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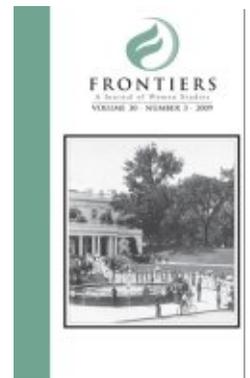
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## **Inmensa Fe en la Victoria: Social Justice through Education**

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## *Inmensa Fe en la Victoria*

*Social Justice through Education*

ANITA TIJERINA REVILLA

Throughout my higher education studies, I have been involved in several student organizations that rally behind cultural enrichment, racial justice, and empowerment efforts for oppressed communities. After my undergraduate studies, I worked for a nonprofit organization that was devoted to providing equal education to poor and minority students in schools. In both of these community and professional environments, talk of equality and social justice surrounded me. Students, professors, coworkers, and activists all expressed their commitment to creating social justice and equality, and I was able to witness how those concepts filtered into their daily practices. Some of their actions contradicted their preachings, but many of their actions also confirmed them. Along the way, I decided that social justice and education would become my lifetime commitments as well.

Today, as I seek to develop my career as an activist scholar, I dedicate myself to learning how to best realize this vision of justice through education. I believe that the best way to do this is by studying the lives of people who have made this same commitment. It is especially important to consider the experiences and perceptions of students who are engaged in activism against oppressive conditions such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism because it is through them that we can learn how to incorporate social justice into our academic lives. For years, these students have been creating their own supplementary education as the traditional curriculum has failed to address their specific struggles and histories. Moreover, as these students formulate their identities, they develop visions for the world in which they want to live. An understanding of these experiences and visions is crucial for forwarding the goals of social justice education because without the perspective of students, educators will find themselves unable to meet their students' needs. Hence, this article will introduce a case study or *testimonio* of a young woman who is an

undergraduate student involved in a struggle for justice.<sup>1</sup> Through her, my hope is that we can learn something about our goals as social justice educators.

#### METHODOLOGY

This case study stems from a larger project in which I studied for four years a student advocacy organization at the University of California, Los Angeles. The organization, Raza Womyn, is a Chicana/Latina student organization founded in 1979 and officially recognized at the University of California in 1981. I became interested in learning about the organization and the women who participate in it after attending their fourth annual Chicana/Latina conference in March 1999. The members of Raza Womyn organized a full day of workshops, dialogue, and performance for the purpose of creating consciousness and awareness about issues pertaining to Latinas and Chicanas. They stated in their conference program that the desire to “carry on the tradition of struggle of economic, political, and social justice” guided their work. They were particularly interested in advancing an ideology of change that they called “reconstructing revolution.” The *mujeres*, the women, explained that they pushed themselves beyond old definitions of revolution that fight against racism but fail to struggle against other -isms and phobias, such as classism, sexism, and homophobia.<sup>2</sup>

While my research examines both the organization and the women who participate in it, this article focuses on the experiences of one participant in particular. She is the one member of Raza Womyn who has consistently been the center of focus of my study. Her name is delia.<sup>3</sup> She is twenty-two years old and in her fifth year of college. When I first met her, she was nineteen and in her second year at UCLA. The data in this article date back to my first extended encounters and discussions with her.

I have formally interviewed delia on five occasions for a total of fourteen hours, which included two focus group interviews and three individual interviews. The focus group interviews took place on March 9, 2000, and April 1, 2001, at UCLA. At each focus group interview, four members of Raza Womyn talked about their reasons for joining, their experiences with racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia, and their commitments to social justice. The individual interviews took place on November 2, 1999, November 28, 2000, and April 1, 2001. They lasted a total of nine hours and consisted of the participant's life history and academic trajectory, as well as her involvement in Raza Womyn. Transcribed interviews and audiotapes are stored in my personal files at home. Over the past four years, I collected approximately two hundred

hours of naturalistic and participant observation of Raza Womyn at several different locations, including weekly meetings, annual conferences, workshops, and community and social events. delia has been present at nearly all of the Raza Womyn activities observed over this period of time.

delia was the first woman in the organization to welcome me into the Raza Womyn space. I felt that I could approach her because every time we met, she embraced me with a warm smile and a friendly word of love. This is something that has endured into the present and is extended to everyone she encounters—on the buses that she rides, in the communities she is involved in, on the university campus, and in the intimate space of Raza Womyn gatherings. Initially, I had some trouble tracking down this busy woman, but I persisted by e-mail and by phone. When I finally talked to her to explain the project and my desire to join her at work and in other spaces, I apologized for being too persistent. She responded, “Don’t worry about it. We’ve [Raza Womyn] missed you.” I explained that I also wanted to go to the Raza Womyn meetings for my observations, and she agreed eagerly. I asked her if she thought the *mujeres* would feel uncomfortable with me participating in the meetings as a researcher because I did not want them to feel that I was intruding in their space. She dismissed my fear and said, “*Mujer*, you are a Raza Woman; of course you can come.” Upon joining them at their meetings and feeling their warm welcome, I soon took to heart the Raza Womyn motto: “Remember, you don’t join Raza Womyn, you are Raza Womyn.”

I asked delia if I could spend time with her during the day so that I could observe her in the midst of her work as a tutor and college advisor to middle and high schools students in South Central Los Angeles. At the time, delia worked for an organization called Youth Opportunities Unlimited (Y.O.U.) as a tutor at three different South Central locations, including John Hope High School (John Hope), Y.O.U. High School, and Bethune Middle School. She welcomed me to join her at work, and I observed her for ten consecutive weeks at two different schools and at a community center. Since then, over the past four years, I have spent at least three hours a week when school has been in session with her at Raza Womyn meetings and also have joined her on numerous occasions for a variety of activities on and off campus. This article will only present the results of the observations and interviews I conducted in the initial observations. I joined her on Monday mornings from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at John Hope and Y.O.U. I also observed her at a South Central community center called Community Coalitions, at meetings in the Raza Womyn office on campus, and during Raza Womyn activities at UCLA.

Throughout this period, delia and I engaged in dialogues about personal

and academic issues. She often asked me for advice and talked to me about the dilemmas that she faced as an activist and as an educator. She encouraged me to talk to the students about my experience in college and to “listen to them because they really need someone to listen to their dreams.” During our encounters, we spoke freely and shared information with each another, and I forged a friendship and bond with delia that made this project both enjoyable and truly meaningful. Recognizing my potential subjectivities as a researcher who also defines herself as a Chicana activist, I ground my findings and analysis in the data, which in this case directly reflect the acts and words of this particular woman. From my observations, I composed fieldnotes and memos incorporating information and artifacts that I collected from John Hope, Community Coalitions, Raza Womyn, and delia. After coding the data, I found that delia’s vision of social justice guides her daily actions as a student, teacher, and activist. Her multiple identities and personal struggles in life led her to become what she calls a *revolucionaria*, a revolutionary. The following *testimonio* weaves together the general theme of my observations, which is that her family background, personal struggles, and identity are intricately connected to her commitment to activism and justice. Moreover, her vision of social justice is achieved through education, which she believes needs to be drastically altered to meet the needs of young students of color.

#### RESEARCH SITES

delia tutors on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. She spends her mornings from around 8:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at John Hope, noon to 2:00 p.m. at Y.O.U., and 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. at Bethune Middle School. All of the schools are in the same vicinity, near Manchester and Highway 110. John Hope is on the corner of Seventy-Ninth and Towne streets, in the center of a residential area in South Central Los Angeles. Some neglected apartments surrounded by a large black iron gate are across the street. Directly adjacent to John Hope is Fremont High School, which covers most of the block, except for the small piece at the corner where John Hope is located. A peach colored building (part of Fremont High School) and a six-foot gate separate John Hope from the other campus. John Hope consists of two bungalows housing three classrooms, an administrative office, restrooms, a teachers’ lounge, and a storage room. The bungalows are painted a dingy peach, and the brown paint on the doors is peeling. Eight picnic tables serve as delia’s tutoring space and the students’ lunch area. Three tables are old and warped, and two others are broken: one is missing the seats; the other is turned upside down. delia informed me:

The buildings here are falling apart. The weeds are growing all over the place, and the grass hasn't been cut for weeks. The only space that the students have is the basketball half court. Over there, past the field, there is a fenced-in storage area with old desks and empty plant pots. This is not an adequate learning environment for these youth.

Y.O.U is larger than John Hope. It is at least half a city block long, and the school is made up of four brown wooden structures. The buildings are in relatively good condition. It is visibly clean and maintained, but from the outside, it does not look like a safe and comfortable space for a learning environment. A six-foot black electronically-controlled surveillance fence surrounds the entire campus, and we are buzzed in through two different doors before we can enter the campus; the first locked door leads to the front office, and the second leads to the classrooms and open courtyard.

Twice delia and I went to the Community Coalition center located on the corner of Vermont and Eighty-First streets. From the outside, the building looks like a warehouse with a door and no windows, so I was surprised when I learned that inside there was a space open to all community members, from youths to seniors. I learned that Community Coalition organizes Latino/a and African American youth to become involved in several groups organized around the different issues that affect the local community. They also are a resource center equipped with a library, a computer lab, and personnel to serve the community.

Besides the two high schools and the Community Coalition resource center, I also observed delia as she worked to organize Raza Womyn activities. The Raza Womyn office is shared with two other student organizations—Chicanos for Community Medicine and the Iranian student group. The very small office is packed with six desks, three computers, seven file cabinets, ten chairs, and a round table. The *mujeres* primarily use the roundtable as a meeting place and work table. An altar is arranged on the heater by the window. *Veladoras* (candles), a statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe, and postcards with pictures of Latinas/Chicanas adorn the altar, along with several flowers made of crepe paper and a Native American hand-drum. A poster of Emiliano Zapata and a raised fist decorates the left wall, along with an announcement of a *testimonio* given by Maria Guardado, an activist and survivor of military persecution in El Salvador. On the right wall, a bumper sticker is posted with a statement against grapes, "Uvas No." A picture of a Chiapas revolutionary, a Zapatista, shooting the middle finger in resistance to the Mexican government, and a huge white cloth with a woman symbol painted on it is taped to the wall on the right. The office space is alive. It is warm and inviting, especially during the

weekly meetings when anywhere from three to ten women come in to organize, share, laugh, and sometimes cry about the world beyond the walls of the room.

I also observed delia in action at the Mujer Expression Night—a dark, brisk, and quiet evening at UCLA. There was a desolate feeling on the campus, but as I walked into the room, active bodies of *mujeres* preparing for their special night livened up the evening. The traditional Latina/o paraphernalia and decor were absent, but the *mujeres* created an ambiance of intimacy and culture that took over the elite space called the Grand Chancellor's Salon. They set up twenty trays of tamales and several cases of red, grape, and orange colas. The smell of the tamales brought back memories of my grandmother's kitchen at Christmas time. Chicana/o and Mexican *recuerdos* were sold, including Frida Kahlo candles, Mexican jewelry, and Latina/o art. The people within the room provided a strong contrast to the polished hardwood floors, marble fireplace, and chandeliers of the room.

It is important that I provide a detailed description of delia and the five sites where I observed her because this study seeks to portray the student, the activist, the teacher, and the woman. In essence, her social and personal networks or communities of resistance reside at these sites, and they determine and foster both her identity and her commitments.

#### TESTIMONIO

At age twenty, delia stands five-feet, eight-inches tall, a cinnamon-skinned student who identifies herself as both a Mexicana and Chicana. She is Mexicana by birth and Chicana by political identification. She has long, brown wavy hair that reaches halfway down her back when it is loose or tied in a braid, but usually her braided hair is rolled into a bun. The bun starts tight and neat at the beginning of the day, and by midday it ends up loose with several strands of thin hair surrounding her face, which she proudly refers to as her *greñas*, messy hair. She dresses in worn jeans or pants, T-shirts with political messages printed on them, and thrift-store sweaters. She consciously purchases her clothing at thrift stores and garage sales in an effort to avoid malls and stores, which she views as capitalist traps. The thing that does not change in her wardrobe are her old, faithful, brown *huaraches*, her Mexican sandals.

Every time I see her, she has at least three bags filled with her belongings. One bag is a baby blue Mexican satchel filled with at least twenty books. The books range in subject from politics to Chicana/o studies, and from feminism to labor movements. She always has a journal, just in case she has a wonderful idea for working with her youth or for organizing with Raza Womyn. Another

bag is her multicolored tapestry satchel that she uses as a purse, and the third is a forest green backpack jam-packed with more books. The backpack is adorned with at least ten buttons with different political statements on them: one has a woman symbol with a fist in the center of it, another says “No Grapes,” and a third declares, “No violence against women!”

The first time I asked delia to tell me about herself and to identify who she is, she replied, “My name is delia—Chicana, revolutionary, feminist. I was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, and came to the U.S. when I was eight years old. I grew up in San Diego, by Chicano Park.” That was in June 1999, and when I interviewed her again in November of the same year, she answered, “I am a Chicana feminist. I identify as a *mujer*, as a *Mexicana*, as an *hija*, or daughter, as a student, a *revolucionaria*, a *mujerista*, *activista*, *organizadora*, conscious.” Her strong political stance is evident in every part of her identity, consistently identifying herself as a revolutionary dedicated to change through activism and the organizing of communities.

delia is the youngest daughter in her family, and she has two older brothers. Her family crossed the U.S.-Mexican border in Tijuana when she was eight years old. She has a vivid memory of the long, cold night they spent in the brush, ducking at the sight of every headlight that whizzed by them as they walked many miles toward San Diego. Her father warned them that they should shut their eyes whenever cars passed so that the passersby would not be able to see their eyeballs and locate them in the brush, just in case the cars carried the *migra*, the Immigration and Naturalization Service agents. She remembers the fear she felt upon awakening and learning that a snake had crawled onto her long hair while she slept, but her parents’ quick thinking saved her from being harmed. After making it safely through the night, they were able to hitch a ride to San Diego. Her family thought that they were going to a better place in the United States, but the job offered to her father turned out to be a false promise. They found themselves homeless and penniless, and they were forced to move from place to place, living first in a garage, then in small apartments, in the family van, and in an orange orchard until finally they were able to secure a home in Logan Heights.

delia spent her early years in Mexico, and her experience with race there was very limited. She recalls her first memory of race in the following way, “When I was in Mexico, I was five years old. I got off the bus with my mom and I saw a black man. I had never seen a black person before. That was my first exposure to a person of a different race.” But her limited exposure to the reality of race would expand once she entered the United States. It was in American schools that delia began to recognize that she, too, was a racialized being. As a *Mexicana*, she is neither white nor black, and while some may argue that Mex-

ican is not a race, delia's negative experiences would prove to be the result of racism and nativism.<sup>4</sup>

As early as elementary school, delia experienced the viciousness of race/ethnic backlash in California against Spanish-speaking Mexican immigrants. She recalls entering grade school speaking only Spanish, and being ridiculed by her classmates, both brown and white. She sadly admits that both her teachers and her classmates made her ashamed of her voice and of the sound of a Spanish-speaker's accent—eventually resulting in her silence in school. She confided:

When I came here to the U.S. everything was different. Since I didn't know English I was put in ESL [a English as a Second Language class]. Then I was given tests, and I was put in a GATE [Gifted and Talented] program. Even though I knew English enough to function, the way the teacher and the other students would treat me was like I was inferior. I wasn't good enough.

The harsh treatment she experienced remains fresh in her mind as she remembers that she was discriminated against, both because of her accent and because of her brown skin. Lighter-skinned Mexican American students made fun of her because of the way she looked and spoke, so she isolated herself. She said, "It came to the point where I wouldn't really talk in class because I was afraid that I would pronounce a word wrong and that they would make fun of me. So, as a Mexicana, I felt worthless." Her self-esteem plummeted and although she scored highly on tests, she did not believe she was an intelligent person because even her teachers made her feel "stupid." It got to the point where she started to believe that, she said.

delia's mother and father raised her and her brothers near Chicano Park in San Diego in a historically Chicano/a neighborhood called Logan Heights. As an adolescent, she had difficulty dealing with the fact that her parents worked as janitors. When asked if class or the level of her family's income had ever been a factor for her, she answered:

My parents are janitors. They clean buildings. They wash toilets, vacuum, and throw away the trash in offices. I would feel ashamed because all the other kids would say my father is a teacher . . . or he's the owner of this building. I felt like, well, I felt ashamed, like what am I gonna say? It was really hard, but also I always used to see how all the other kids who weren't brown were able to do all the extra curricular activities after school. I couldn't do it because, for one, I had to go home.

My mom had to work two jobs. And sometimes I had to have dinner

for her ready so she could eat really fast and go to her next job. I am the only *mujer*, the only daughter. I was expected to be there and clean dishes, the house, everything. . . . So that was an issue as I was growing older. I knew it wasn't fair. I wondered, why is it that they have access to those things and I don't?

The injustices that her parents experienced as laborers caused her to begin questioning the privilege that she witnessed in the special school she attended for academically proficient students. It was during high school that she began to question the shame that she felt because of her parents' occupations. She feels that as she matured, she learned to appreciate the love and sacrifices that her parents made for her and preferred their love to the material wealth that other children had. She said, "I realized that I shouldn't be ashamed of what my parents do because after all, it's a job. They're doing it. It's an honest job, and they do it. And then soon, in high school, when they would ask me what they do, I would tell them, proudly, 'They're janitors.'"

delia's exposure to class injustice by way of her parents led her to a fierce criticism of money and capitalism. She asserts that she purposely surrounds herself with "beautiful people, like the *mujeres* in Raza Womyn," because she wants to escape from the capitalist culture of the university. She said to me, "I see how people of color try to fit in and try to pretend like they have money. Some of them do, but some of them are just trying to fit in. It makes me sick. I'm bitter because there *is* a class difference." The discussions about the dangers of capitalism and negative consumerism led her to a passionate discussion about the youth with whom she works. She says that she is saddened by the fact that her students' goals are led by materialistic visions, and she considers it her responsibility to educate them about these issues. She declared:

Capitalism blinds people from what they really need to do and from how much they hurt if they only look at profit, at how much they can make. . . . Many times we're taught to see education for how much money we are gonna get out of it. Our youth . . . instead of having us teach or recognize the knowledge and the freedom that we can get from education, the freedom of mind, the freedom to express yourself, the freedom to know so much. . . . Instead, we are taught about how much money you can get. . . . Many times we ask people to do things, and they ask, well, how much are we gonna get paid for it? You know? We've lost the feeling, the need to do stuff because we need to do it and we must do it. We've lost that because we're so into how much are we gonna get for it. If we're not gonna get nothing, we don't want to do it. And it's just so sad.

So, I guess I feel like I need to start working on deconstructing that little

by little in my students. I know that I'm not going to be always there in the lives of my students, but maybe I can create that little seed that will trigger that in the lives of my students, and maybe for them to start thinking that there's more important things than just money.

As delia solidifies her critique of classism and the woes of capitalism, she shares her feelings with her students. She regrets not being taught about the many injustices that her people have encountered in the United States, and she believes that it is up to her to provide this information to the youth with whom she works. She feels that this knowledge will help put an end to the inequalities that she and others have faced.

When delia was a second-year student at UCLA, she was a sociology major, planning to pursue master's and doctoral degrees. She hoped to pursue those higher education degrees to become and continue as an activist, teacher, school principal, and social worker. She also dreamt of creating a community center that would serve as a space for youth. When I asked what her goals were, she smiled and told me, "There's so many things that I want to do. . . . I want to do everything!" delia's short- and long-term goals included continuing to work with youth and to work with students in continuation and alternative schools because she believes that they are most in need of academic and emotional support. She laments that her students have been forgotten because of the negative conceptions that they have been tagged with in their schooling experience. She acknowledges that most of them have been placed in low-level academic tracks, and she is determined to show them that she cares about them and that she understands them. She believes in their potential to succeed and recognizes their talents and capacities in life. She lauds their abilities to write, express themselves, sing, and play sports, but she shakes her head and notes that "no one cares" about them. She explained:

I see so much anger and frustration in my youth. I feel like I have to be there in order to listen to them, in order for them to understand that, "Look, you're not alone. Don't feel like there's no one here that doesn't understand you and don't feel that no one sees that you can make it. Because I believe in you." I've seen that it has an impact on some of my students. And just for them to be constantly seeing me . . . because it's hard, because society has fucked up on them, and they don't trust a lot of people. It's hard for them to start trusting.

I observed that delia's verbalized commitment to her youth transfers into action. She works extremely hard to juggle her life as a student, a teacher, and a mentor. At John Hope, I watched her clean dirty picnic tables in the campus courtyard because these table were the only spaces that were available. She was

not given class time or classroom space, but she did not let that hinder her activities and discussions with the students. She recruited her junior and senior students as they passed by the tables, and she asked them to sit down for a few minutes to fill out applications to take the SAT exams. Some of the students turned her away saying, “Nah, I don’t want to fill one out. SATs are a bunch of bull and a waste of time.” delia never despaired, nor did she force the students to join her. Several of the female students and a couple male students either sat down to fill out applications or told her that they would take one and bring it back to her. She confided in me that the administration at John Hope expects her to be only a tutor for the students, but she has dreams of her students pursuing higher education—dreams that few of the teachers or administration share. She chooses to share college preparatory materials with the students and helps them collect information about college possibilities. Some teachers complained when their students stopped to talk to her about the SATs. Mr. Blackburn, a white male, yelled at a student and told her to hurry up and come to class. She replied, “I’m doing something. Can’t you see I’m talking to her about this stuff?” He responded, “No, I can’t.” She told him, “I’ll be there in a minute.” She ignored him and continued to talk to delia about the SAT and college.

While she was helping students fill out SAT forms, she was also assisting other students with class assignments. Then she was called away by a teacher to help students in the classroom, and students barraged her with greetings and questions. One student even asked her to help him find work. When she told him where to go and who to talk to, he asked her to go with him. She put her hand on his shoulder and said, “I can’t go for you. You have to go and show them that you want the job. I can’t go for you or hold your hand.” He agreed, “Yeah, I know. I’m eighteen now. I’m an adult.” She said, “Yeah, you have to be responsible and show that you want to work.” On at least two occasions, I heard students asking delia for assistance with finding a job, and she advised them.

delia told me that she also shares information with her students about community projects and activities that she believes are both educational and consciousness raising, such as an antipolice brutality march, Raza Womyn activities, and *Dia de los Muertos* celebrations. Sometimes she takes students with her to the university or to special events outside of school. This is something that created conflict for delia because the administration of the school felt that she was “getting too close” with the students, and they also disapproved of the off-campus activities to which she took the students because they were “too political.”

When I visited Y.O.U. High School with delia, I was pleased to see the welcome that she received from the students. When she walked in the classroom,

a young black female exclaimed, “delia! Thank God you’re here today!” Another student, a Latino male, pleaded with delia for help because the substitute teacher, Ms. Macias, had given his mother a bad report about him, which he swore to delia was a lie. delia talked to him privately and tried to calm him down, and she recommended talking to his mother, but he rejected that advice, insisting that his mother trusted the teacher more than she trusted him. Ms. Macias had many problems with the students at Y.O.U. Every time I observed the classroom, she was busy disciplining the students or chastising them. delia later told me that Ms. Macias quit three weeks later because according to delia, “She couldn’t deal with the students. She thought they acted like ‘animals.’”

delia’s ability to engage the students at Y.O.U. amazed me because I was able to contrast it with the teacher who was instructing the class before her. He was conducting an English lesson on how to use “I am” and “We are” in a sentence. He walked around the class chastising the students because they were talking instead of working on their assignments. He approached some students at one table and asked them if they had completed the sentences. Annoyed, they answered, “We already did it!” Distrustful, he asked, “Where is it? Let me see me it.” One of the female students angrily replied, “We’re already done!” Then they ignored him and talked to each other. Exasperated, the teacher walked toward another table. Once the period ended, the teacher went to another classroom, and delia began to address the students. A student named Maria stood up to move the television set out of delia’s way, providing her a space to write on the dry-erase board. delia immediately wrote the directions for an assignment on the board entitled, “Self portrait through writing.” She wrote:

Describe yourself:

How do you look (physical appearance)?

How do you feel and what do you think about yourself?

How do you think people see you?

The students worked quietly on the assignment for at least ten minutes. It was the longest amount of time that the students had been quiet all morning. Although there were a few new students who were not originally in the class, most of the students remained in the class from the previous period, and even they were engaged in the assignment. The assignment that they were working on before was a simple exercise of writing sentences using “am” and “are.” This assignment was apparently much more challenging, but the same students worked on it without needing much assistance. Once the students completed the assignment, they volunteered to share the very personal things that they wrote about themselves. One of the students asked, “Are we gonna read

our self-portraits?" delia said, "Oh yeah. You want to read yours first?" The young woman said yes and read her portrait aloud. She described herself as a happy person and happy to be in school. Two other students read their descriptions of themselves. A female student said, "People may think I am a bad ass, but I'm not." A male student stood up and read, "Some people think I ain't shit, but they don't know me." He continued, "Sometimes I see myself as a boy wonder because I constantly have to fight so much negativity all around me." He sat down after reading his self-portrait. Just then, Ms. Macias, who was still in the room but had been forgotten by the students, chimed in, "That was really good," and the female student started to laugh. Ms. Macias asked, "Why are you laughing? Don't you think it's good?" The student told her, "Nah. Yeah, I think it's good. I'm laughing cause you said it was good." After that, none of the other students volunteered to read their self-portrait. It was obvious that the students had very negative feelings of distrust and disconnection with Ms. Macias, and I wondered why their relationship with delia was so different. I guessed that delia identified with her students very differently than the other teachers did, which was evident in her oral and physical communication with them. Consequently, the students behaved differently with her.

delia continued to talk to the students about college, graduation, and the need to work together and speak freely with each other. She asked students to volunteer to tutor the middle school students at Bethune Middle School at least once a week. She encouraged them to participate by saying, "It's important to start learning to educate our young people." The level of respect that she offered her students was evidently appreciated because many of the students volunteered enthusiastically. She talked at length to them about the need to use education as a way to liberate them from conformity, and she never talked down to them. All of them signed up to tutor at least once a week, and some volunteered to go more than once a week. Something that delia tells me often is that she feels that her students are treated like small children with little or no respect for their intelligence. This is why she adamantly rejects calling her students "kids"; instead, she refers to them as "youth," "young men and women," or "*jovenes*." While she no longer works with these same youth, she continues in her efforts to gain access to higher education for youth and to demand respect for them.

As a student, delia has been fortunate to find a group of women who have offered her support and space for development. I first met delia at the 1999 Raza Womyn annual conference. The conference is a grassroots effort to educate others for social justice. More specifically, the conference is one facet of an entire movement in which the women are involved. The women in the conference program wrote:

This year's theme . . . represents our internal passion, the ability to motivate our selves and create change. It is the fire that burns within us to destroy the many "isms," such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism that attempts to dismantle our communities. The theme also tries to embody the way we look into the face of ourselves to see the reflections of those that continue to carry on the revolution. Our sisters, mothers, great-grandmothers, the neighbor across the street, the women at the bus stop, and the women half way across the world, all carry on the tradition of struggle of economic, political, and social justice.<sup>5</sup>

In a focus group interview I conducted with four women in the organization, a member of Raza Womyn stated, "The main goals of the conference are raising consciousness, creating productive dialogue, building solidarity, and providing a safe space for all *mujeres*." The women do not view consciousness as the only outcome of their work, but they do see it as the first and most needed step toward social change. The personal growth and empowerment of *mujeres* is extremely important to these women. They view this as the central and most urgent goal of the organization; nevertheless, they do not lose sight of a social movement that will create a more just society.

The members of Raza Womyn, as women of color at a historically white university, have been forced into the margins and have also chosen the margins as a site of resistance.<sup>6</sup> Raza Womyn have experienced immense marginality and isolation in their own personal and educational experiences, but they have also found strength in their collective gathering and activism, which is achieved because of the strength that they receive within their marginalized space. The issue of "safe space" is key to their vision of collective action and a social movement. As one woman put it:

There's a really safe space to go, where you can go and be who you are. What that's doing is, it's giving you the energy, and the language, and the courage, and the strength to go out and use that in other parts of your own activism, or in the collective activism of the group. So that without that, you can have some sort of goal. You can say, "Yeah, we are part of a *movimiento* and blah, blah, blah," but if you are not actually practicing it in your daily language, then you can just dump it all out—it's not really worth anything.

The organization has given the women a space to empower themselves to continue their academic and activist work. They further recognize that oppression is exerted not only from the wealthy, white-dominated institution, but also from males and heterosexuals in other organizations as well. As one woman stated:

I think that a lot of the organizations that we've all once been a part of, and had to leave for one reason or another, who talk a lot of revolution talk, are exactly the people who are hurting us and are doing the things that are pushing us down and silencing us. They are not giving us the space to be who we are. So that I feel personally that I can't be part of a movement if I can't even be myself, and if I can't say what I need today, and if I'm constantly being silenced.

Thus, for these members of Raza Womyn, it has been necessary to challenge both institutional and individual oppressive ideologies that have pushed them into the margins, but at the same time, they rejoice in the separate space that they have created for themselves.

I initially believed that delia's consciousness and sophisticated critique of injustice was rooted in her involvement with this organization, but when I asked her how she came to her definition of social justice, she answered, "A lot has to do with my involvement with Raza Womyn, but I think that it has to do with my experience and involvement with my community, especially youth." When I asked her who taught her about the injustices that exist, she laughed and said:

Who taught me? I guess I just started seeing it and talking to people. It would just come up. And I would be like, what does that mean? Like okay, go look for this, ask people. Some of the Raza Womyn taught me some stuff. . . .

Just my own research, my own interests about it . . . Some classes. Chicano/a studies classes usually . . . basically. Some of my feminism classes, education classes . . . I took Chicanos and Education and it opened my eyes to many things that I had questions about. So, it cleared some of those questions. And just in terms of talking to people, talking to older people in the community . . . It started making me realize that there's something more to this. Why are we living the way we are?

delia's exposure to books and discussions about justice and inequality began at the university, but the books only added to her understanding of her lived experiences. Her participation in Raza Womyn gave her a space where she could engage in dialogues about these issues, and it provided her with a group of allies, other women who had very similar experiences. It was within this group that delia was continuously discussing her obstacles as a teacher and a student, and together they came up with ideas and ways to deal with these issues in their daily lives.

In delia's work as an educator, she has met several obstacles. She says that her most immediate struggles at work are lack of resources and time, as well as lack

of support from the administration, especially at John Hope High School. She explained:

The administration . . . You know, like I have projects that I want to do or simply just talk to them about different issues. [The administration replies], “Well, you’re imposing your political ideology. . . . So you can’t say this or you can’t do that.” Also, I’m very limited with funding, so if I want to do a project here and there, or if I want to take them to places, “No you can’t do that.” Obstacle . . . with, like, time. If it were up to me, I would have [projects going on] day and night.

delia has been discouraged from inviting students to protests and rallies for justice. For example, she was told that an antipolice brutality march is not educational and that it would discourage the police from responding if the school ever needed their help. She once shared her frustrations about the situation at John Hope with me. The following is part of a conversation the two of us had about it:

delia: It’s crazy shit cause like any kind of little shit, their just trying to get me, you know?

Anita: Uh huh. Why? What happened now?

delia: Because, what was it, like two weeks ago. The students were complaining that the tables were so dirty to eat on. So I suggested to them, “Hey what’s up if we stay after school and clean up, you know? Like just wash them and sweep a little . . . to make our campus more welcoming so we want be here. I mean it’s ours, so we gotta take care of it.” They were, like, “Yeah, yeah.” At first, they were, like, “What? Us? Stay after school? Heell nah.” So I was, like, “But check it out. We’ll be eating. We’ll be kicking it with some music or whatever.” And then I suggested to them that we could clean up the garden in the back you know, like, where we were. I was, like, “How about planting some flowers or whatever?” Well, I was, “How about just hooking it up with something? Something to make it look nice?” Some of the young girls were, like, “How about planting some flowers and stuff like that, you know?” I was, like, “That’s a good idea. We can do it.” But then today, the project director, she came up to me, she was telling me [we can’t do that]. . . . She came up to me again. It’s like every time she comes up to me, she has complaints from Dr. Darren [the principal]. First of all, why can’t you just say it to my face, you know?

Anita: Yeah.

delia: She said, you know, she doesn’t want me to be organizing the students to be doing anything.

Anita: Why?!

delia: I'm, like, ugghh! She tells me, "She [the principal] feels that you are a threat, and that you're [making] too much attachment to the students instead of behaving like a guest at her school. She's feeling that you're [making] her decisions.

Anita: Taking her school away?

delia: Exactly. I'm acting, like, that's my school. I'm like, nah. First of all, that school is the students' school. You know? I'm not there for her. I don't even want to see her face. That's why I don't even go in the office.

On one occasion, delia shared with me that the office aide at John Hope told her that Dr. Darren was jealous of delia's relationship with the students. It was very difficult for delia to work in this situation, where all of her actions were being scrutinized and questioned. While she found it to be a great challenge because she had no support from her coworkers, her commitment to the students did not falter.

Another significant obstacle for delia is the contradiction that she struggles with internally concerning her beliefs about higher education. She said:

They're so much shit that goes on. Hell nooo. Enough with this. And sometimes I think, Why am I going to school? It's crazy how, like, I hate going to the institution of UCLA. I hate being there. You know? I'm like, I just have to go there in order to get that diploma, but if it were for me, I know that I could do so much reading. And sometimes I just feel like I'm just wasting my time there. I have to take classes that I'm, like, this is just wasting my time. I don't have to do this. I need to be doing other stuff, working outside in my community. I could be reading my own shit, you know? Educating my own self. Reading.

But a lot of the stuff that I go through, it's not helping me. All they want to do is brainwash me, institutionalize me, and put more ideas of theirs in me. And I get so frustrated, like, do I have to go? It's crazy how, like, over there I'm hating to go to the university and over here I'm telling my students go to college, educate yourself. You know?

When I asked delia how she reconciled this contradiction for herself, she replied:

I think of it like, we have to. In order for them to do something with their lives, in order for them to start doing something, start taking . . . educating ourselves and putting ourselves in higher positions where we can do more and start taking control. I don't want to say control, but start taking

charge. Start changing the way things are, because if we're always . . . well, letting others do that for us, the society, the system is always gonna stay the same. I don't want the students to conform.

I ask my students not to conform to satisfy or to think that only going into higher education is going to give you a better life. . . . I think that it's important to get into all the institutions and start changing the way things are done. . . . Economic justice, social, all of that shit, start changing it. We gotta just take the initiative and do that shit. Educate ourselves and do it. By any means necessary. If it means that we gotta get violent, you know, we gotta do that shit because if we're always gonna be positive and try to say well this and that, hoping that everything will come along, nothing's gonna happen! No! We gotta do something.

As delia shared her frustrations and goals, I thought back to the conference and considered the call for "collective revolution" that was asserted in the conference program. Many activists are familiar with a notion of revolution. It is a term and even a vision that has long been associated with social justice movements. However, it has been defined and envisioned very differently by different activists. Thus, I wondered what it was that delia envisioned as a revolution. I asked her what it means to be revolutionary, and she answered:

It means fighting for what I believe. Even if it means to die for it. Like not putting up with anything that I know is wrong, that I know is hurting me and that I see hurting human beings, not just, yeah my people of color, but in terms of everyone. A *revolucionaria* fights the injustices that exist. It means that we fight for our mental freedom. . . . To be able to do anything that we want to because we are free.

Being a *revolucionaria* means we need to express ourselves. I am a *revolucionaria* in terms of being a *mujer*, being who I am. It just means so many things. I guess ultimately it means not being afraid of doing what you believe you have to do. And for sure understanding what you need to do. . . . Yes, I will die for this, for one of my students . . . just for them to survive and be able to be free with their minds. I will die. And I am not afraid of it, well maybe I am, but I am willing. I'm not afraid of change because change has to occur. If not, things are always gonna be the same.

delia's vision of social justice and the means by which to achieve it has gone through many revolutions as well. Today, she is taking a class on nonviolent movements, but she still supports the armed struggle of the Indigenous people in Chiapas. She never ceases in her hunger for knowledge and in her immense faith in victory.

My observations offered me wonderful insights, and they helped me better understand the issues that this particular Chicana student activist faces in her work. I learned that many things informed delia's commitment to social justice, including her childhood, adolescence, personal, professional, and academic experiences. When delia was silenced as a young Mexican immigrant child in her elementary classrooms because of her language and skin color, she became determined to regain her voice and cultural pride. Because she, herself, had experienced the feeling of isolation and attack from peers and teachers, she was better able to understand and work with students in continuation and alternative schools. Growing up in a working-class Mexicana/o environment taught her to appreciate love, respect, and family, and to despise material wealth. As the only daughter of a traditional Mexican father, she was expected to act according to patriarchal female expectations. She challenged that and has pushed herself to reject all societally-imposed gender and sexuality roles.

Raza Womyn did not teach delia about social injustice—she experienced and recognized the injustices in her daily life. Raza Womyn provided the space to engage in dialogue, to develop her critique of the injustices and to organize to eliminate those injustices, and it offered her a reason to remain at the university. Consequently, she has been able to solidify her beliefs and maintain her identity as a *revolucionaria*. Her commitment and sentiments are inspirational to me and to many who know her. Education is integrally connected to her struggle. She fights oppressive education by seeking alternative sources of knowledge from her family, community members, activists, organizers, youth, elders, and Raza Womyn. She has an immense faith in victory over all injustices, and she actively participates in the struggle against oppression.

#### NOTES

1. *Testimonios* are testimonies. In her introduction to *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), Luz del Alba Acevedo, describes *testimonios* as “stories of our lives . . . [that] reveal our own complex identities as Latinas” (1). She further asserts that “*testimonio* can be a powerful method for feminist research praxis” (3).

2. The 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 the literal definitions these words imply a connection and sense of identity between Chicanas/Latinas. I will use these words to refer to the women of the organization, following their common practice.

3. I purposely do not capitalize delia's name because she does not do so. She asserts that rules and regulations, especially in the act of writing, are conformist and oppres-

sive. She feels that in order to freely express herself, she must break all the rules of writing. Therefore, in the tradition of black feminist scholar bell hooks, she chooses not to capitalize her name.

4. On the social construction of race and its effects on Chicanos/as, see Ian Haney Lopez, "The Social Construction of Race," in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, ed. Richard Delgado (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 191–203; and Juan Perea, "The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: Exploring the 'Normal Science' of American Racial Thought," *California Law Review* 85 (1997): 1213–58.

5. Henry Giroux, "Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education: A Critical Analysis," *Harvard Education Review* 53 (1983): 257–93. Giroux is a critical theorist who argues that we should study resistance to develop a radical pedagogy that builds student's abilities to engage in social justice struggles. He urges educators to understand resistance in schools because he views schools as social sites that have significant impacts on the experiences of subordinated groups.

6. See Delores Delgado Bernal, "Chicana School Resistance and Grassroots Leadership: Providing an Alternative History of the 1968 East Los Angeles Blowouts" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997). Bernal expands on Giroux's theories of resistance and uses them in Chicana school resistance research. Also see bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990); and Daniel G. Solórzano Octavio Villalpando, "Critical Race Theory: Marginality and the Experience of Students of Color in Higher Education," in *Sociology of Education: Emerging Perspectives*, ed. Carlos Alberto Torres and Theodore R. Mitchell (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998).