young and inexperienced, and yet, after the first week of teaching children who were 99% Puerto Rican, I questioned what I was doing. I remember discussing with my colleagues that teaching these students in English made no sense. When my colleagues asked what I was going to do, I told them,

“I’m going to do it bilingually.” They asked me what that meant, and I told them I had no idea. Today I recognize this conversation and my colleague’s support as one of the most important ones of my life. It allowed me to take risks for the first time, to let go of the strictures of language and engage with the children in more meaningful ways.

I had the difficulties that all new teachers have in the beginning, but I was blessed with a mentor, Lillian Weber, who was very involved in the creation of the school and wanted to support it. Lillian was a progressive educator and a powerhouse. She took me under her wing and fanned the streams of energy that make teaching an imaginative and liberating experience. She also taught me that you build “on the strengths of children.” It was a lesson that I have never forgotten and that has led me to my positions on language, education and bilingual education.

As I taught and became immersed in the Puerto Rican community of Hell’s Kitchen, it was the love of literature again, this time the one rendered in Spanish, that kept me going. In those days, the study of Spanish literature consisted mostly of Iberian literature, with Latin America almost non-existent, and of course, Latinx literature not even mentioned. But again, it was a teacher at Hunter College, José Olivio Jiménez, who took me by the hand to The Graduate Center of City University and told me I had to pursue a Ph.D. I started studying for my doctorate in “Spanish,” and found I did not quite fit. And again, it was this time a Gallego, a Spaniard from Galicia, who was the

Chair of the department, Don Emilio González López, who gave me permission to go beyond the academic boundaries of disciplines, encouraging me to take courses outside of the department and in semiotics, history, comparative literature, French and anywhere where I could find a piece of myself. And it was in the poetry of Oliverio Girondo, an Argentinean whose language in poetry brought out other meanings and messages, and the patience shown by my mentor, Angela Dellepiane, that I was able to put together semiotics, language, poetry, education, and meanings beyond language.

Entering the academy: Mentors and teachers

When I finished my Ph.D., my teaching mentor, Lillian Weber, told me there was an opening in a non-tenure track project in bilingual education at The City College of New York and asked me to apply. I told her I had no theoretical background, but she recognized my experience as a bilingual teacher, even before Bilingual Education became a field of study. I was interviewed by a committee, including its chair, Ricardo Otheguy, who went on to become my husband, and the person who in the last 40 years has constantly gone about unplugging all my emotional and intellectual tapones. We started out as colleagues, and we have ended up as partners in life.

The story goes that Ricardo did not want to hire me, and it was only because the women in the committee forced him to give me an opportunity that my life took a turn. Ricardo was a linguist who was directing the Bilingual Education program. City College was then a vibrant college in Harlem, with students who were mostly Black and Latinx. Black Studies,



as well as Puerto Rican Studies, were departments that had close ties to the Bilingual Education Program. I immediately recognized in Ricardo what I had been missing for much of my life — another Cuban American who was politically progressive and committed to social justice and the New York Latinx community. Ricardo also had non-traditional understandings of language and education, enabling us to dialogue about what was going on in schools, in the community, and in bilingual education. He has been my most important mentor and greatest supporter throughout my academic life, and has co-authored some work with me, especially at the beginning and towards the end of my academic career, as well as in retirement. Ricardo has also been my greatest supporter in my family life, and a generous father to our three children (Eric, our Tiger #1; Raquel que es mucha Raquel; and Emma who colors life with stories), and loving grandfather to our greatest treasures — our five grandchildren (Gia with her energy; Gabo with his inquisitiveness; Charli with her sensitivity; Isabel Alicia with her joy and carácter; Alaya Luz, born during the pandemic to give us light; and there is more light coming from another grandchild who is on the way as I write this).

Teachers, both informally in the family and formally in school, have had a major impact in my life. And again, I had the good fortune of landing a post-doc opportunity at Yeshiva University, studying with Joshua A. Fishman, who was seen as the “father” of the field that became known as Sociology of Language. Fishman had studied and written much about bilingualism and bilingual education in the world, and I felt I needed theoretical insights about language in society, beyond those of texts. I have never

stopped being Fishman’s student. I have always said that, “Everything I know about language in education, I learned in Fishman 101.” Joshua Fishman could not have been more different than me personally, but not in his interdisciplinarity. He was a speaker of Yiddish, a secular Jew who then became orthodox, a sociologist, a social psychologist, a historian, a linguist. I was extremely ignorant of the world at the time. I had not had any opportunity to travel, almost beyond my own community. I saw the world through the eyes of my barrio. But Fishman taught me patiently and generously, always acknowledging that I would understand things differently because I came from a different world. Perhaps one of the greatest lessons he taught me was that every generation had to make sense of its own realities. I think of this lesson often, as



I age, and as I see my students go beyond my own work, making sense of it in different ways, and discarding what no longer applies because, as Mercedes Sosa’s song said, “todo cambia.”

During those years, my relationship with El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños proved essential, as I learned how to think “from the community.” The Language Policy Task Force, under the leadership of Pedro Pedraza, was studying language in the East Harlem community. Their research questioned the ways in which mainstream scholars were describing language use in the community and schools. I have never forgotten the lessons they taught me, as well as my discomfort in facing theories and research that did not match those of my mentor, Joshua Fishman.

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In the 1980s City College of New York was a place filled with tension, but also possibilities. It was a place I loved during the

15 years I was faculty in the School of Education. I remember one day at the beginning when we were in line to pick up our checks (no electronic deposit during those times), and a faculty person in the line heard me say I had just been hired. He turned around to ask me: “How do you like it?” When I told him I loved it, he smirked, and I asked him, “Don’t you?” He then replied, “This is not what I signed up to do.” I couldn’t understand what he was telling me, but I was later told that he meant “Open Admissions,” and teaching brown and black students who were said “not to know anything.”

I felt so differently about my City College students. They knew so much and taught me about life, about struggles that went beyond those that I had experienced. I remember Altagracia who used to complain that her husband turned off the light so that she couldn’t do her reading. I was fortunate to have a loving husband, supportive of my life as a woman, a mother, an academic. Ricardo always reminded me that we were fortunate. We were there to educate, and we were “haciendo pueblo” [making people]. These were my formative years. I learned more from my students than they learned from me. And I learned more from the Harlem and Washington Heights community than I had in all my studies. Putting my understandings gained from the community and the students alongside those I had gained from books and scholars became a challenge, as I honored the understandings gained del pueblo and tried to make sense of them in the theories I found in books. I started realizing there was little fit.

Throughout my life as an educator, I have been surrounded not only by teachers, but also by students who have pushed me forward.

The day came when the reality at the college also changed, despite my many committed colleagues, too many to mention

here. Instead of educating teachers, the goal became passing the teacher certification examination. And eventually, passing an examination that was very similar to the final teacher certification exam became a requirement to be admitted to the School of Education. In 1995 we had admitted more than 100 teacher candidates to the undergraduate and graduate programs in bilingual teacher education. But a year later, after the new requirement, only 22 students were admitted. The time had come when I also felt that “this was not what I had signed up to do.” I had expected to educate teachers of color for their own communities. I became vocal about the injustice of this new requirement.

Getting my hands dirty: Students to the rescue

Throughout my life as an educator, I have been surrounded not only by teachers, but also by students who have pushed me forward. One of my old City College students, Gladys Schrynemakers, called me one day from the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University. They were looking for a Dean for their School of Education, a school where 90% of students were students of color, mostly from the Anglophone Caribbean, and who were having the same issues around the failure rate in the teacher certification examination. The program had been threatened by the New York State Education Department with termination. I decided that it was time to think of what it would mean to lead a teacher education program truly committed to educating and preparing teacher candidates of color to teach in their own communities. I decided to accept the challenge and get my hands dirty.

But then again, I wasn’t sure of the camino to make the changes needed. Within the first month, I remember going to see Vito Perone, director of the Teacher Education Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I knew Vito from his participation in the North Dakota Study Group, a group of progressive

educators that included my colleague Lillian Weber. I knew that Vito had been a most effective dean. I told him I didn't know what a dean was supposed to do, and I described the school's predicament. He gave me the best advice possible: "Start with a vision of teacher education," he told me; "if all the changes that you make respond to a vision, the faculty will not see them as personal, but as changes that need to occur for their own success and that of their students." But I needed colleagues to open up the caminos.

The relationships with colleagues especially in international and comparative education and anthropology and education extended my understandings and thinking.

I was fortunate to then hire Cecelia Traugh, now Dean of Bank Street College of Education, first as consultant, and then after a major grant from the Luce Foundation, as Associate Dean. Cecelia brought to the faculty a tool for dialogue and conversation that proved to be essential. Based on the Descriptive Processes developed by Patricia Carini for the Prospect School and Archives, Cecelia engaged the entire faculty and administration, including me, in bi-weekly inquiry sessions following the process. Through careful description of what the faculty were facing in their courses, we started crafting what a curriculum would look like to ensure the students' education and preparation as teachers for their communities, as well as attention to development of English writing which was a stumbling block in the teacher certification examination. Through Cecelia's efforts we revamped the curriculum entirely, and we started focusing on pedagogical practices that supported our students' critical literacies.

These were years of intense work that I have never described in writing. But I was interested in transforming teacher education

for teacher candidates of color, not necessarily in being an administrator. And once we had achieved success and the New York State Department of Education was happy with our progress, other changes occurred.

I always link these changes to the development of technology and the coming of the Internet. When I started at LIU/Brooklyn, we had a Provost and President who trusted me and had intense conversations with me. But little by little, during my tenure there, conversations started becoming dominated by bureaucratic reports of student enrollment and cost, available now through new technological capabilities. I knew that I didn't want to spend the rest of my career simply managing a program.

I missed teaching and my students terribly. I also missed having the time to write, and more time for the family. From the time I entered City College I wrote not because I had to do so for tenure (there were few publishing requirements at that time), but because I couldn't stop writing. I studied, researched and wrote for my students, my colleagues, myself, never for peer-reviewed journals. And I missed that process also.

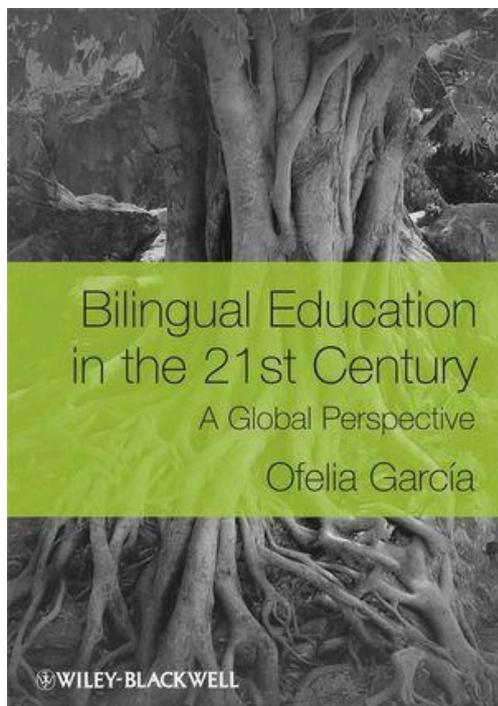
The lure of the dominant side

Because I was the product of a public university and had never looked beyond institutions that educated poor students of color, Columbia University always loomed beyond my horizon. I was enthused when a Puerto Rican colleague, the late María Torres-Guzmán, reached out to tell me that there was a position for a full professor in Bilingual Education at Teachers College. I decided to apply and was hired.

My years at Teachers College were not entirely happy ones. I had wonderful colleagues. Besides María, there were, among many others, Patricia Velasco, JoAnne Kleifgen and Lesley Bartlett, who were lights in my darkness and who remain among my closest colleagues today (for some of our work together, see Barlett &

García, 2011; García & Kleifgen, 2018; 2019). Despite the support of many colleagues, I felt alienated. There were few Black and Latinx faculty in those days. I was hired in the department of International and Transcultural Studies. The relationships with colleagues especially in international and comparative education and anthropology and education extended my understandings and thinking. But the teacher education program in bilingual education was administratively separate from that in TESOL, which was in a different department. It was difficult to work across departments.

Six years into my tenure at Teachers College, a noose appeared on a black professor's door. This incident rocked the college, but it especially rocked me personally. I could not understand how the reputation of the college was more important for some than facing the incident and dialoguing about what it meant for faculty and students, all mostly white. The dialogues were painful, and I grew angry and



¹ Some of these (in alphabetical order) are: Arsen Babaev, Maryam Borjian, Christal Burnett, Mignonette Chiu, Jeehyae Chung, Ameena Ghafar-Kucher, Victoria Hunt, Naomi Kano, Jill Koyama, Tatyana Kleyn, Yi-Sheng Li,

more alienated to the point that I felt out of breath during faculty meetings. My wonderful students understood, but it was not enough for me. Many of my students were international students, some of the best I have had. During this time, they supported me in my sadness, as did many of my colleagues, but I grew disenchanted as I realized I could not make a difference in a private university. I longed to teach students who would become bilingual teachers and researchers in the United States. Despite my ambivalence, I count today among my closest colleagues some of my doctoral students during my Teachers College tenure.¹ I have continued my collegial collaborative work especially with Tatyana Kleyn and Kate Menken, whom I'm fortunate to have had as colleagues in a later chapter at CUNY. So despite my challenges at Teachers College, I treasure all I learned from my students and colleagues there. I learned to think about the role of education in dominance throughout the world, and about how English language education and bilingual education are used to gain privilege for some and exclude others.

Although uncomfortable, Teachers College opened up the world for me. I could not have written *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (2009), without the perspective I acquired in a program with doctoral students researching educational challenges throughout the world. But at the same time, as I grew disappointed with Teachers college, another camino was opening up, this time at the public doctoral granting institution of City University of New York, The Graduate Center.

The Graduate Center, translanguaging, and closing the academic camino

It is important to know how to close chapters. I longed to retire from a public education institution because public

Guillermo Linares, Dina López, Carmina Makar, Leah Mason, Kate Menken, Bahar Otcu, Roozbeh Shirazi, Elizabeth Sumida Huaman, Rosario Torres-Guevara, Laura Valdivieso, Wei-Li Wu, Zeena Zakharia.

education was my passion. So once again, my lines fell for me in a pleasant place — the Graduate Center, the place where I had first become a doctoral student. I thought, “el círculo se cierra,” as the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz once wrote. But in my case, the círculo has not closed. Indeed, it has expanded through the work of my doctoral students.

Just as I saw my work at The City College as “*haciendo pueblo*,” I wanted to “*hacer escuela*,” to leave a legacy with educational researchers of color who worked in the U.S. and would be able to extend my commitments and passions. The Graduate Center was an institution that gave me freedom, students with a social and intellectual commitment to critical questions that matter, colleagues that opened up other caminos. Although I was hired in the doctoral program in Urban Education, physically the program shared space with the Ph.D. programs in French and Spanish. So immediately I was physically in the center of interdisciplinarity, without the disciplinary borders that had plagued me at Teachers College. Here, the building itself was a collaborative interdisciplinary space, with students flowing freely between education, sociology, anthropology, political science, human geography, cultural studies, literature and languages, etc. I was immediately drawn to the theoretical sophistication of my colleagues and

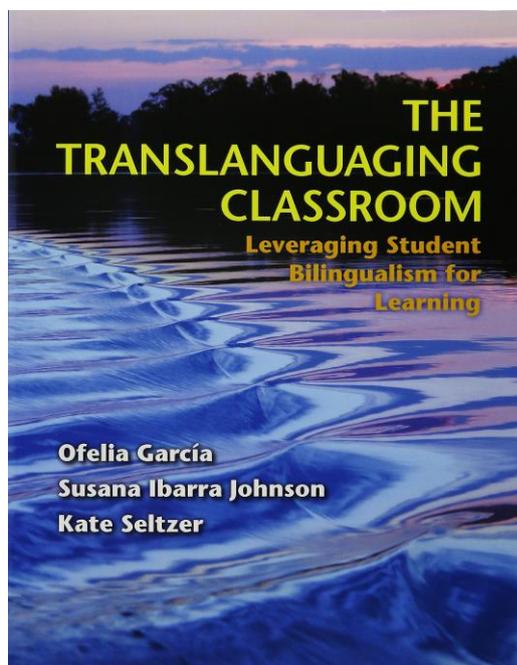
students, and especially to their openly critical scholarship.

For the first time I had doctoral students who were serious students of race, gender, Black and Latinx Studies and who brought those understandings to courses in education. I was not restricted to bilingual education certification requirements, but taught courses that sparked our collaborative imagination, and that pushed my thinking. Among my most important colleagues at The Graduate Center were three extremely strong women — the late Jean Anyon, Wendy Luttrell, and Michelle Fine. Jean Anyon was the most courageous and committed scholar I have met; Wendy, the most sensitive qualitative researcher; Michelle, the bravest fast talker and doer. I learned much from the three of them. I transformed my understandings of language, bilingualism, sociology of language, language policy, and language education, as I learned from them to honor my own lenses, my data, without regard to whether it fitted or not traditional scholarship.

Led by my colleague José del Valle, a “Spanish” program that previously had seen literature and language separately become Latin American, Iberian and Latinx Cultures, for the first time even mentioning the existence of Latinx cultures as a field of study. José also led the formation of a group on “*glotopolítica*,” centering the politics of language and scholarship done in Spanish and led by scholars “from the South.” But this *glotopolítica* was closely aligned to the political economy that Jean Anyon had taught me to consider carefully, to the careful description of what I was seeing rooted in Cecelia Traugh’s descriptive processes fortified through Wendy’s careful looking, and yes, even to the semiotics that I had used as a tool in my early graduate years.



The concept of translanguage emerged from putting together all the lessons I had been taught by my teachers, my colleagues all over the world, my students, but especially my Latinx bilingual community and its teachers and students (García et al., 2017; García & Kleyn, 2016; García & Wei, 2011; Otheguy et al., 2015). It took me a very long time to look at my data with my own lenses, no longer following other scholars' theoretical frameworks. It took courage to do scholarship "from the inside out," "from the community," and not from what others taught me to say. What I learned to do as a young teacher when I decided to teach "bilingually" in a way that conformed to what students needed and not what school systems imposed, took me years to develop in my scholarship. I knew all along that bilingualism was not additive, that the descriptions about bilingual communities' language use were not accurate. That thinking of bilingualism as a first language plus a second language did not



² I want to mention many of my doctoral students who taught me so much about education and minoritized students, as well as language (in alphabetical order): Laura Alonso, Jorge Alvis, Gladys Aponte, Andrew Aprile, Demet Arpacik, Laura Ascensi-Moreno, Dale Britton, Alejandro Carrión, Marie Cerat, Haiwen Chu, María Cioè-Peña, Carla España, Nelson

help bilingual students learn or bilingual teachers teach. And yet, my earlier work was guided by outside policy, by dominant lenses that studied bilingualism through monolingual frameworks. I was a mature older scholar when I had the courage to theorize from people's actions, from the lives of students and teachers, not from other scholars' theoretical frameworks. It took a long while for me to name what I had seen all along — that bilinguals perform with a unitary language repertoire, that to teach them we have to engage their whole beings, not just one language or another, and that not to do so is unjust and leads to educational failure because you are comparing bilingual performances to those of monolinguals. Theorizing translanguage is political, an act of giving bilingual students re-existence in a present, able to use language on their own terms, without creating the "absences" that comparing them to monolingual acts create. Perhaps that has been the lesson that has taken me the longest to learn as an academic — that it is important to look closely, describe fully, and interpret from the perspective of the people one is studying.

The Graduate Center students, most of whom are New York City residents and almost all students of color, have been primarily focused on issues of education and social justice for minoritized students. Never have I learned so much from a group of young people. In the footnote I name some of my doctoral students who have influenced me the most — from Urban Education, but also from Latin American, Iberian and Latino Cultures, as well as Linguistic Anthropology.² Many of them have taken the concept of translanguage and made it theirs, extending it to their own

Flores, Luis Guzmán Valerio, Luz Herrera, Sarah Hesson, Laura Kaplan, Khánh Lê, Roberto Martínez, Susan McCullough, Mike Mena, Zoila Morell, Angélica Ortega, Amber Pabón, Liza Pappas, Kate Seltzer, Cristian Solorza, Sara Vogel, Heather Woodley, Joanna Yip.

work. Recently I was asked to write the Foreword of two books authored by some of these student/colleagues (España & Herrera, 2020; Espinosa & Ascenzi-Moreno, 2020). I am so proud of all of them.

I am also very proud of the collaborative work that we did with schools in New York State that were educating emergent bilingual students, The CUNY-NYSIEB project. Through generous funding from the New York State Education Department, we established a network among teachers in schools and faculty in different CUNY colleges that has become a familia. Collaboratively we edited a book of our experience (CUNY-NYSIEB, 2020), and maintain a website that is visited by teachers around the world (www.cuny-nysieb.org).

Sometimes there is a student who pushes you to understand things that you have known implicitly, but that you have not been explicitly saying. That for me was the role that Nelson Flores played. Nelson was my first Research Assistant at The Graduate Center, and he taught me more than I taught him. Now a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, Nelson put together language and race for me. The concept of raciolinguistic ideologies, developed by Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa (Flores & Rosa, 2015), has shaped my thinking in my recent work.

The title the students gave to the symposium they organized when I retired in January 2019 was “Transcending Fronteras.” I end then by sharing some bullet points on how I have transcended some of the lines in academia to end in a pleasant place, despite it not being “*el ideal*.”

The trick is to find good people to think with, love with, do work with, dialogue with, disagree with, fight with.

It is not wisdom that I have acquired; it is a camino of questioning, unplugging, and learning from others — those in my past and those in a present that becomes an instant future as doctoral students become

esteemed colleagues, and our children grow into generous parents to our grandchildren.

Las lecciones: Transcending fronteras

- “Speak up, speak out, get in the way,” call out “*comemierda!*” and then take action. John Lewis & Emma González, different in many ways except united in their sense of calling out injustice and getting into “good trouble.” Academia is not a place for cowards. It is a place of privilege, and as we support tenure, it is important to also embrace the social responsibility that we all have.
- Step out or step in deeply when you are put in a position when you feel that this is not “what you signed up to do.” Get your hands “dirty,” and act against injustices.
- Re-view your data with fresh lenses, with lenses that come from the people who are in the situations you study, not from theoretical frameworks that have hidden from view those who have suffered the consequences of colonization and global capitalism.
- With those fresh lenses, find strengths and build on them. Build on the strength of children, of minoritized and racialized communities, of teachers. Look for strengths and you will find them. Look for failure, gaps, ineptitude and that will color your looking.
- Remember that the grass is not always greener on the other side. Imagine the possibilities on your side, dig for those possibilities, describe them, make them visible, feel the discomfort, and then enjoy its pleasant space as *fronteras* are abolished.
- Academia is full of fronteras — disciplinary, hierarchies of faculty ranks, committees. There are also fronteras created by professional organizations and journals, many times not welcoming of new or different ideas. Your task as an academic is to

keep pushing on those fronteras — questioning their borders, liberating thought, making room for others and especially for the knowledge systems of those who have been racialized, colonized and gendered as inferior.

Perhaps the most important lesson I can give younger scholars is to put home and family first. Ricardo, Eric, Raquel and Emma are my stronghold. Ricardo and I never considered leaving New York City, even when others came to call. I was fortunate to have been hired as faculty in four different institutions of higher education in New York City. Indeed, lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.

Institutions are never perfect places. There is no “ideal.” The trick is to find good people to think with, love with, do work with, dialogue with, disagree with, fight with. That is what keeps an academic going — finding some measure of tranquility at home, facing the difficulties that come from being a mother and wife, and the cycle of ups and downs, crises and resolutions that make love more meaningful; and then, finding spaces in institutions where you can bring yourself wholly into the intellectual work that moves you, with others, and with the energy that comes from making room for difficult ideas.

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*I include here the publications that I refer to in the piece. For a complete list of publications, go to my website, www.ofeliagarcia.org.

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About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their College careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in Educational Psychology and Educational Research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in Educational Psychology, Educational Research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. .

A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers – how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions – and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their manuscripts contained these elements: 1) their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.



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