

Scholarly Personal Narratives: Leslie Gonzalez

I am so honored to have been invited to share a bit about my personal story with you. In drafting my personal narrative, I set out to share a little bit about my biographical history with you and a little bit about my development as a scholar. To wrap this up, I'm going to share with you a few lessons or insights that have been really key to my scholarly development. Before starting and formally introducing myself, I just want to thank Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher for the opportunity and for asking those of us in this video series to dig deep and use the tenants of scholarly personal narrative, which is a distinct methodology that asks scholars to consider how our histories inform who we are, what we ask and how we go about it. In this way, scholarly personal narratives can powerfully disrupt normalized standards of objectivity, which have been used to judge academics and their worthiness for far too long.



There's a method that really aligns with my own Chicana feminist epistemology, which understands that notions like objectivity and neutrality are really just convenient covers for how whiteness and masculinity have shaped the academy. I am just so pleased to be able to think through my scholarly journey through such an inviting methodological framework. All of that to say, I'll go ahead and get started by introducing myself and sharing a little bit about my professional profile right now. My name is Leslie Gonzalez and I'm an associate professor of higher education at Michigan State University. Michigan State University occupies ancestral, traditional and contemporary lands of the Anishinaabeg. Here at Michigan State University, I serve as a program coordinator for our online master's program. This is a program that focuses on higher education and lifelong learning. I also serve as an associate editor for the review of higher education, which is one of the key journals in our field.

These titles and roles are of course, something that I'm really proud of and humbled and honored to hold. When it comes down to it, I often introduce myself or write up my bio to describe myself as a working-class Latina, a first-generation college student turned academic. In fact, when I open up my classes every semester, that's how I introduce myself to my students. Moreover, I am the product of my parents' very careful and thoughtful and loving parenting. I am the granddaughter of farm workers, including migrant seasonal farm workers, ranchers, cooks, and cleaners. My mom and dad, they married very young and right after graduation, while still living in the state of New Mexico. They got married and due to my dad's family's history as a seasonal migrant farm working family, my dad ended up marrying my mom and they moved to the state of Texas.

I actually grew up in the state of Texas, in the Northern part of Texas, in a really small farming community. I lived there until I was about 13. While I went to school there, I faced a series of racist incidents. Everything from racist interactions with classroom peers, to bad interactions with teachers. I'll talk a little bit more about that in a bit, but those series of incidents led my parents to take a risky decision and the hard decision to make a big move. We didn't have a lot of money, but they decided that it was important to move me and my little brother back home to New Mexico where we could be

around family and where we could come to have a better and a prouder understanding of who we are. Who we are as a people, who we are culturally, linguistically and so on.

Although I spent a substantial amount of my time growing up in Northern Texas in this farming community, I actually identify really strongly as a New Mexican. I grew up from 13 onwards in a very rural ranch in New Mexico. This ranch, you can find it on the map. It's known as Bonitas, or as Gonzales Ranch, and it's right off the Villanueva exit on I-25 in New Mexico. I love my ranch very much. It's very high in the mountains, about 5,700 feet in terms of elevation. We have horses and cows, and I love cows and I love pigs. We're about a solid 45 minutes from any real town. My mom is originally from Las Vegas, New Mexico, which is where I went to undergraduate at New Mexico Highlands University. That is the nearest town and it's about 45 minutes away. My dad was the school bus driver that gets the kids from the ranch to the schools in Las Vegas.

That means that when I was growing up, I was often on the school bus as early as 6:00 AM every morning. That's always an interesting story to reflect on. It's always helped me to really think about all of the work that school children and parents have done before they even take a step or move into the school doors. It really has grounded me. I love my ranch, as you can probably tell, and I strongly identify as a rancher. In fact, I attribute a lot of my best thinking to the fact that I grew up with a rancher's worldview. When you're a rancher living in a very rural area, where there's limited water, that you draw from a well. When there's not really a convenience store around the corner, you have to be anticipatory. You have to be a planner. You have to think about systems.

Most importantly, you have to think relationally. You have to think about what you're using and how that might affect your neighbors, who may be 10 or 15 miles up the road. You have to think relationally because when you use resources, those are resources that others will not then have access to easily or quickly. I really think that the rancher's worldview has been central to how I think about how colleges and universities work as organizations in this larger field, where they're competing for resources, et cetera, et cetera. As much as I love my ranch, and as much as I love and sort of embrace this identity as a rancher, my understanding of my family's connection to the ranch has really become much more complicated in recent years. In fact, in 2019, when I was the Ash Program chair, I wrote about this in a letter to the Ash community. You can probably tell that I've always had a very romantic attachment to the ranch, but I now understand through about two years of learning, that the ranch is not really our land.

It's not really my family's land. In fact, it is land that belongs to the native and indigenous people of New Mexico. In fact, I think it's important to take this opportunity to note that New Mexico has a fairly large native population. The native population constitutes about 10% of the state's population, about 220,000 people and about 23 different tribes or clans are represented in New Mexico. The native people of New Mexico are responsible for creating some of our most crucial resources and systems, specifically native and indigenous people are the first to have formed the Esekias, which are really water systems or waterways that current ranchers like my family use in New Mexico today. Holding that in mind, as I think about my relationship to our family's ranch and taking responsibility for it in the future as my family ages, as my father ages, some of what I've been thinking a lot about is my responsibility and the process for rematriating land and resources to indigenous communities, and what are the best ways to do that.

I think it's important to talk about this because this has been a crucial part of my learning, my thinking as a scholar, and thinking about what does it truly mean to decolonize our systems of higher education. That starts with how we're even willing to think about or engage around issues of power and land and responsibility as individuals. I need to say that I am extremely thankful for my indigenous friends and community that I'm a part of, including Heather Shotton and Amanda Tachine, Stephanie Waterman, Jameson Lopez, and Tiffany Smith, and Christine Nelson, among others. Working with the indigenous community through Ash was one of the most important and deepest learning that I've done as a scholar in higher education. Although, it may not be necessarily something that I'm writing about in my scholarship, it definitely shapes how I'm thinking about my work as an educator, as someone who occupies land that is not my own, in my daily work.

I also think that there's something to be said about the fact that some of my deepest learning has been in community, and that's sort of a shift in my growth as a scholar. Books are still some of my best friends. I love books. I love reading. I love articles, but there's something about the learning that happens, at least in my experience when you are in conversation and carefully, carefully listening to others. There's something about being able to actively listen to someone, tell their story, share their experience, recall pain or excitement or victory, and being able to learn from that. One of the things that I have been thinking a lot about is the process of learning, the spaces of learning that, as academics, I need to be or should be more open to. In fact, I think that I see sort of a shift in some of my most recent work and thinking about my scholarship. I've been thinking a lot about learning and unlearning in the academy.

Historically, in my work, I've looked at faculty careers. I've been curious about how faculty intersect with one another, how they intersect with their departments, with their organizations, with their disciplines. I've been curious about how those intersections really are often groups of people, groups of individuals that sit in different privileges that hold different networks privileges and how they render really different outcomes. Particularly, I'm interested in the outcomes and the experiences of minoritized scholars, particularly women of color scholars, scholars who come from minoritized institutions or under-resourced institutions like Hispanic serving institutions. I, myself, am a graduate of Hispanic serving institutions. I'm interested in understanding how these intersections, these coming together, these collisions, really render outcomes for faculty members that have been historically, again, marginalized, underrepresented. Lately I've been sort of taking the next step. I want to understand what it takes to encourage faculty to unlearn some of the norms and principles that they use to legitimize colleagues in their settings.

I'm starting to ask questions like, how can we foster a culture of learning and unlearning amongst faculty in relation to equity? What does it take to shift department culture so that minoritized faculty can be seen fully and all of their possibilities, not only as, unfortunately. This is still the case, not only as the diversity hire or not only as a person who does diversity work, but as a robust multi-dimensional intellectual with a wide range of possibilities and talents. To be able to see, often for people who sit in places of power, often white faculty, who are most senior in those ranks, particularly white CIS men, for them to be able to see a new diverse faculty as full of possibility, rather than flattened into sort of one kind of a scholar with one kind of a talent or one kind of an interest. I want to know how we can help them unlearn those, the way that they've made those judgments in the past.

A lot of my recent work has really revolved around learning and unlearning and how we can foster that amongst faculty. As my scholarly work has evolved, I've had of course, many successes and disappointments along the way. I share both of those things with you today because I think they're important in kind of telling the story of my scholarly growth and development. I also want to make sure to say that I share those successes and disappointments with others, the successes I share, because I have lots of supporters and cheerleaders and a husband who was willing to make a lot of runs to Walgreens for peanut M&M's when I write manuscripts. I have a lot of students and colleagues who are willing to read papers and drafts and process with me. I have a big community of people who are really willing to help me process disappointments.

I think both the successes, but probably even more so, the disappointments or the moments of hurt, have been really key to a lot of the questions that I asked in the academy. For example, I remember when I finished graduate school, I was finishing up graduate school. I was really nervous about the job market, as many of our graduate students and early career scholars are still today. I was worried for a lot of reasons. I remember thinking I'm coming out of a very small program at University of Texas, El Paso. It's a program that not a lot of people in the higher education field really knew at the time because historically the program that I graduated from at UTEP focused more so on K-12 leadership. It had a higher ed track, but it was very much focused on developing K-12 leaders. I was really worried about that.

I was worried about the fact that I know that people, even within the academy, even people who claim a social justice perspective, are skeptical or suspicious sometimes about Ed.D.s, which is what I hold. People are suspicious about an EDDs ability to conduct rigorous research, to theorize, et cetera, et cetera. I have a very keen mentor to me, Dr. James Satterfield, who is now serving in academic leadership roles. He just kept hounding me to apply. I made a few applications and I had a few early rejections and places that I never heard back from, but James kind of kept on me and he said, "You've got to keep applying." He was really central to helping me cope with those disappointments.

I remember that a job came open at Clemson and he said, "We have a job here. You need to look at this job. It's a really good fit." He ended up nudging me, nudging me to apply. I did. I went out and I interviewed at Clemson and it was a fantastic experience and I was hired. That was a big win. It was a big win. I remember my family and I were driving out from Texas to South Carolina that summer to help me get situated, to help my family get situated. We stopped off at a place for dinner. I had all my family with me, which has always been the case. Every time I made a move, my parents moved me and Ruben, my partner's parents, helped us to move. We were a fairly sizable group at this restaurant and we were waiting outside in line, waiting for our table to get called.

There was an older white man standing next to us. I think he was curious about this sizeable group of Latino, brown looking people being in one place. He asked my partner, Ruben, "What are you all up to? Are you all on a trip? Are you on vacation?" My husband, who was always cordial, responded that we were in the middle of moving because his wife, me, was recently hired at a university in South Carolina. The man became curious for a number of reasons. I think he was a little bit shocked that this young woman of color was hired as a faculty person. He asked me what department, what was my degree? Then, suddenly he sort of just stopped. He's like, "Well, you don't have one of those EDDs, do you,

because they'll give them to anyone? They're not very valuable. They're worthless." To some extent, that's what he said.

I remember feeling in that moment, so defeated. It was a big win that had sort of been overcast with this defeat or this disappointment. I offer this moment in time because, it's because of that very kind of an incident that I ask questions about how we evaluate, how we evaluate academics or faculty as being worthy as being valuable. In that moment, my worth, or my value as a potential professor was really called into question. Again, it is these kinds of moments that have really led me to ask the kinds of questions that I ask about the academy. I often say, I like to hold sort of a mirror to ourselves because we are making decisions about who gets to be valued, whose knowledge gets to be legitimated. I'm curious and I'm concerned about that process.

I think most fundamental to my research agenda and what has really driven my work, is my commitment to foster an academy that is not only more diverse, more inclusive, but anchored in equity. There are these moments in my life where I have understood that relations of power abound sort of everywhere, even in the academy, which has historically been characterized as sort of this community of scholars. I see flaws with that analysis. There are relations of power and competition that abound within the academy, even in a field as nice as education as of many scholars have described. One of the key moments that really informs my research agenda and again, one that really drives me towards thinking about equity in the academy and how to foster it, how to get us thinking towards equity, is a moment that happened when I was a very young child.

As I shared with you earlier, I grew up in Northern Texas and I was one of very few kids of color in the school. As I noted, my father was part of a migrant farm working family, a seasonal migrant farm working family. The town that we lived in was actually the town where he and his brothers and sisters had often picked fields as children. Most of the farm owners there were wealthy white families. There were a few Latino or what we call Hispanic families. There were a number of black families. Because I was born in that area, my parents, they had the insight to invest heavily and carefully, not with money really, but with their time and their love and their energy in my very early education. My mom spent a lot of time teaching me how to read and write very early.

Even before kindergarten, I was reading small words. I loved reading very early on. My mom really fostered that love in me very early on. My dad who is really just brilliant taught me about numbers and math. My parents really got me ready for school far before even kindergarten. It was time to start kindergarten in this little white farming town. I remember showing up that first day and I remember being extremely excited. Again, my parents had really fostered this level of learning and I showed up and I remember being really excited and I was walking just a bit in front of my parents. I could tell that my parents were having this weird engagement with the teachers. I'm assuming it was the teachers that they were talking with, mainly one teacher. I remember seeing a look of puzzlement come over my mom's face. I remember a look of my dad being somewhat angry or frustrated.

I remember them saying something about, "Well, she only speaks English." What had happened, I've now grown to understand. My parents had shared the story with me, that even though they had made the time and loving investment to teach me early about the love of learning in school and reading and all that it could bring, even though they had made the painful decision, not to really speak Spanish in our

home for fear of me being penalized in school, the school teacher still felt like maybe I could benefit from ESL classes or special education classes. That conversation, that weird engagement was all about the teacher letting my parents know that they would be placing me in a special education classroom if needed.

As I have been able to reflect on that moment, even as a child, I knew something was wrong. I knew something was happening that wasn't right. I've been able to reflect on that over and over and over through my life. I understand that that is really the moment that sits below my agenda as a scholar and my commitment to racial justice in the academy. Because in that moment, I understood that schools are these white institutions of power. There are mechanisms and policies and programs that are in place that can be used to classify, legitimize and sometimes delegitimize people as knowers. All of the work that my parents had put into me, all of the moments that my mom had spent going over my ABC's and teaching me sight words, they could have been undone in that moment because there was, there was this judgment of knowledge and knowers.

I think about that, always, as my entry point for who gets to be seen as a knower in the academy. How do we help folks that sit in positions of power to unlearn the metrics, the norms, the standards that they have used for far too long to recognize when there is an intellectual in front of them, when there is a thinker in front of them. We know from the literature that scholars of color, and especially women of color, tend to approach their research in much more multi-dimensional, what Gloria Anzaldúa would call, hybrid thinking, divergent thinking. We know that women of color are likely to employ interdisciplinarity in their thinking. Those characteristics of work really rub against the norms, the standards, the boundaries that have been used to judge academics' worthiness. These various moments in my life have been very instructive, have really driven me to pursue an academy that is not only, again, more diverse and inclusive, but characterized by equity. Concerned that the conditions are such that scholars from various backgrounds, but particularly racially minoritized backgrounds, that the conditions are in place. That they can be successful on the basis of their work. That people that sit in power are willing to unlearn norms and habits that have kept scholars of color from the academy, from feeling included, from being elevated as intellectuals.

Of course, I have to acknowledge there's intellectuals everywhere, not just in the academy, but I'm particularly concerned about the academy because this is where we prepare professionals and practitioners and leaders for the future. This is where it's incredibly important that students of color and women of color come into the academy and see all these possibility models. We can't provide possibility models until people are willing to unlearn and relearn different ways of thinking about knowledge, knowers, et cetera, et cetera.

I've been asked to kind of wrap up my thinking and some of what I've shared today with just a few gems or insights that I think are important to those of us who are striving to be the best allies. We can be the best racial justice advocates that we can be. I'll share first. I think that it's important that we're always thinking coalitionally. What I mean by that is all of us, including me as a woman of color, but as somebody who has proximity to whiteness, I need to think about how that benefits me in certain situations and how it will enable me to make asks, to make critiques, to raise questions that others perhaps cannot, or perhaps should not make given their positionality. Always be willing to interrogate where you sit inside any group, any collective. Consider how you might be positioned to be an educator

or an ally. For example, because of my scholarship on faculty careers and particularly some work that I'm doing right now around faculty hiring, I've learned a lot about faculty hiring patterns, both patterns in terms of practice and the norms that really sit underneath the practice.

Now, I am well-equipped to raise questions about hiring processes. I'm well-equipped to talk about recruitment and to point out we lack, or you lack, or there is a lack of partnerships with minority serving institutions. How can we think more carefully about building relationships with minority serving institutions that educate a good book of our students of color? How can we think more carefully and critically around community colleges as a place where we have future academics that are being, that are being prepared. I can ask questions in a different way. I can also ask questions about how faculty evaluation works. Always think coalitionally and think about what are the privileges that you have, what are the networks, the knowledge that you have, that you can deploy in favor of other minoritized and marginalized communities. It's incredibly important, I think, and in this next chapter of my work that because I do have tenure, because I do have the knowledge that I have based on my research, because I do have particular privilege, even as a woman of color, is very intense.

It's very important to me that I am intentional about using those privileges and networks, and resources to ask questions that maybe others cannot and always thinking coalitionally about my responsibility. I think the second something that I'll leave with is that, it can be easy when you're engaged in equity work in the academy, in any organization, in any institution, but especially in the academy. It can be easy to feel very disenchanting because the academy is filled with academics and professionals that love to position themselves as progressive liberals that are open, but being open isn't enough. To really get to equity, it's going to require folks to relinquish power, position, and resources. It can be really hard when you're feeling a little lost or you're feeling a little bit alone, especially if you're doing this work in a space where you are one of the only, or one of the few.

When those feelings come up, I think it's incredibly important and valuable and important to connect, rather than disconnect. I think in the past, I think I've been one who's been more likely to disconnect, withdraw maybe a little bit. What I learned over the last few years is this work will have to be done in community. It will have to be done and connecting with others. Find your people, find your support squad, create group texts, virtual coffee hours, and connect with people who can help you remember that the work that you're doing is important. That can also give you grace when you mess up, because there are going to be moments where you mess up. There are going to be moments where you don't come through as a good ally.

There are going to be moments when you're trying to be an ally and you undo some important work. You also need people that can provide for you an honest, but also a safe space that's full of grace and love. Because of this work, if equity and racial justice are aims, we'll have to get there through love. Thank you for listening to this. I hope it's been helpful. I look forward to connecting and being in community with many of you and hopefully all of you.