Guatemala meets North Carolina

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**My Guatemalan Friends:**

I am a Spanish interpreter at my church for the Latino parishioners who are English language learners. Given my role as interpreter, I am often one of the first contacts for our Latino parishioners. To this end, I made the acquaintance of two lovely Guatemalan women. When I found out that they spoke fluent Spanish, as well as Garífuna, an African dialect that has interested me for many years, we instantly connected. Progressively, the women began to share more of their lives with me. The daughter, Elinor, is in her 50s and the mother, Eugenia, is in her late 70s. Elinor is a citizen of the United States and has lived here for about 30 years. She speaks English, although it is somewhat broken. Eugenia came to the U.S. about 7 years ago following the death of her husband. Eugenia is a legal resident of the United States. Eugenia does not speak English and due to a poorly performed glaucoma surgery, Eugenia is totally blind. The women soon expressed that although “papers,” or “papeles” as they stated, were not an issue, they desperately needed assistance. Here are the requests that they made.

**Eugenia’s request**

Eugenia very much wants to work. Her daughter, Elinor, works third shift to support herself and her mother. Although Elinor tries to convince her mother otherwise, Eugenia feels that she is a dead weight who is not contributing anything to the family. Before she lost her sight, she worked as a midwife in Guatemala. She knows that she cannot perform those duties in the United States given the medical license requirements, but she wants to do something outside of the home. This request has not proven easy given that she is both fully seeing impaired and she does not speak English.

**Elinor’s request**

Elinor wants to return to school for her GED and also she would like to take an English as a Second Language course to hone her English skills.

**Joint Request from both Elinor and Eugenia**

Both Elinor and Eugenia had one request that was at the top of their list. They want to bring their nephew to the United States to learn English so that he can then go back to their “pueblo” of Livingstone, Guatemala to teach “their people” English. The women shared that their nephew is very smart and longs to learn English, but has no resources to do so. A poignant comment that Eugenia made was “La mayoría de la gente de donde yo vengo es el color de nosotros y no hablan inglés.” (The majority of the people who are from where I am from are the same color as us (black people) and they do not speak English).Upon hearing the women mention how race impacts social mobility, I immediately considered the historical imperial domination that has impacted the Afro-Guatemalans of today. “Racism in the context of colonialism and imperialism takes the form of simultaneous naturalization and abstraction. It works by erasing the economic, political and historical exigencies that necessitate the essentialist discourse of race as a way to legitimate imperialism in the first place” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 61). The women went on to explain that most of the people in Livingstone, Guatemala are black and they speak Garífuna and some also speak Spanish, *but no one speaks English*. In order to learn English you must go to the capital, la Ciudad de Guatemala, which is far away and very expensive. Livingstone is quite impoverished; therefore, the residents cannot afford to go to the capital to learn English, although learning English is the fastest way to gain employment and to have upward mobility. Although I immediately saw the connection between race and class, I would like to learn more about how gender factors in.

**Transparency & Reflection**

I pray that I am not judged too harshly based on my reflection, but I aim to be open and transparent. I know that in any collaborative partnership, reflection is key. Elinor and Eugenia’s requests came at such a busy time in my life. I had just had surgery which rendered me confined to the house for 2 weeks. It was mid semester and I had several projects due (including the first travelogue). I was also teaching full-time. Additionally, I was headed to Seattle, WA to present at the AESA conference. I genuinely wanted to help them, but I simply could not see how I would carve out the time. Neither woman spoke English well enough to conduct the type of business that they needed. Neither woman drove. I considered informing them that I just did not have the time. But the more we spoke each Sunday, the closer we became. “Collaboration [must] depend on the circumstances and the particular needs of the community at that time” (Geraldine Pratt et al., 2010, p. 71). It was unfair for me to establish our partnership or collaboration based on my convenience.

The women were more open to discuss certain experiences with me that related to race given that we were all black women. The women felt that my Spanish was more “educated” than theirs (although I would disagree); therefore, Elinor and Eugenia were comfortable speaking in their native Spanish tongue when they were in face to face meetings, but due to the Garífuna influence on their Spanish, they feared being misunderstood over the phone (although I detected little distinction in their Spanish as a result of Garífuna). They preferred that I make phone calls in their stead when necessary. I was happy to do so. As I jumped in and started working with them, it felt less and less like work, but more like a partnership. Their mobility was an important step not just for them, but for me as well. In terms of community, if one of us makes it, we all do. “We are allies [in this work], sometimes even co-conspirators” (Geraldine Pratt et al., 2010, p. 71).

**My Shift**

I began conversing with Elinor and Eugenia shortly before I was due to have surgery. Being fairly immobile for 2 weeks showed me what it was like to have to depend on others for your care and well-being. Gratefully, I had wonderful friends and family who readily assisted me with meals, errands, and home visits. I reflected on what my experience would have been like had others not sacrificed for me. I knew that I had to be unselfish and do what I could to support Elinor and Eugenia. Each of their requests was for their personal advancement and also for the betterment of their families. Also, after weeks of getting to know the women, I felt connected to them as if they were my family. We are family. As academics, we must be careful of the “binary that distinguishes the “academy” from the “community” or the academic from the activist” (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010, p. 27). This collaboration was an opportunity to not only read about transnational feminist theory, but to actually live it out.