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## I'm Poor, You're Rich

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# I'm Poor, You're Rich

## **Abstract**

It started in ESL class when I haphazardly threw around one of my new Spanish phrases. “Dame tu dinero,” I joked to Maria\*, one of the adult students I was teaching. She playfully responded back, “I can’t. I’m poor.” I laughed and nodded in agreement: “Yeah, me too.” This became a sticking point for her, however, as she kept telling me, “No, I’m poor. You’re rich.” I remained adamant that I wasn’t rich, offering as a closing point to our lighthearted interaction, “OK, we’re both poor,” but I could tell that she remained skeptical. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, ESL, linguistic and cultural differences, relative poverty, social stratification, class distinction

## **Disciplines**

Chicana/o Studies | Ethnic Studies | Inequality and Stratification | Latina/o Studies

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# SURGE

**[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward**

## I'M POOR, YOU'RE RICH

September 16, 2015

It started in ESL class when I haphazardly threw around one of my new Spanish phrases. “Dame tu dinero,” I joked to Maria\*, one of the adult students I was teaching. She playfully responded back, “I can’t. I’m poor.” I laughed and nodded in agreement: “Yeah, me too.” This became a sticking point for her, however, as she kept telling me, “No, I’m poor. You’re rich.” I remained adamant that I wasn’t rich, offering as a closing point to our lighthearted interaction, “OK, we’re both poor,” but I could tell that she remained skeptical.

It continued a few days later when Maria’s son and another boy said I owed them money for all the goals they scored on me when we were playing soccer. It was again a comical interaction, but Maria definitely wanted to make sure that the two boys weren’t expecting money from me anytime soon. She was explaining to them that they had to drop the idea, and meanwhile I went back to my old standby: “I can’t give you money. I’m poor.”

“If you’re poor,” one of the boys joked, “why isn’t your shirt ripped?”

“If you’re poor,” the other continued, “how come you have a car?”

While I dismissed the first question as ridiculous, I answered the second one without thinking: “My parents bought it for me.” A look shot onto Maria’s face that made it clear to me that she was reacting to the privilege I had just demonstrated. I tried to justify myself by remarking that the car was cheap and falling apart, but it was a foolish effort.



Back in the classroom a few days later, I noticed that when Maria mentioned her status as poor, and especially when she said, “I am not rich,” she would look at me without fail.

Despite the levity contained within all of these conversations, I’ve felt uncomfortable when trying to figure out how to react in these situations. While I went into ESL classes with a careful eye towards the linguistic disparities between me and my students, I was not prepared to acknowledge our different economic situations. When I’m on campus, I feel poor in comparison to the majority of students, which makes sense considering the affluent status of the college overall. But the fact that my parents don’t put extra dining dollars on my ID card doesn’t give me a free pass to identify as poor. Yes, I always buy clothes that are on sale, and I spend a long time in the grocery store poring over the price per pound of chicken cutlets compared to chicken breasts in order to save myself about sixty cents, but I do so from an entirely different standpoint than Maria does. I am a young college kid trying to milk the most out of a bank account built up from intermittent part time jobs, and I’m saving my money so that I can blow it all on a trip abroad for which my school essentially pays. I may not personally feel rich, but Maria is damn right to call me that from her perspective.

But what I respect most is that while Maria clearly wants to differentiate her status from mine, she in no way means to create any distance between us. We took a trip to Mr. G’s after one ESL class, and she paid for ice cream for me and the other interns. I protested, of course, but she was adamant. In one respect, this can be read as Maria’s appreciation of our help in learning English. But I think it can additionally be read as a mark of pride—a way of showing that though she may consider herself poor, she does not consider herself helpless. Middle- and upper-class adults would have made the same offer to a group of college students, so why can’t she?

I don’t offer this story as a mark of my own ability to transcend class barriers. Yes, I grew to have a close relationship with Maria, and yes, she made sure that I promised to keep in contact with her after this summer, but I don’t think I fooled her into thinking that I was anything other than what she first suspected of me. Our friendship is remarkable less for the way that we found the class distinction between us breaking down and more for the way that we just didn’t let it oppress our interactions. If we accept the malleability of our positionality, it becomes inherently less concerning. Class does not have to define how we act, but rather it can situate us in a place from which we can more effectively act.

\*Names have been changed.

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