

Diversity and Community

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I'll never forget the day I left Brownsville, Texas. It was the summer of 1997, I was twenty years old, with \$300 in my bank account, driving my little 1988 Mitsubishi Mighty Max truck to Fresno, California. That day in Brownsville my mom and sister helped me pack a few memories. Mostly clothes, my basketball, and stacks of pictures of family and friends. I remember the house being quiet. I know my mom was worried. My parents couldn't help me financially. All they could do was lend me their Texaco gas credit card so I could get to California. To be honest, none of this should have worked.

Fresno Pacific University accepted me as an undergraduate transfer student on academic probation in the fall of 1997. I was let in, but I had to do well academically, earn a 3.0 GPA or something close to that, or else I would be asked to leave. I took out loans to pay for tuition (17k a year back then), signed the paperwork, and headed west. I started the drive late in the day. The plan was to drive the 4 hours to San Antonio and spend the night there with an old friend. He treated me to dinner at the Hard Rock Café, told me I was completely crazy, and we laughed about our awkward days in the church youth group at *Iglesia Menonita del Cordero* in Brownsville. The next morning, I left San Antonio at 5am and headed west on I-10. That's really all I remember about that trip.

A week later I was on campus for the transfer student orientation. There I was, doing my best to make conversation, trying to sound smart. "English major, I'm an English major," was pretty much it. I had absolutely no idea what that meant. And as soon as someone brought up Shakespeare, because, you know, I'm an English major, I would sit and smile and try to say something that didn't sound stupid. Why was I an English major? I mean, even the admissions counselor at FPU, after taking a look at my transcript, with my miserable GPA, tried to change my mind. "English is a really hard major here at FPU, you should reconsider," he told me on the phone once. I called him a racist in my head, but responded with my usual nice, "I understand it's hard, but that's what I want to do." I almost reconsidered after turning in my first paper to Prof. Wilfred Martens with the word "grammar" misspelled. Not only was I bad at grammar, but I literally couldn't spell grammar. I spelled it "grammer." Epic fail.

FPU was more than an intimidating place for me. It was paralyzing. I had never in my life been in a space with so many white people. And that's saying a lot considering I grew up attending Mennonite church conferences in the Midwest. I mean, I'd been in plenty of white spaces before. But nothing like Fresno Pacific. In all of my classes I was either the only person of color or I was one of maybe two or three. But it wasn't only the demographics of the campus. It was an entire culture, a way of being that like smog covered every inch of campus. There was a certain language I was not familiar with, a certain privilege that I did not recognize. The whole thing at FPU was a cross-cultural experience for me. I was like an anthropologist, asking questions and taking notes: How must it feel to have financial security? Do these white kids fear yet another call from the financial office about needing to get yet another loan in order to cover this semester's tuition? How does it feel to just be able to talk to a professor like a normal person?

And why were all these white kids addressing the faculty by their first name? Wilfred; Richard; Luetta; I didn't get it. And what was this evangelical Anabaptism they practiced? The whole campus sounded like Jars of Clay and looked like Steven Curtis Chapman, two of the biggest Christian acts in the 1990s. And why do they look at us like we don't belong?

But in the midst of all this, us brown and black kids found each other. We took care of each other. For Latina/o students, it was "Amigos Unidos." The name was a bit too sentimental for my taste, but it was exactly what I needed in those days. Led by then staff person Dina González, we hung out, sponsored events, supported each other, and laughed a lot. My last year on campus, I joined African American students to start a new student organization that we, children of the 1990s, called "Cultural Awareness and Knowledge Enrichment" or just "CAKE" (probably the most 90s name ever). And yes, we did have cake at every meeting.

If student groups offered me a community of support, it was the academics that saved me. I fell in love with learning at Fresno Pacific University. I read everything: John Muir, Terry Tempest Williams, Gary Soto, and it's the place where I first read Gloria Anzaldúa's masterpiece, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. I'll never forget sitting in Hiebert library, more than 1,800 miles from home, mesmerized by Anzaldúa's words and by her poetry. It was the first time that I saw and felt my experience within the pages of a book. Each text that I read raised important questions for me about my culture, my religious upbringing, and

my history growing up in the South Texas borderlands. And each text moved me to raise important questions about the racial politics of central California where “worker towns” and “grower towns” were common and where Mexican Americans, and other people of color, were mostly absent on our campus. Here we were, in the middle of the San Joaquin Valley, the region that gave birth to the greatest agricultural worker rights movement in U.S. history, and FPU did not offer one class focused on Mexican American culture and history—not one class on César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, not one class on the racialization of Mexicans in California. Here was this Mennonite Brethren school, in the middle of this historic region, ignoring its responsibility.

And I was not the only one raising these questions. Much of this political awakening started in what was by far my favorite class at FPU: “Cultural Communities of Central California,” taught by the brilliant Prof. Mary Ann Larsen-Pusey. Mary Ann introduced us to writers such as Amy Tan, Gus Lee, Anne Fadiman, Toni Morrison, and Rudolfo Anaya. That class, and Mary Ann’s brilliance and toughness, saved me. I’m pretty sure it saved a lot of us black and brown kids on campus. She was our leader, the person we looked to for academic support. She was the faculty member that *got* us. I know I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was my coming to political consciousness, to an understanding of my own people’s history—I was reading Chicano history for the first time—that propelled me in every other field. I wanted to be a good student at Fresno Pacific, because I was starting to understand that knowledge was at the core of me and my people’s liberation.

I’ll always be critical, and I will always name the racism and exclusion that me and other students of color faced on campus in the late 1990s. But I am also thankful for the community of faculty, staff, and students that made Fresno Pacific University such an intellectually vibrant place. The small classrooms; the faculty to student ratio; the academic rigor; the conversation about race on campus; all of it made me a better student and a better human being. After I graduated in 1999, with an improved GPA, I left believing and knowing that I was not that same kid that had left Brownsville two years earlier. The lessons I learned at FPU have helped to guide my life ever since. For that, I am eternally grateful. Happy 75th birthday FPU. In the next 75 years, I hope that you begin the difficult work of reimagining your traditions, I hope that you insist on moving beyond what limits you, I hope that you expand your vision, and I hope that you continue believing in students like me.

