

Mentoring in a Time of Fascism

Lydia Huerta Moreno & Nhi Le

Nhi: Hello Dr. Huerta, sorry to stop by your office unannounced and without an appointment, I was just wondering if you have some time to chat?

Lydia: Hi Nhi, nice to see you, sure, come on in, take a seat. Before you tell me how you've been and how I can help, just know that I will have to leave in about an hour because I have to teach across campus, but we can continue talking on my way to class, if need be, ok?

Nhi: Ok, yes that works. So...I wanted to talk about my place or possible future in academia.

Lydia: Has something changed since we talked last semester about applying to doctoral programs?

Nhi: Well...yes. I've been thinking a lot about maybe not getting my PhD after all. The anti-Asian hate after President Trump's racist rhetoric around COVID-19, images on social media and the news, and even in my own experiences here at the university...have made me really question if I belong in academia and want to continue being a part of it in the future?

Lydia: Ok, well, it sounds like you have been experiencing a lot and that it is overwhelming. Nhi, it is ok to feel doubtful about what your place is or could be in academia. Is there or have there been any specific experiences at the university

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while you have been working towards your M.A. that have contributed to how you are feeling?

Nhi: Yes. Mainly it feels like every time I overcome a fascist laden experience, there is another one just around the corner. I've been told we are not to say anything to students about not wearing a mask.

Dr. Huerta, how am I, a 4'10" queer Asian immigrant woman, supposed to stand there watching disrespectful white men and women, who with privilege and carelessness walk around not caring if they can get me sick?

I read this article called "Global Capitalist Crisis and Twenty-First Century Fascism: Beyond the Trump Hype" and it made me realize I've experienced a total lack of institutional support financially, morally, and ethically.¹

Dr. Huerta how is it that the University that brought us back Fall 2021, when the pandemic was still peaking? Or that we are here sitting in toxic wildfire air? Or I am asked to ignore homophobic behaviors? – I think it says a lot when an academic institution and department chooses to keep the status quo over the physical and mental health of its employees. There is no ethics of care here, it is like seeing Arendt's concept on the banality of evil reincarnate from theory into practice, but in the context of education.²

Lydia: Nhi, I am sorry you have been experiencing all of these things...

Nhi: Dr. Huerta I never expected academia to be violent. Violent is not a word that I had ever thought I would use to describe my experiences at this institution. Like I know this violence is not the same as like experiencing war crimes or being beaten, but I don't have another word to describe this pervasive, consistent, dismissive, oppressive, and insidious culture. I just feel that with every new fascist policy, oppressive or dismissive encounter I grow weary and resisting becomes harder and it impacts my ability to perform, and it eats away at my spirit.

Lydia: I can see why you are describing these experiences in this way, and frankly the academic part of me thinks we need to unpack this rhetorical association of academia with violence—I mean violence as a term often gets used as a blanket term that hides specific norms, behaviors and practices that cause diverse forms of distress and in some cases even trauma.

¹ Robinson, William I. "Global Capitalist Crisis and Twenty-First Century Fascism: Beyond the Trump Hype." *Science & Society*, vol. 83, no. 2, 2019, pp. 155–183., <https://doi.org/10.1521/isis.2019.83.2.155>.

² Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Harcourt Brace, 1985.

It has been my experience that the weaponizing of identities, culture, the insidious ways in which nationalism, elitism, toxic masculinity, homophobia, myopic religious agendas and neoliberal projects have thrived easily in academic environments. Look, the policies, initiatives, surveillance, assessments, granting/restricting funding, access to resources are all part of academic totalitarianism. For example, there was an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Ed* titled “Totalitarianism takes Aim at Higher Education” where the author, Weineck, explains that University of Florida administrators told faculty they could not testify as expert witnesses in a case challenging Florida’s voter suppression law. Basically, by telling faculty they could not be expert witnesses in the case, the University of Florida was acting as an arm of the government instead of an institution committed to the production and dissemination of knowledge.³

Part of being in academia is becoming aware of where and who might enact harmful behaviors, oppressions, promote, reproduce, and thrive by fostering a culture of fear. This awareness can allow us individually to manage and cope in these moments and think systemically. Granted, I’m oversimplifying.

Nhi: Hm... I had no idea about Florida! That type of enforcement on one’s autonomous choice to participate in social issues is incredibly fascist. It’s a complete lack of recognition by the broader public about how this ideology circulates in our culture and institutions. I am starting to understand what you mean about it being a more complex issue that it appears... Like, how do you as a Latinx queer woman do any of this? How do you have the head space to think about anything else other than surviving? How do you resist what Giroux describes as the culture of fear being instilled by the institution, hyper- masculine ideologies, and violent policies?⁴ I mean you don’t even have maternity leave?!

Lydia: I do a lot to ground myself and to get myself to show up for my chosen career. Part of how I survive is that I just do not stop. Does that make sense?

Nhi: No, not really.

Lydia: Ok, on a given day if I stop during the day and reflect, I don’t make it through the day. I get angry, sad, frustrated, and can’t do my job. I don’t get the headspace I need to think about ideas. My coping mechanism is that while I am

³ Weineck, Silke-Maria. “Totalitarianism Takes Aim at Higher Education.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, The Chronicle of Higher Education, 18 July 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/totalitarianism-takes-aim-at-higher-education>.

⁴ Giroux, Henry A. “White Nationalism, Armed Culture and State Violence in the Age of Donald Trump.” *Philosophy e3 Social Criticism*, vol. 43, no. 9, 2017, pp. 887–910., <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453717702800>.

at work, I don't stop. However, at the end of the workday I walk home, and walking home allows me to get distance and move the tension and feelings out of my body. It is in that 45 to hour long walk home that I can pause and let go of things that happened during the day. Sometimes not stopping works, sometimes it doesn't and I fail tremendously at being present and showing up for students, my partner and family members.

For example, the other day I went to teach class in extremely toxic air because of the wildfires, the air quality index was 638 that is a little more than 100X more than the recommended air quality index recommendation from the World Health Organization. The classroom I was teaching in was filled with smoke. I told students these were unhealthy learning/teaching conditions and dismissed them. The students asked me why I hadn't just emailed them and cancelled class. I heard myself explaining that I would have gotten in trouble for moving the class online or cancelling class without the university administration sending a communication to us saying it was allowed. The combination of having to face students in a smoke-filled classroom as a representative of the university made me feel ashamed to work here. I broke down crying. I have never done that. Sometimes it is all too much for my nervous system.

Nhi: Dr. Huerta, honestly why are you still here?

Lydia: That's a good question Nhi...as of late I find it harder to be in the academy, but I'm still here. I do a lot of ancestral and intuitive practices to nurture myself to be present with you and students in my classes. I surround myself with caring and inspiring friends with whom I have established networks of care—so that when they or I have hard days we can show up for each other, hold space, and offer healthy distractions. I am learning to nurture myself through daily somatic practices. I go to trauma release therapy and a curandera twice a month. I've been reading a lot of books about burnout and autoimmune diseases and the body, one of them is actually called *Burnout*.⁵ I know it sounds silly, but I read these books in hopes of finding something that will help me continue staying in this chosen career because frankly I enjoy being able to be able to create spaces where we can discuss ideas, imagine better futures, and talk about the impact of good research. It does take a lot of outside work to show up for this job.

I am offering a perspective of what it takes for me to still be here, and I can't really tell you what you should do regarding pursuing a doctoral degree, but if you do, be aware that it is important to have support systems outside of it, good mentors, a few colleagues you can trust, and grounding practices. If it is not what

⁵ See *Burnout: The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle* by Emily and Amelia Nagoski and *When The Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress* by Gabor Maté.

you want, it is ok too. There is nothing wrong with you wanting a career that does not demand so much of your sense of self to be embedded with the work and the relationships that come with the job. It is ok to want to have a job that does not feel like you are simply surviving every day instead of thriving and trust me, I am aware of the irony of saying this to you while being in the throes of it. It is your life, Nhi, and you must ask yourself what quality of life do you want to experience?

Nhi: Hm....the maintenance of your mental health is a large reason you are still able to physically do the job, and this is not something I had considered when pursuing my Master's degree—honestly I do not think I have the financial resources to go to therapy regularly and the school only offers maximum of 10 sessions, and therapy outside was over \$200 a session with insurance and they were not accommodating to my student/teaching schedule. Recognizing the work I must do for myself and establishing networks of care seem like a lot of emotional labor and financial investment just to pursue a doctoral degree and ensure my ability to thrive in this system. Like, it is crucial that people like us are in academia, but I do not know Dr. Huerta—at what cost? And is the cost worth it? I do have a lot to think about.... it's just that my experiences throughout the M.A. program made me feel like there is no longer a place for me in academia and that it is not a world where I have a right to live.



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