

the maquiladora syndrome

by gloria gonzález-lópez

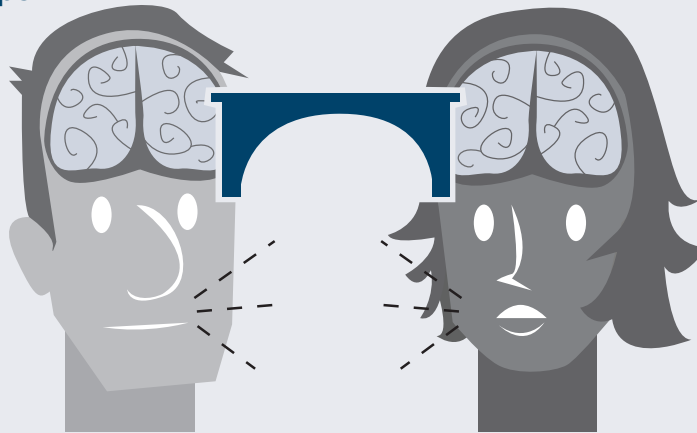
"So are you like all the other researchers who have been here, people we have helped, who collected their data and then left, disappeared, and never came back? Are you like that?" The director of a community-based agency in Mexico City confronted me with this question when I approached her about my recent research project.

"No, no!" I wanted to shout in response. "I am not that kind of researcher, I am a feminist sociologist, an intellectual activist!" But even as I heard myself refuting her accusations, I knew that I would have to work hard to convince her that I was not just another knowledge invader who was visiting Mexico to interview people, extract their histories and collect a wealth of rich data, all for her own professional benefit, and that of a small intellectual elite.

This conversation haunted me as I traveled and lived in four large Mexican urban centers (Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey). Well endowed with prestigious research grants, I was conducting ethnographic research on incestuous relationships in Mexican families. In recent volunteer work, I had learned from activists and mental-health professionals in Ciudad Juárez that research on sexual violence within the family was completely invisible. This also validated my preliminary research on this theme, led by my original interest in studying this topic with immigrants.

With that research, I hoped to make good on my commitments as a feminist and intellectual activist; I wanted to conduct research that was urgently needed and useful. But I had heard many complaints from local community workers about researchers from the north (as well as some Mexican institutions) who make careers out of research on local communities in the global south without giving anything back. The situation sounded like the academic equivalent of the renowned maquiladoras, or Mexican assembly plants that exploit cheap local labor to produce goods for northern markets.

This "maquiladora syndrome," as I came to think of it, troubled me deeply and motivated me to explore ways to engage in some form of professional reciprocity. I asked the director how I could return the generous support her agency had given me in identifying potential informants for my project. I was startled when she responded, "Teach me what you know." "But what do I have to offer you?" I wondered. I thought about all



the knowledge I have accumulated through years of studying, teaching, and writing in top-ranked U.S. universities. Though I am a tenured professor with a hefty record of accomplishment, when confronted with the question of how to genuinely give back to the communities from which I was "extracting" data, I

found myself speechless.

This humbling experience compelled me to rethink what I know, and what I teach, and how knowledge circulating in our intellectual communities might be of use to those situated outside of them. I thought about all the work I have done on Mexican immigrants and their sex lives, men and masculinity, sexuality and violence, and feminist research methods. I shared this list with the agency director, and together we designed seminars and workshops for the professionals, activists, and other women and men who were working in the trenches of Mexico City.

In preparing for and participating in these seminars, I felt deeply vulnerable. Rather than simply impose "northern knowing," I struggled to figure out how to share ideas in ways that would resonate with the complex social realities of these professional activists. I realized that if I really wanted to be a feminist intellectual activist, I had to allow myself be transformed by the ways of knowing that emerged from my conversations with these people. As a Mexican immigrant myself, I have frequently felt marginalized in intellectual circles located on the north side of the border; now I was in a situation of privilege vis-à-vis these community workers in the global south. For many of them, I was "la doctora de Texas," the Mexican who had made it in the United States. I was the borderless immigrant, una feminista without fronteras going back and forth both intellectually, and in my own heart.

In refusing to participate in the intellectual maquiladora syndrome, I learned that creativity and collaborative knowledge production is rooted in vulnerability and openness. The confrontational woman who later became a supportive and loving friend, the woman who moved me deeply when she said, "teach me what you know" taught me many valuable lessons about the politics of intellectual reciprocity and engaged research.

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