

# Beyond Pleasure and Danger: Life-Changing Feminist Lessons<sup>1</sup>

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“Sex? What are you talking about?!” I still remember the confrontational voice of a working-class, exhausted immigrant woman who reacted to me as I asked her naively yet respectfully about her sex life after migrating from Mexico to Los Angeles. Her honest reaction was part of one of 40 interviews I was conducting while working on my dissertation; the conversation became a turning point for me intellectually, one that I will never forget. Her moving words stuck with me to become a moment of powerful awareness and revelation that helped me give more depth and texture to my interviews with other immigrant women, women who validated her reflections while complaining about the overwhelming, exhausting routine of life and survival in Los Angeles. A postdoctoral stage of the project followed to include the sex stories of 20 immigrant men; the men shared with great precision the around-the-clock routines shaping the quality of their intimate lives, and that of the women in their lives, and the quality of their family engagements. The project taught me so much about the reorganization of erotic life and the meanings of heterosexual intimacy of cisgender women and men living in patriarchal contexts and capitalist economies—before, during, and after Mexico-US migration processes, in this case.

The project that gave life to *Erotic Journeys* helped me establish an academic career that took me by surprise; my own path developed like a good novel, page after page offering unpredictable lessons to a feminist scholar. As a student, I dreamed of completing a doctoral degree to eventually continue teaching for nontraditional student populations (i.e., at a community college) and establish a modest community-based agency promoting collective healing somewhere in a Mexican barrio. But then I fell in love with feminism and ethnographic research in the doctoral program—the rest is history. In

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this essay, I share some of the remarkable moments of this rewarding and life-changing journey that started in the early 1990s.

Back then, mainstream feminist theorizing and research on sexuality was an inspiration, but they soon clashed as I started to *listen to the field* as a feminist researcher in training. The same women who became intimate strangers signaled the ethnographic direction to be followed: the research surprises and the unexpected emerging stories of sex and the intimate shaped my understanding of feminist research when I was *actually* immersed in the process of conducting it. The communities close to my heart talked to me through these stories of sexuality, immigrants who shared so openly and candidly, becoming in the process the unexpected, unofficial feminist mentors revealing the intellectual pathways to be followed. They were incredibly generous and honest; I did my best to listen. In retrospect, I realize with deep gratitude that they laid the foundation so I could become the feminist who is learning to become a *teachable being*, the feminist who does her best to always *be teachable*.

Turning into a teachable being while being teachable became the two wings of the purple bird that was learning to fly: there were more lessons to be learned.

“How many men have you slept with?” I still remember the question written on a piece of paper that I was holding as I was overcome with feelings of confusion. The question was one among the many questions similarly written on pieces of paper that I enthusiastically collected after sharing my dissertation findings with a large group of undergraduate students. It was the late 1990s, and after the presentation that took place on campus at an R1 university somewhere in the United States, I asked students to write down their individual questions on a piece of paper—*anonymously*. I collected many interesting questions and I tried to answer most of them, but this not only got my attention but also kept me quiet. I did not save the piece of paper; I wish I had. Back then I did not know whether academia was for me, so the experience was confusing and validated my insecurity for a moment, but fortunately it vanished very soon. More than 15 years later, potential participants in a project examining incest and sexual violence in the context of family life in Mexico similarly asked me endless personal and professional questions before agreeing to participate in in-depth personal interviews. The context was completely different: it was not *anonymous*, but rather direct and personal, and I already had a job as a professor (close to her tenure promotion). This time the setting was Ciudad Juárez, the first research site in the project, and my main concern revolved around the risk of my answers compromising the methodology, for example, influencing or shaping the quality of the interview, skewing the storytelling process or “contaminating the data.” I made myself available to answer the questions *after* the interview was completed, and I said that I would only answer

the questions that the interviewees were asking in order to feel comfortable enough to participate. One of the concerns addressed by the potential participants included their interest in making sure that I had enough moral integrity and was trained enough professionally to listen to the stories. I don't remember anyone declining to participate after these candid professional conversations.

The question that was posed to me anonymously when I was a doctoral student could be perceived and interpreted from contrasting perspectives, *from* pure voyeurism, intimidation, harassment, or intrusive disrespect *to* a genuine concern about the moral character of women researchers studying sexuality, one that is assessed by making sure they are not promiscuous and by inquiring about their sex lives (assumed to be heterosexual). The experience made me think about the experiences of cis men—of all races—who conduct sexuality research and their professional experiences in similar contexts and circumstances. I kept thinking about the most marginalized because of gender or sexuality and how multiple and complex intersectionalities might shape their experiences, including but not limited to bodily ability, nationality, race, and religion.

Regardless, the incest project that was born in Ciudad Juárez and that gave life to the book *Family Secrets* and other publications close to my heart helped me to be honest with potential informants, and with myself. Soon I learned: life was giving me a special opportunity to explore the potential of vulnerability, a source of tremendous strength and intellectual creativity, as well as a search for authenticity and resilience as a feminist and human being. For instance, using creative writing and conversation as a method helped me share an experience of what Carole J. Sheffield has identified as “sexual terrorism” that I experienced in Mexico in 2005. “In the Flesh” is the title of the article, and the publication became my own #MeToo moment (González-López 2022).

In retrospect, I have also realized that going too fast was not a desirable feminist quality; some of my sisters-in-arms taught important lessons about it.

“Why don't you slow down, woman?” I still recall the words of a beloved friend who is an attorney and a long-time local resident of Ciudad Juárez. She was looking me in the eye with tremendous honesty and a firm tone in her voice. She was picking me up after a productive meeting with the director of the local prison in the border city, and as she drove me back to my next appointment, she did not wait to give me a lecture on the countless risks in the city and the many ways I might have not been able to perceive the real dangers a researcher is exposed to in that location, regardless of gender. Local cultures have their own language, symbolism, and social engagements. I always thought I was deeply familiar with them; I was wrong. Being Mexican, speaking the language, and being familiar with the overall national culture were not enough.

Days earlier, I had been successful in my attempts to schedule a meeting with the director of the local prison. It was the fall 2005 semester, and earlier that month, I had visited the local prison per the recommendation of a senior scholar who thought it would be a good idea to interview men who were incarcerated after going through a legal process and found guilty of exercising sexual violence against a girl or a woman *within* their families. Visiting the local prison was a powerful experience, and the energy was intense; there is no doubt that human suffering has its own energy and force. At that moment, I was living in the city while conducting my fieldwork and conducting the interviews with the women and men who gave life to the incest book, and incorporating the stories of men who were incarcerated was intellectually exciting and promising. The director at the prison was supportive, and after I met with him that day, he simply asked me, "How many men do you need to interview?" He was very professional in his interaction with me and came across as enthusiastic about the project. I came out of the meeting with him feeling incredibly fortunate and grateful. But that ended after the meeting was over and my beloved friend picked me up and gave me a stern warning. I knew it was out of love; she cared tremendously about my safety.

"Come over here so you can see!" The same friend was animatedly asking me to watch the local news in Ciudad Juárez. Intense riots at the local prison I had visited days earlier were being covered by the local news. The images left me speechless and in a state of shock as I expressed my gratitude to her for her honesty when she picked me up after that meeting. She was hitting me with her elbow while saying, "See, I told you." And so, I learned: intellectual humility was essential for me as a feminist researcher working on a sensitive topic in a region with a long history of volatile expressions of violence. And self-care was more complex than what I had learned up to that point: collective care instead became the way to take care of myself; letting others take care of me was not only a praxis of intellectual humility but a good practice to continue growing and developing my knowledge of local cultures and, eventually, my intuition and awareness as a feminist ethnographer who soon aspired to become that *teachable being*.

"How do you take care of yourself? *¿Cómo te cuidas?*" I have been asked countless times after sharing my research, either in the United States or in Mexico. While each project has represented unique challenges, there are endless lessons about my own evolution as a feminist researcher who has worked on emotionally challenging topics and controversial issues. The celebrated, highly cited quote by Audre Lorde became a daily prayer: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare." And caring for myself became an everyday practice of *verbos vitales*, vital verbs that not only preserve but celebrate life as a form of radical care, care that involves human engagement, care as collective

praxis. But being able to be there for others will only happen if I can take care of myself first, so vital verbs included resting; writing, erasing, writing again, editing the story I would like to remember in my old age (fingers crossed!); establishing and nurturing a circle of love and care; remembering the voice of the one who has loved me the most and following the priceless advice; defending and protecting my joy as a human right, as an everyday habit; and taking good notes when what the heart whispers to me becomes essential. The heart in the end is my best life companion and witness.<sup>2</sup>

Revisiting each one of the above life-changing lessons as a feminist has reminded me of the power of what Arlie R. Hochschild once identified as *magnified moments*, and these moments have signaled meaningful turning points in my career. They took me back to the publications that inspired me as the doctoral student who was formally trained in the 1990s. Back then, the now classic *Pleasure and Danger* by Carole Vance celebrated and validated my initial research interests, but my fieldwork offered a purple Pandora's box yet to be tripped on and opened—Alice in Wonderland became Alicia in the Borderlands. For instance, pleasure for some of the women that I have interviewed in the two large projects was at times a fascinating erotic abstraction to be claimed as a right, one yet to be discovered and lived, and danger went beyond the risk of being exposed to sexual violence. Danger was multilayered especially in the context of intense gender inequality in an increasingly volatile Mexican society. Being killed by a narco was, for instance, identified by Noelia, a woman who worked as a stripper in a border city, as the most serious danger; I shared her story in *Family Secrets*. Danger has even become more intense for women living in contemporary Mexico. As I type this essay, it is common to hear alarmed journalists announce that 10 women are killed every day, usually by a heterosexual partner, and that guns have been crossing the US-Mexico border (Amnesty International 2021).

Doing my best to produce knowledge by using conversation as method has helped me to engage with a new generation of feminists in two ways. First, with feminist activists exploring reinventions of both pleasure and extreme danger in the #MeToo era, in contexts of volatile violence, such as Ciudad Juárez (González-López and Cordero Cabrera 2021). And second, in a less intense scenario, with a younger generation of scholars looking at nuanced expressions of pleasure and danger as the protagonists of consent in the context of lesbian relationships in Mexico (González-López and Russo Garrido 2023).

In the end, conducting research that is *urgently needed* has become the spirit inspiring my intellectual curiosity, and the mantra nurturing my career as a public feminist sociologist. It has also become the reason why it would

<sup>2</sup> I further discuss the topic of vital verbs and self-care in a book called *Senderos feministas* (González-López 2021).

have painful to say no to historian Monica Muñoz Martínez. A native of Uvalde and a highly respected public historian studying racial violence in Texas, she invited me to join her team after the shooting at Robb Elementary School shocked Texas on May 24, 2022, and exposed complex harms, including but not limited to the fractures of historical trauma in the state. As a member of this collective effort currently called “Restore Uvalde,” I am learning moving and revealing lessons as a feminist. However, the project is still talking to me slowly, in incomplete sentences, through syllables.

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“First get tenure, then you have your little revolution”; these were the words of Gloria Anzaldúa, the advice she gave me as I cried while I asked for her words of wisdom during a consultation with her about the best way to survive academia. It was fall 2002, my first semester as an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin, and I could not believe my good luck of finally being in her presence. She gave a workshop for a large group of participants in San Antonio, Texas, the last or one of the last presentations she gave before her untimely death in 2004.

My endless search for authenticity has become my little revolution, and *Senderos feministas*—feminist pathways—became not only the title of an anthology I wrote and published with an academic press in Mexico as a way to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic but also my honest effort to embrace personal and intellectual vulnerability and openness as a feminist scholar who is also concerned about copublishing with feminist activists working hard on the Mexican side (González-López 2021). Transitioning *from* being the junior Latina warrior—the first-generation high school student, daughter of a working-class Mexican family, *la niña del barrio* who was incredibly afraid deep inside all along—to embracing the possibility of simply becoming a fear-free wise woman, a feminist intellectual activist who is also a spiritual being, is my ultimate dream of true inner liberation. I share these lessons hoping they will be of benefit to future reading feminist eyes embracing the same aspiration.

Thank you for reading, thank you for being my witness.

Written with a grateful heart in Austin, Texas, in spring 2023.

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