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Raza Womyn Engaged in Love and Revolution: Chicana/Latina Student Activists Creating Safe Spaces within the University

Anita Tuerina Revilla

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RAZA WOMYN ENGAGED IN LOVE AND REVOLUTION:
CHICANA/LATINA STUDENT ACTIVISTS CREATING SAFE
SPACES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY

ANITA TIJERINA REVILLA¹

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I. INTRODUCTION

Four years ago, I encountered a group of women at a Chicana/Latina conference on the campus of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I was astounded by the huge success of the conference with its turnout of nearly 500 participants and that it was organized by a group of no more than ten undergraduate women. These young women offered free childcare, workshops, entertainment, spoken word, and food, but most importantly, they provided a space for women to come together and dialogue about the issues that affect their lives. Their commitment, they indicated, was to “create a conference which aims to raise consciousness, create dialogue, build solidarity, and provide a safe space for all mujeres...”² They further noted that the conference theme, “*El Fuego de Nuestro Espiritu Continua la Llama de Revolución Colectiva*” (The Fire in Our Spirit Continues the Flame of Collective Revolution), “represent[ed] [their] internal passion, the ability to motivate [them]selves and create change. It is the fire that burns within [them] to destroy the many ‘isms,’ such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism, that attempt to dismantle [their] communities.”

As a new student in a doctoral program, I was anxiously searching for a research project that would be both scholarly and meaningful at that time. My purpose in pursuing my degree was to improve the educational opportunities and experiences of

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²Interview with the Raza Womyn Focus Group (June 3, 1999).

“disadvantaged” students like myself and people in my community. Thus, my biggest fear was that I would spend the next several years of my life conducting research that had no meaningful connection to my life. When I learned of Raza Womyn, a Chicana/Latina student organization “dedicated to the empowerment, liberation and education of all *mujeres*,”³ I immediately sought to study the significance of the organization, its goals, and its impact on its participants. I was drawn to study Raza Womyn because they articulated a commitment to social justice and consciousness-raising with regards to racism, sexism, classism, *and* homophobia. As a student, I had been involved in many student organizations that rallied around issues of racial/ethnic justice and cultural pride, as well as gender equity and empowerment, but I had yet to encounter any student, community, or professional organization that addressed all of these aspects of Chicana/o experience. It is rare to find race, class, gender, *and* sexuality at the center of a stated goal or vision, even when it comes to “progressive” social justice movements. Thus, I was curious to learn about the way that this commitment was or was not addressed and carried out in the organization. I came away from this research learning something that many student activists know and experience, but few scholars recognize—that is, that student activism and political consciousness serve as means of survival for many marginalized students at historically white universities.

The data for this research project was collected over five years using extensive participant observations, one-on-one interviews, and focus group interviews. This piece draws on all of the data but focuses on the experiences of one specific member of Raza Womyn. Her story represents a larger body of women who struggle with similar issues and experiences. I chose to focus on this particular woman because her story best exemplifies the three most salient themes of this research, which are the experience of marginalization, a belief in revolution, and the commitment to love. Below you will find the *testimonio* of a Chicana student who felt marginalized in college, found and helped cultivate a safe space as a student activist, and consequently developed a commitment to social justice and to surviving in higher education.

II. METHODS

I began conducting participant observations with Raza Womyn in the winter of 1999. At the preliminary stages, I conducted a ten-week case study of one member of Raza Womyn, as well as a focus group interview with the entire organization. Thereafter, I attended two to three hour weekly meetings for the next three academic years and participated actively in all planned Raza Womyn functions. I used video, audio, and manual recording strategies to document meetings, informal and formal gatherings, social events, conferences, expression nights, protests, rallies, and social activities. Since then, I have collected over eighty audio tapes of weekly meetings/gatherings, forty video tapes of Raza Womyn special events, community activism, and personal interactions, thirty-one surveys, five focus group interviews, and 20 one-on-one interviews with individual members. I generated several focal

³The words “*mujer*” and “*mujeres*,” meaning “woman” and “women,” are generally used by the participants of Raza Womyn to refer to women of Chicana, Mexicana, and Latina ancestry, but beyond that these words imply a connection and a sense of identity between Chicanas/Latinas. I will use these words to refer to the women in the organization and other women involved in Chicana/Latina activism, as is common amongst Raza Womyn.

themes by coding and analyzing the data. The themes include: Raza Womyn theories, *mujer* issues, sexuality, safe space, identity, class, race/ethnicity, desire for an education, experience in school, culture, community, activism, immigration, and revolution. I proceeded to conduct in-depth interviews (at least eight hours in length) with three women whose lived experiences best illuminated initial themes. This article will feature a portrait/*testimonio* of one of these three women.

Naturalistic observations provided information about the daily practices of the women and the organization, and the personal and in-depth interviews captured the perceptions and *testimonios* of the participants. I observed the women in several spaces, including places of employment, the university, homes, and communities to learn more about the way that their thoughts and perceptions inform their actions. My use of document examination included historical and contemporary research about Chicana/Latina feminism, identity, activism, and experience, as well as papers, pamphlets, poetry, and journals written by the women themselves, which helped me to analyze the data collected. Using the women's personal *testimonios*, I created a portrait of each individual woman to explore the ways they theorize and articulate their political and existential acts. I then examined how these theories inform, shape, and construct their commitment to social justice.

Portraiture relies on in-depth interviews, narrative inquiry, and observations, but it differs in that "it seeks to illuminate the complex dimensions of *goodness* and is designed to capture the attention of a broad and eclectic audience."⁴ Portraiture rejects traditional positivistic notions of research, but it also presents the whole story as a portrait of the participants' experiences. As Lawrence Lightfoot indicates, "The portrait, then, creates a narrative that is at once complex, provocative, and inviting, that attempts to be holistic, revealing the dynamic interaction of values, personality, structure, and history."⁵ In the case of my research, the organization of Raza Womyn is the frame of the portrait, and the canvas consists of the *testimonio* of the women.

In *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, the concepts of marginality, resistance, and critical navigation skills are embodied in the *testimonios* of eighteen scholars, writers, activists, and/or Latina feminists.⁶ The authors write, "Creating spaces for Latina feminisms — latinidades feministas — means confronting established and contested terms, identities, frameworks, and coalitions that have emerged in particular historical contexts."⁷ They explain that as Latina feminists, they have long been active in Latina/o and feminist communities as activists, educators, artists, and writers, but as *mujeres*, they felt the need to organize a space for themselves where they could share and explore their lives together. They point out that *testimonios* can serve as both a method of consciousness-raising and a method of self-reflexive feminist research. The work of these women is a model for the data collection, analysis, and presentation of this study.⁸ These women and many

⁴SARA LAWRENCE-LIGHTFOOT & JESSICA HOFFMANN DAVIS, *THE ART AND SCIENCE OF PORTRAITURE* xvi (Jossey-Bass Publishers 1997).

⁵*Id.* at 11.

⁶*See generally*, ALBA ACEVEDO ET AL., *TELLING TO LIVE: LATINA FEMINISTS TESTIMONIOS*. (Duke University Press 2001).

⁷*Id.* at 2.

⁸*See generally, supra* note 4.

other Chicana/Latina scholars illuminate issues such as intersectionality, consciousness, and resistance.

Moving beyond the Black-White framework of racial discourse, Chicanas shed light on other facets of racialization, on those that form a continuum of color, phenotype, and privilege. Theorizing the intersection of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, Chicana writings contributed a new vocabulary of *mestizaje*, hybridity, oppositional consciousness, and the critical metaphor of ‘borderlands.’ These concepts helped mark a consciousness of resistance to the repression of language, culture, and race, and a recognition on the in-between spaces formed by those with complex identities.⁹

The following *testimonio* seeks to illustrate these concepts and capture the essence of a consciousness of resistance while recognizing the complexity of the multiple identities of a Chicana student activist.

III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The low educational achievement of students of color in the United States has undergone intensive interrogation for at least the past century. Most often, students and their families have been harshly criticized for being failures. The so-called “failures” of students of color have historically been explained by deficit theories positing that these students have inferior genes, cultures, and/or environments.¹⁰ To combat the widespread employment of deficit models, scholars have developed alternative theories and research that highlight other factors affecting students of color in schools, such as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. Furthermore, critical scholars have encouraged students of color to become critically conscious of their social inequities, in hope that the students would transform their own oppressive conditions.¹¹ Critical race theorists and Latina/o critical theorists in education have extended the use of critical (race and feminist) theory to recognize student resistance to discrimination as powerful acts of social transformation, in which students work to create spaces for themselves in institutions of education that have historically excluded them.¹²

The experience of Chicanas/os in education has been disheartening. Studies have documented academic success for many Chicanas/os; nevertheless, the numbers of Chicanas/os who are able to reach a college-level education are extremely low.¹³

⁹*Id.* at 4.

¹⁰*See generally*, R. VALENCIA, *THE EVOLUTION OF DEFICIT THINKING: EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT AND PRACTICE* (Falmer Press 1997).

¹¹*See generally*, P. FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (Continuum 1994).

¹²*See generally*, D. SOLÓRZANO, & D. DELGADO BERNAL, *CRITICAL RACE THEORY, TRANSFORMATIONAL RESISTANCE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: CHICANA AND CHICANO STUDENTS IN AN URBAN CONTEXT* (In Urban Education 2000); D. Solórzano & T. Yosso, *Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method: Counterstorytelling Chicana and Chicano Graduate School Experiences*, in *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE STUDIES IN EDUCATION* (2000).

¹³*See generally*, D. SOLÓRZANO, *THE CHICANA AND CHICANO EDUCATIONAL PIPELINE* (1998). Adapted from the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1993).

'Chicana/o educational pipeline' indicates that out of every 100 Chicana/o students who begin elementary school, fifty-four drop out before graduating from high school. Twenty-four continue on to college with only six graduating. One obtains either a graduate or professional degree, and 0.3 percent receives a doctorate degree.¹⁴ Several factors account for the low numbers of Chicanas/os that have been able to navigate through the education pipeline. However, not enough research has been conducted to give a full account of the experiences of Chicanas/os as they enter and leave different points of the pipeline. This research fills this gap in the field of education by also examining the college application and choice process of a Chicana going from high school to community college to a four-year university. Moreover, it illustrates ways that women build community for themselves and how they use that community to struggle against the subordination they encounter in their schooling experience. This *testimonio* demonstrates the intersection of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality in the life of one woman in particular. By examining her schooling experience, her family background, and her identity as an activist, I consider the extent to which her political consciousness and commitment to social justice are linked with her decision to persist in her higher education.

A. Marginalization

Bell Hooks discusses the strength of existing in the margins in an essay entitled, *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*.¹⁵ She holds that the margins are places where oppressive boundaries can be transgressed, and she considers the options of people of color in academia.

Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of the colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, of making culture, towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure and power of knowing, where transformation is possible? This choice is crucial.¹⁶

hooks recognizes that she has the ability to attempt entry into the center, that is, the dominant culture's center, but she chooses not to be in the center. As a member of academia who has struggled with oppression but has also gained privilege, she finds herself in a difficult dilemma of having to choose and cross sides. This article goes on to discuss the margins as part of the whole and as a space for resistance in which the marginal individual understands both the center and the margin.¹⁷ The majority of women, people of color, poor people, and Queer people are not able to choose whether to exist in the margins or not; rather, they are most often forced into the margins. Nonetheless, some have learned to transform the margins into a space of nourishment and transformation. This has been the case for the participants in my

¹⁴*Id.*

¹⁵See generally, BELL HOOKS, *YEARNING: RACE, GENDER, AND CULTURAL POLITICS* (South End Press 1990).

¹⁶*Id.* at 145.

¹⁷*Id.*

study. Although they have gained privilege as university students, they are marginalized based on their race, class, gender, and sometimes sexuality. They have access to many opportunities that other Chicanas are denied; nonetheless, they suffer many forms of discrimination based on their immigrant, working-class backgrounds and/or their gender. The members of Raza Womyn are very conscious of their existence in marginal space, or as a marginalized group. While they admonish the marginalization of their communities, they welcome the opportunity to transform their marginalized spaces on campus into spaces of intimacy, sharing, and rebuilding. They recognize racial/ethnic organizations as places where students can connect with one another and feel comfortable. When I asked Carmen what the purpose of racial and ethnic organizations was, she answered,

The purpose of them is to make sure that people feel like they're connected to some sort of community, especially at campuses where people are predominantly White. So people of color can come together within their racial/ethnic groups and be able to talk about issues that affect them because of them being part of that racial or ethnic group.¹⁸

She goes on to explain that Raza Womyn serves that purpose for her, but beyond that it serves as a space for her to discuss various aspects of her identity and allows her to organize for social change outside of the university — in her community — and to have the support to do so. She says,

[Raza Womyn is] a collective of women that provides a safe space for us to talk about issues that pertain to women and pertain to women of color, Chicanas and Latinas, where we begin to talk about things that are not talked about within our families, within our cultures, or within other spaces where women feel like they're silenced. So this is a space where we can begin to talk about those things, and also where we can come together to organize. Because I think that organizing is one of the things that I think is really important from Raza Womyn, to plug ourselves into the community and to see the larger picture.¹⁹

Daniel Solórzano and Octavio Villalpando's article, *Critical Race Theory, Marginality and the Experience of Students of Color in Higher Education* also addresses the issues of marginality, resistance, and safe space within the university.²⁰ Solórzano and Villalpando conducted thirty focus groups with students at UCLA and compiled their findings into a composite character by the name of "Gloria." This student found herself alienated and marginalized by racist practices in the classroom, but she found her source of resistance in ethnic campus organizations and in the academic field of Chicano/a Studies. Many of the members of Raza Womyn had similar stories; however, even in some ethnic organizations, they did not find a safe space because of the sexism and homophobia that they encountered. Likewise, some women came across hostile and uninviting spaces in predominantly White feminists

¹⁸Interview with Carmen, Member of Raza Womyn (July 29, 2001).

¹⁹*Id.*

²⁰Daniel Solórzano & Octavio Villalpando, *Critical Race Theory, Marginality and the Experience of Students of Color in Higher Education*, in *SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION: EMERGING PERSPECTIVES* (Carlos Alberto Torres ed., 1998).

organizations. Thus, it was in Raza Womyn that they found their niche or “safe space.” Carmen says,

I can come into this space and be open with other women and talk to women and have a venting session or a crying session. I feel really privileged to be in this space because I do have that support system... But see, it's a privilege to be a Raza Womyn in the context of where we are situated. We are situated in a White university. We're situated in a racist society in a racist structure, so it's a privilege within that.²¹

Many of the women recounted stories of joining male and female Chicano/a student organizations and experiencing sexism and/or homophobia. Even when they joined the Latino/a Queer organization on campus, they found that male-female dynamic was not as comfortable as a women's space. Also, these women were often in the process of “coming out,” and they were uncomfortable with being pushed too quickly into particular Queer politics or sexual identities. In particular, bisexual women were met with harsh resistance from gay and lesbian students who wanted them to choose one or the other.

Just as bell hooks indicated, Solórzano and Villalpando also found that the margins were a site of resistance and a place of transformation.²² For the students in Solórzano and Villalpando's research, the margins were a place where students learned how to survive in college—they gained critical navigation skills that served as survival skills. They write that:

One result of the ascribed marginal status is that some of the Students of Color have developed... “critical resistance navigation skills” to succeed in higher education. Many of these skills do not stem from students' conformist or adaptive strategies, but emerge from their resistance to domination and oppression in a system that devalues their ethno- and socio-cultural experiences.²³

Often the feeling of connecting with other women from similar cultural backgrounds alone was enough to help the members of Raza Womyn feel that they had a place at the university; more importantly, the process of growth and consciousness-raising that took place within Raza Womyn was a source of strength. Carmen felt that the most positive part of her college experience was what she learned from Raza Womyn and others who pushed her to become a critical thinker. She says,

The positive aspects [of college] have been the classes, and the professors, the students, and Raza Womyn who have opened up my way of thinking about things and who have challenged the things that I've thought about, who have made me think about the things that I held to be true, who have made me question the things that I held sacred and true. I think that's been

²¹Interview with Carmen, Member of Raza Womyn (July 29, 2001).

²²See generally, Solórzano, *supra* note 19.

²³*Id.* at 216.

the best thing about the university...I now see things critically because of them.²⁴

B. Revolution

It has been argued that consciousness is the first step toward a commitment to creating change or social and self-transformation for the oppressed. This view is aligned with the view of CRT/LatCrit scholars in education, Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal, who have written about students who engage in transformational resistance, which entails a sophisticated critique of social oppression as well as a motivation for social justice.²⁵ Raza Womyn have undergone a process that many activists are familiar with, which is referred to as “becoming conscious.”²⁶ Chela Sandoval refers to it as developing an oppositional or differential consciousness, rooted in opposition to subordination and domination of multiple aspects of oppression.²⁷ Gloria Anzaldúa refers to it as a mestiza consciousness, which entails learning about the oppression of your ancestors as well as other forms of oppression that take place within your own cultural group.²⁸ Next, is the constant deconstruction of history and the reconstruction of a future free of the destructive images, stereotypes, and beliefs from the past. For the members of Raza Womyn, this process of deconstruction and reconstruction have often been defined in terms of “revolution.”

At the fourth annual Chicana/Latina conference, Raza Womyn sold a t-shirt designed by a friend of one of the members. On the front of the shirt was a drawing of an indigenous woman resembling the *Virgen de Guadalupe*.²⁹ The woman’s round belly was covered by an Aztec calendar, and a halo of fire surrounded her whole body. On the back of the shirt there was a slogan that read, “Re-Constructing Revolution.” The call for a revolution is common amongst activists, but it is often believed to be a naïve, romanticized, and nostalgic concept remaining from the Civil Rights Movement. Nevertheless, I have been surrounded by enough intelligent activists and scholars who have also utilized the language of revolution to exert their desire and vision for social justice to recognize that the call for revolution is much more profound than a naïve and romantic notion of the past. Thus, I began to study the language of revolution to determine its significance for these student activists.

²⁴Interview with Carmen, Member of Raza Womyn (July 29, 2001).

²⁵Daniel Solórzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal, *Examining Transformational Resistance Through a Critical Race and LatCrit Theory Framework: Chicana and Chicano Students in an Urban Context*, in 36 URBAN EDUCATION 3 (2001).

²⁶*Id.*

²⁷See generally CHELA SANDOVAL, *METHODOLOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (University of Minnesota Press 2000).

²⁸See generally GLORIA ANZALDÚA, *BORDERLANDS: LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA* (Aunt Lute Press 1987).

²⁹For a discussion on the significance of the *Virgen*, see ANA CASTILLO, *GODDESS OF THE AMERICAS: WRITINGS ON THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE* (River Head Books 1996).

During a two-hour focus group interview with the members of Raza Womyn I asked the women to define “revolution.” One woman defined the concept of “re-constructing revolution” in the following manner:

Revolution...revolution...revolution.... Revolution to me means change, speaking out, recognizing the injustices that exist. It's also about recognizing bitterness and being aware that there's bitterness, and I have to let that out. I have to use my bitterness and my anger to change the injustices that exist. Speaking out, that's part of revolution...making the change, demanding, recognizing that there's something wrong here. It's not just talking about it. No, we see that there's something wrong so we will become active and do something about it. And also educating ourselves and becoming informed about what's really going on. Also how do we expect our community to be free of oppression when many times our own communities are oppressing us? To me that's what revolution is about, changing the mind, the ideas that have been imposed on us. Many times, we forget about the mutual respect, the equality that must exist between each other, we forget that. To me revolution looks at the big issues, but you cannot forget about the individual members of the movement who are behind that revolution, that are in that struggle too. Many times the mujeres are forgotten and we are oppressed. Re-constructing revolution means we won't put up with that anymore. We will educate ourselves and educate as many people as we can.³⁰

This woman specifically spoke to the issue of being marginalized in male and female spaces in Chicano/a organizations or movements. She admonished the idea of putting forward a vision of justice or “revolution” that lacks the full inclusion of women's issues, and she used self-education and a general process of educating society as a strategy to further the vision of “re-constructing revolution.”³¹ Another woman indicated that working with men in activist organizations taught her something about working with people who consider themselves conscious or revolutionary.³² She said, “it's taught me a lot about how to deal with men in the struggle...how just because we're conscious, or just because we call ourselves revolutionary doesn't mean that we're conscious, and just because we call ourselves conscious doesn't mean that we're gender conscious.”³³ The other women shared this sentiment indicating that many men and women of color perceive themselves to be people who are engaged in creating social change — calling this process “revolution” — but oftentimes they reinforce sexist and homophobic beliefs. Hence, “re-constructing revolution” would entail working toward the elimination of all forms of oppression and not just racial, ethnic, and class oppression.

³⁰Interview with delia, Member of Raza Womyn. I purposely do not capitalize her name because she does not do so. She asserts that rules and regulations, especially in the act of writing, are conformist and oppressive. She feels that in order to freely express herself she must break all the rules of writing. Therefore, in the tradition of feminist scholar bell hooks, she chooses not to capitalize her name.

³¹*Id.*

³²*Id.*

³³*Id.*

C. Love

Third world writers such as Guevara, Fanon, Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Trinh Minh-ha, or Cherrie Moraga, to name only a few, similarly understand love as a “breaking” through whatever controls in order to find “understanding and community”; it is described as “hope” and “faith” in the potential goodness of some promised land; it is defined as Anzaldúa’s *coalitique* state...³⁴ These writers who theorize social change understand “love” as a hermeneutic, as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement.³⁵

Differential consciousness, mestiza consciousness, and/or critical consciousness necessitate love and hope to transform into social change or social movement. Elenes, et. al write about Chicana/Mexicana feminist pedagogies as *consejos, respeto, y educación* in everyday life.³⁶ They explore the ways in which teaching and learning take place in Chicana and Mexicana “intimate, multiple, and intersecting spaces of home and community....”³⁷ Similarly, I documented Raza Womyn pedagogies of teaching and learning that took place in *mujer* spaces off and on campus — in the community as well as at the university. I observed and participated in profound acts of Raza Womyn pedagogy in which the *mujeres* educated each other and themselves about race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and so much more through the act of love. Distinctly a part of the free flow of education, or Raza Womyn pedagogy, is love, hope, fun, safeness, and intimacy. “Safe space” as a theme came across very strongly in all of the interviews because it was the most sought out and neglected aspect in the lives of the *mujeres* at the university and sometimes even in their homes and communities. Carmen’s *testimonio* illustrates how love and revolution came together to create her Raza Womyn pedagogical experience.

IV. TESTIMONIO

This *testimonio* is about a 22-year-old woman named Carmen who graduated from the University of California in the spring of 2001 with a major in communication studies and a minor in Spanish. When I asked Carmen how she identifies, she answered,

C: Um, okay. [She laughed.] That’s not an easy question. I identify as a Chicana, which implies *mujer*...and as a Queer Chicana now. [She laughed again.] Do we need to get into that?

A: Yes.

³⁴See generally ANZALDÚA, *supra* note 28.

³⁵See generally *id.*

³⁶C. Alejandra Elenes, Francisca E. Gonzalez, Delores Delgado Bernal & Sofia Villenas, *Introduction: Chicana Mexicana Feminist Pedagogies: Consejos, Respeto, y Educación in Everyday Life*, in 14 INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF QUALITATIVE STUDIES IN EDUCATION, 595, 595 (2001).

³⁷*Id.*

C: I guess I also sort of...consider myself lower, in terms of economics, lower class.

A: Anything else?

C: Really those are the things that mostly define me — Chicana, *mujer*, Queer, and lower class.

Throughout the interview, we would revisit these four different identities, as she would connect them to her experiences in school, home, and communities, as well as to her desire to struggle for social justice and to resist racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia.

C: Both my mom and my dad are from neighboring *ranchos*. They are from *Jalisco*. The closest city is Tepatitlan.... My mom...the rancho that her parents live in right now is called *La Loma*, and my dad is from *Los Pollos*. They have a small amount of land on the ranchos, and they grow *maíz*, both of my grandparents. I think on my dad's side, he has more cows. Like they do the milk thing. It's not a super big ranch thing where we have stables and drama like that. It's not like that....

A: Why did your parents come to the U.S.?

C: My dad...because his family was very poor, so as the oldest child...the whole idea, you know, of "you can make it in America because there's jobs and there's opportunities to make money." And he came, basically to make money to send back. And I think he was here for about 5 years, then went back to Mexico, married my mom, brought her over on their honeymoon — not really a honeymoon, just brought her over. The honeymoon supposedly didn't end. They didn't go back until 15 or 16 years later...so they came to make money because it was going to be impossible there. And then they had my brother a year after they were married, and they didn't have their papers. So they figured let's stay, and then they had my brother and I. We were all born here.³⁸

Carmen was raised in Wilmington, California, just south of Los Angeles. Her earliest recollections are fond memories of her mother playing with her in a humble home that was actually a small apartment or studio with a bed for her parents, a sofa bed for her two brothers, and a make-shift bed for her, consisting of a wooden bench covered with cushions and blankets. This was the only home the family of five could afford to live in at the time. Her father worked as a machinist and her mother worked at home "taking care of other people's children." They have always struggled financially, and Carmen feels that this has had a huge impact of how she views the world. She says, "Ever since I remember, money has been such a central part of my life because there hasn't been that much of it. And it's more the lack of money that's been the center of focus.... And in everything that I do, I think that it can be linked back to it."³⁹

³⁸Interview with Carmen, Member of the Raza Womyn (July 29, 2001).

³⁹*Id.*

Carmen's primary and secondary education were relatively pleasant because, as she explained, her older brother set the precedence for what she needed to do in school, which was to behave, follow orders, and do well academically. She resents that she was taught at an early age that being a conformist would result in rewards. Still, her good behavior would earn her entry into a track of accelerated classes, just like her brother. Surprisingly, although her brother had attended the University of California at Irvine to study engineering, he did not actually assist or influence Carmen's decision to go to college. She believes that her peers in the high track classes influenced her decision most, especially her best friend Angelica, whose two older siblings had attended and graduated from Loyola Marymount University (LMU). Carmen and Angelica applied to several universities together and had planned a great future together, but much to their disappointment, the path was not so simple. After learning that Angelica would not be going to LMU with her because she was not accepted, Carmen made the difficult decision of going alone; she recalls this to be her first experience of "culture shock."

I was scared of being in a big place, and then I realized that worse than being scared of that, was the culture shock... It was just the deal of coming out of the dorm room and walking into...a sea of blonde hair, and then realizing, "Oh shoot, these aren't the people that I'm used to looking at." Of course elementary, middle, and high school was predominantly Latino. Wilmington is predominantly Latino...That's what I expected to see because I had never been anywhere outside of Wilmington...and it wasn't.... And then the class issue again came up for me again because LMU is a private school, and I had loans. But the loans that I had and the grants they were giving me weren't enough to cover everything, so I had to work...I didn't have enough money to pay for extra things or groceries...And I thought, "Okay, there's no way. I can't afford to be here, one, and two, I don't like it here."⁴⁰

Carmen left LMU at the end of that year and met up with Angelica to take courses at El Camino College, where they carefully planned their transfer to the University of California. Once she found her way there, she knew that it was not perfect, but she was at least glad that she was not at LMU anymore. In March of 2000, they began attending Raza Womyn meetings, and they continued on until Carmen moved to Oakland this winter and Angelica went to Mexico to study abroad this past summer. Raza Womyn has become a sort of home base for many of its members like Carmen because while many of the women are busy with their education, family, and communities, they often come to Raza Womyn for nourishment, support, and for the safe space.

I met Carmen for our first interview date at her apartment in mid-Wilshire, where she was living while she was participating in the Summer Internship Program (SIP) sponsored by the University of California Labor Center. We planned to spend the day together and conduct the interview on Sunday. We decided we would have lunch first, so we drove down Sunset Boulevard until we saw a Colombian restaurant we wanted to try. The food was delicious, and we were the only customers there, so we enjoyed our meal and talked for at least two hours at the restaurant. We stopped and

⁴⁰*Id.*

bought some watermelon and strawberries at an outdoor swap meet, and we took them back to the apartment where we sat on the couch in the living room and started the interview. After about an hour, we moved outside to enjoy the summer afternoon before it disappeared. For almost two hours, we lay on the folding chairs by the pool, continuing the interview. Finally, Carmen suggested that we reschedule because we were not even half way through and I had agreed to go for a swim with her before I left.

Afterwards, we were invited to have dinner with some of the other interns in SIP, or the SIPers, as she referred to them. They had organized a barbecue by the pool. And after chatting with them a few minutes, I clearly saw how different they were from the *mujeres* of Raza Womyn, which was something Carmen had already told me about during lunch. She complained and described at length how frustrated she was with the program because the students who participated in it were at such a different level of social and political awareness, especially in terms of sexuality and gender issues. She confided,

I felt like I had been spoiled by Raza Womyn because there were all these women...there were so many women who were just so amazing. They were very strong women, very determined, intelligent, fierce, and amazing women. I expected that when I went to another activist space that was supposed to be similar. I figured, "what do you expect from a group of activists? You expect them to be fierce and to be challenging and critical and open and wanting to learn and expand on whatever it is that they already believe in." So when I got the shock that they were not that way, I was really disappointed in that.⁴¹

She was consistently challenged by her involvement in SIP. She and delia,⁴² another Raza Womyn who participated in SIP, had tried to push their peers to be more critical of their privilege and their hypocrisy; however, this resulted in them being accused of being political intimidators. After dealing with the very painful experience of being rejected for being "too revolutionary," they joked that they were "Chicana Machona Terrorists." Eventually, they were chastised for leaving the circle and isolating themselves. Luckily, Erin, an organizer who worked for the labor center, was hired to serve as a mediator and counselor during the internship. She was the one person who kept the program together for Carmen. Carmen told me about a meeting she had with Erin, during which Erin was completely challenging Carmen's decision to isolate herself from her peers.

[Erin said,] "Every union, every labor organizing effort, every non-profit, every place has problems. Carecen...Chirla...Bus Riders Union, all these places have internal problems. Not everybody is...just because they're organizers, doesn't mean that they're not going to be racist or homophobic"...She said, "You need to realize that in order to organize and be effective, you need to include these people. Why are you excluding them? And if you do exclude them, what does that mean? Does it mean

⁴¹*Id.*

⁴²*See supra* note 30.

that it's just going to be you and handful or other revolutionaries? What kind of work are you going to do if that's the case?"⁴³

Carmen considered Erin's challenge and admitted,

[I]t really made me think because I became really good at writing people off and being like, "Fuck you all. I don't care about you, and I don't want to deal with you because you are a bofahead [not critical]." And then I realized that I'm not getting anything out of that. And I thought, "Well maybe I do need these people to be here. And I do need to reevaluate how I'm treating people." And maybe that is my challenge...And how are you going to deal with these kind of people when you're are organizing something else and people say something sexist or homophobic? What are you going to do? And I started thinking about that. And Erin told me, "The only reason that I'm being so hard on you about this is because I believe that you are a fabulous organizer. And I believe that you are a revolutionary. And I see you that way, and I see a lot of the things that you're doing were the same things that I did. And it took me some time to reevaluate what I was doing, and I really approached my organizing by appreciating people for where they are at, which doesn't mean that I let people say fucked up shit and that I don't call them on it and I don't work with them on it."⁴⁴

Erin's words resonated with Carmen months later, and they transcended her participation in Raza Womyn. Although I had seen Carmen every week at Raza Womyn meetings, we did not reschedule to meet until October because of our busy schedules, but the time between the two interviews allowed Carmen to be much more reflective about her experience over the summer.

When we finally did get together, we spent four and half hours talking—mostly about her new obsession with love and revolution, a concept that she surprisingly developed during the SIP program with the help of Erin and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizers.

One of the things that really impacted me was this talk [Erin] had with us about how she approaches her work. She was like, "My organizing stems from love. I think that we need to have love. I do this because I love people. I love what I do. I love myself and I love the people that I work with, and I love the people that I live with. And all of it stems from love. And I don't think that you can have a revolution without love." And I thought, "Wow! That's so amazing." And after that, I kept on hearing all these people mention love and talk about love. And I thought, "This is so crazy. It's like love *and* revolution. It is possible." And I like that idea. I like the idea of appreciating people where they are at. I think, "Somebody did that for me." And that person was Kikanza and somebody else at the Bus Riders Union or the Strategy Center, and it was people in Raza Womyn who appreciated me for where I was at and who helped me in my

⁴³Interview with Carmen, Member of the Raza Womyn (July 29, 2001).

⁴⁴*Id.*

development. Somebody did that for me, and so why am I not doing that?
So yeah, love and revolution.⁴⁵

At the time of this interview, there was tension in Raza Womyn because delia, one of the core members of the organization and Carmen's roommate, was frustrated because she felt that many of the members of Raza Womyn lacked a revolutionary stance or vision. She felt that they were not motivated enough to organize and to be active, and she felt an urgency to help rebuild the commitment to justice, but was unsure of how to accomplish this. She was feeling a huge void, and her pain was evident. At times, she would come into the Raza Womyn space and not even share or embrace us, and this was very unlike her. It became an issue even for Carmen, who understood her frustrations but was also on the receiving end of them. It was not until we began to dialogue about this issue of love and revolution that things began to change.

They discussed the fact that not all Raza Womyn have the same revolutionary vision as others within the group, and they acknowledged that not all Raza Womyn have the same politics. Most importantly, they concluded that if long-time members of the organization did not share their personal visions of social justice and teach those visions to the new members, they could not expect them to automatically engage in action merely because they entered a space in which other women were doing so. There must be a continual act of education, a "Chicana feminist pedagogy", in which the work of creating a consciousness of resistance does not end once some of the existing members feel that they have become conscious or revolutionary; rather, the act of teaching and learning (r)evolves as they engage in (r)evolution. Carmen asserted,

I've been feeling this thing about love and revolution. I really feel that these two things really have to come together in order for there to be a revolution, there must be love. And that love can be for...first of all, it must be for yourself because you can't love anyone else until you love yourself. And then you extend that to love the painful parts about your culture, not to excuse them, but to love the parts about you that includes your culture, your family, that includes the fucked up people in your life, and loving the people who are around you and accepting people for where they're at. And I don't think you can accept other people unless you love. As an extension of that, then you are able to revolutionize. And I think if you love, then you're more open to revolutionize what you already think and revolutionizing other people's minds. And if you love and you can demonstrate that you love, then how can people be closed to you or to allowing their lives and thinking to be revolutionized?⁴⁶

The women realized that even in a space that is already believed to be critically conscious such as Raza Womyn, conscientización must be shared and taught in order to foster a safe space wherein *mujeres* can begin their own process of *conscientización* and construct their own personal commitment to act and organize against subordination.

⁴⁵Interview with Carmen, Member of the Raza Womyn, (October 26, 2001)

⁴⁶*Id.*

“Revolution” for these women is equated with social change. It is the destruction of oppressive “isms” and phobias. But as Carmen points out, “Before we begin to engage in the larger vision of social justice and defining what are vision is...we need to begin with a place of loving ourselves and being able to revolutionize ourselves and being open to that in order to fully engage in the movement or social change.”⁴⁷ From her experiences in SIP and Raza Womyn, she learned that activists must love their *compañeras/os* (partners) in the struggle despite their level of consciousness/awareness or action and accept them for who they are and what they have the ability to become. Essentially, these Raza Womyn learned that activism and conscientización does not automatically take place once you enter a space with other activists. In order to become and remain an activist, one has to be engaged in a process of self-education; then the desire to act and educate others is cultivated.

In January, Carmen accepted a job with the SEIU in San Jose. She decided to take this job soon after working with the SEIU in Los Angeles. As part of the SIP program, the student interns were expected to work with a union organizing around labor issues, so Carmen and Delia worked with the Justice for Janitors campaign. At the end of the program, she was invited to work with the SEIU campaign in San Jose. After falling in love with Erica and attempting to have a long distance relationship from Los Angeles to Oakland, she had already considered moving to the Bay area. Thus, it was a wonderful surprise for her to be offered the job in San Jose, and she faced the dilemma of trying to choose between her set career path, of spending a year preparing for graduate school and going to work in San Jose, as a full-time labor union organizer. I thought that perhaps the new relationship and some difficulties with negotiating her Queer identity with her mother were major reasons for her decision, but in the end, she felt that the biggest decision factor was the call to action. She said,

I was going crazy trying to weigh my options. “Okay, do I organize? This is so thrilling right now, so exciting, and I can do graduate school at another time. Or do I go to graduate school, and then sort of plug myself back into activism. How do I do this?” I was going crazy, but all this time I knew what I wanted to do, I was thinking, “I want to organize.”⁴⁸

Carmen chose to follow her heart and moved to Oakland, to live with Erica and to become a union organizer for the SEIU in San Jose. She believes that love and activism are very closely related to one another; she wrote a poem for Erica where she explored their similarity. She described it to me:

I talk about love and activism, and how both are similar in the sense that they require work. Just like we were saying about the safe space, it requires work. Just because you’re in love or you’re married doesn’t mean that love is what holds you. It takes work to be in a relationship. Love takes work. Activism takes work. It’s like saying that just because you say it’s a safe space, now it’s a safe space forever. It’s not. And just because you say I love, doesn’t mean that you love forever. And just because you

⁴⁷*Id.*

⁴⁸Interview with Carmen, Member of the Raza Womyn (October 26, 2001).

say that you are an activist, doesn't mean that you stay an activist forever.⁴⁹

V. CONCLUSION

My own and other research shows that Queer/Chicana/Latina college students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or marginalized communities to the university often engage in a process of resistance to oppressive practices and environments within those institutions, even while continuing their education. While a higher education can be a form of liberation for many of these women, it can simultaneously be oppressive to some. As women learn how to negotiate both privilege and oppression in the college setting, they develop tools for understanding their conditions. One of these tools is political and social consciousness, which is often internalized and acted upon in the form of student activism. Such is the case for many of the members of Raza Womyn. Carmen's *testimonio* is an example of the very difficult road of learning and teaching that takes place in the private spaces that student activists occupy, and it illustrates the learning-process that takes place when people are really committed to putting forward a vision of social justice or to engaging in "love and revolution."

⁴⁹*Id.*

CHICANA IDENTITY POLITICS: A CONVERSATION OF SORTS

(for erica, a leftist lover)

on love and activism,
 loving activism,
 actively loving,
 because love is work,
 and work requires love,
 un labor de amor.

the ringing of the bell
 in the depths of me
 signaled concientización
 activismo hooks
 me in

saboreando the possibilities
 of revolutionizing
 the mind and body
 after tasting,
 no se puede retroceder

es algo que se sabe,
 en la profundidad
 not a lesson to be learned from a book,
 after all love and activism are
 not learned from
 reading but rather from
 working in the field

conversations with you have
 made clarifications,
 transparente como freshly drawn
 bath tub water,
 glass doors that open out to
 possibilities

looking through the crystals
 of shared knowledge
 entre conversaciones
 that see eye to eye

intimate thoughts
 y tanto contemplar,
 reinforces my Leftist desire
 for activism and
 conversations

-carmen