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MUXERISTA PEDAGOGY: Raza Womyn Teaching Social Justice Through Student Activism

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Using Chicana/Latina/Queer Feminist Thought and Raza Womyn grounded theory as theoretical frameworks, this research utilizes the methods of ethnography, participant observation, and narrative analysis to explore the contributions of Chicana/Latina student activists to social justice education. The study focuses on the members of an undergraduate student organization called Raza Womyn. The research illuminates the way Chicanas/Latinas struggle against racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia as activist educators employing a distinct kind of education called Muxerista pedagogy.

Keywords: Student activism, Muxerista pedagogy, Chicana/Latina feminism, Social justice education

In college, many students of color engage in a process of self-discovery and social consciousness. Some undergo this process as a result of learning about their racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized identities and his(her)-stories, especially in Ethnic, Women's, Labor, and/or Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender (LGBT) Studies courses. A great majority of other students learn about this through their participation in student organizations as student activists (Muñoz, 1989; Garcia, 1997; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998a). Often student activists engage in meaningful acts of pedagogy during which their collective actions and conversations lead to a raised critical consciousness as they dialogue during meetings, at protests, vigils, conferences, and community events (Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003). Many of us who consider ourselves activists and who have had the experience of raising our racial, class, gender, and/or sexual consciousness, for example, are very familiar with these experiences. They become part of our identities and epistemologies. We sometimes forget how detailed and intricate the experience was and continues to be. It is difficult for many to explain how it is that one develops conscientización (Freire, 1970; Castillo, 1994), which can lead to other obstacles.

For example, sometimes new activists and long-time activists have a difficult time connecting or building bridges between them because they are at different levels of consciousness and because they have different visions of social justice and liberation. I find these issues of great concern for I believe that there are many lessons to be learned and taught by long-time activists about their struggles for justice. I further believe that the fervor and enthusiasm and changing times and strategies of new activists make incredible contributions to the shifting facets of "liberation struggles" today. My research is taking steps towards building bridges between new and long-time activists, while also documenting Chicana and Latina student activism as a form of alternative education that is alive in many spaces across the nation. While many of the findings shared in this piece may appear to be things that have already been contributed by early Chicana/Latina feminists, there are distinct experiences, voices, and lessons to be learned from the specific involvement and thought processes of the women whose experiences I have been researching and documenting for the past five years. This article examines the process and development of a *Muxerista* pedagogy amongst Chicana and Latina college student activists in an organization called Raza Womyn de UCLA, which was created by Chicana/Latina students at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1979.

Why Raza Womyn?

As an activist scholar, I have focused my academic work on learning about and from activists who are engaged in creating social justice pedagogy in schools and communities. Thus in 1999, when I attended the 4th annual Raza Womyn conference, I became intrigued by the work that was being done by approximately 10 undergraduate Chicana/Latina students. Amazingly, these ten women had organized a conference that attracted over 400 Chicanas/Latinas of all ages from throughout Southern California. The day included free breakfast and lunch, childcare, bus transportation; 18 different workshops; a keynote address from well-known Chicana lesbian feminist, scholar, and playwright Cherrie Moraga; a performance by performer/scholar Monica Palacios; spoken word and poetry performed by student participants; and closing entertainment by popular Chicano/a music pioneers, "Quetzal." It was a day filled with food, entertainment, and social justice education. The goal of the conference, as stated by the *mujeres*, was to "...raise consciousness, create dialogue, build solidarity, and provide safe space for all mujeres in attendance" (Raza Womyn conference program, 4). The organizers went on to say that the theme of the conference, "The Fire in Our Spirit Continues the Flame of Collective revolution," represents, "...[their] internal passion, the ability to motivate [themselves] 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" (Raza Womyn conference program, 4). Again, I became more attracted to the idea of studying this organization as I read these words in the conference program because their stated vision for the conference included four fundamental axes of identity and discrimination that many activists and scholars today grapple with-race, class, gender, and sexuality. Some activists and scholars indicate that they are working to create justice on all four of these fronts, but many fall short of this goal.

Chicano scholars and activists have a history of dealing with racism and classism, including labor struggles and imperialism. However, Chicana feminists who have shared the concerns of their male counterparts have challenged the persistence of patriarchy/sexism and heteronormativity/homophobia in Chicano Studies and the Chicano Movement (Garcia, 1997; Martinez, 1998; Trujillo, 1997). Hence, the focus on all four of these aspects of Chicana/Latina experience was especially important to consider as I worked towards developing and describing models of agencies of transformational resistance (see Covarrubias & Revilla 2003). In particular, my work details the work done by Chicana/Latina agencies of transformational resistance and builds on the work done by my colleagues Alejandro Covarrubias (2003), Dolores Delgado Bernal (1997, 2001), and Daniel G. Solórzano (2001).

While Chicana feminists scholars have often shared personal testimonios of their experience as activists in the Chicano and Chicana

Movement in anthologies, books, and journals, scarce empirical research has been conducted to document the experiences of collective groups of Chicanas/Latinas activists in student movements (Cordova et al., 1990; Moraga, 1983; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984; Garcia, 1997; Trujillo, 1997). Even fewer projects have documented the experiences of young women today as activists on and off university campuses.

The amazing element of this project is that there is a resounding echo of similar issues that early Chicana/Latina feminists described throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Many of the early issues continue to be focal points of discussion, struggle, and distress for young activists women today. These women deal with these issues in similar and unique ways. It is most beneficial to see how both new and age-old issues are being dealt with amongst these young women. This research aims to fill a gap in the fields of Chicano/a Studies and Women's Studies, and contributes immensely to the field of Education. It also speaks to the work that had been done around issues of student resistance in education (Giroux, 1983; Rhoads, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 1997; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Research Methods

For the past five years, I have conducted a longitudinal study that includes document examination, surveys, participant observation, one-on-one interviews, in-depth life history interviews, and focus group interviews with the members of Raza Womyn. Over the years, the number of women active in the organization has fluctuated from two to 30 with more than 100 virtual members and supporters on the Raza Womyn listserv. In the spring of 1999, I conducted an initial focus group interview with four members directing questions to them about how they have experienced race, class, gender, and sexuality in their lives. Since then and over the past four years, I attended meetings once a week for 2-3 hours in the Raza Womyn office or in another designated meeting space throughout the academic year, and on occasion during the summer. I also attended and helped organize nearly all of the events sponsored by Raza Womyn for at least three years, including workshops, expression nights, protests, community meetings, vigils, retreats, and various social and cultural events. Between 1999 and 2001, I interviewed 20 members of Raza Womyn one-on-one and surveyed 30 women. While the interviews were intended to be one to two hours, they usually lasted at least two hours and went as long as five or more hours. Throughout this time, I conducted three official focus group interviews, during which all of the women were invited to participate.

Theoretical Frameworks

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) served as guides for the development of this project (Crenshaw, 1995; Perea, 1997; Padilla, 1997). Specifically, I drew on five themes from CRT in education as outlined by Solórzano (1998):

1. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism.
2. The challenge to dominant ideology.
3. The commitment to social justice.
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge.
5. The interdisciplinary perspective.

To fully understand Chicana/Latina experience as a socially constructed racialized experience that constantly intersects with gender, sexuality, and class, I drew heavily on the work done by Chicana/Latina and lesbian feminists, as well as early Chicano scholars (Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1994; Trujillo, 1991 & 1997; Perez, 1999; Moraga, 1983; Acuña, 1988; Muñoz, 1989). I sought the stories or counter-stories of the women in this research to shed light on their struggles and enter academia (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Their experiences and epistemological perspectives served as grounded theory, or Raza Womyn theory, which is the major force of analysis for this piece. Adopting from the CRT/LatCrit frameworks and Chicana/Latina feminism, I outlined a Muxerista[1] (Chicana/Latina feminist) theoretical and research framework to better conduct and analyze this research. A *Muxerista* framework:

1 *Muxerista* is an alteration of the word mujerista, which literally translates into womanist. A *Muxerista* is a woman-identified Chicana/Latina who considers herself a feminist or womanist. The "x" replaces a "j" to signify a connection to the ancestry and languages of Mexico and Latin America.

1. Is committed to challenging all types of oppression in Chicana/Latina/o communities, including but not limited to racism, imperialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, homophobia, nativism, and monolingualism.
2. Addressing the holistic needs of Chicana/Latina/o communities, including females and males.
3. Makes distinctions between Chicanas and Chicanos, as well as between Chicanas, white women, and other women of color, by understanding and examining the specificity and intersectionality of our experiences.
4. Challenges traditional research paradigms and theories by advocating for "theory in the flesh" that bridges our lived experiences with academia. (Moraga & Anzaldúa 1984)
5. Opposes and resists the competitive and divisive practice of "ranking oppressions" based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. (Moraga, 1983)
6. Redefines, reconstructs, and re-empowers ideological constructs historically used to oppress women.
7. Focuses research, pedagogy, and practice on experiences of Chicanas/Latinas/os and views these experiences as sources of strength.
8. Offers a liberatory or transformative solution to racial, gender, sexuality, and class discrimination.
9. Utilizes the interdisciplinary knowledge base of ethnic studies, women's studies, social sciences, history, humanities, and the law to inform praxis.

Notably, these tenets may be employed by other Chicana/o and Latina/o scholars, but it was helpful for me to connect different bodies of literature and detail this list to consider how my research was framed, conducted, and analyzed, by paying close attention to the collective recommendations of Chicana/Latina/o scholars in various fields of study.

Transformational Resistance and Agencies of Transformational Resistance

Delgado Bernal's (1997) dissertation work examines women's leadership roles in the 1968 student movement resisting the discrimination of Chicana/o students in East Los Angeles. She identifies their actions as transformational resistance. According to her,

> Transformational resistance...is based on a conscious critique of domination and is motivated by an interest in liberation or social justice. It includes a deeper level of consciousness that allows agency to be manifested in ways that are more empowering than that of traditional notions of school resistance (p. 91).

Hence, students who are aware or have a critical consciousness of racism/white supremacy, classism/imperialism, sexism/patriarchy, and homophobia/ heteronormativity and are active in the deconstruction of these aspects of subordination in their personal lives, communities, and/or social spaces are engaged in transformational resistance. Furthermore, agencies of transformational resistance are organizations whose goals include the following (Covarrubias & Revilla, 2003):

- Promote a multi-dimensional consciousness,
- Nurture a commitment to social justice,
- Provide and develop skills and services that make it possible for participants to engage in at least one of several forms of empowering changes (for example, self-transformation, school change, community empowerment, or societal transformation), and
- Create and sustain a community of inclusiveness.

Using these guidelines, my data revealed that Raza Womyn is indeed a Chicana/Latina agency of transformational resistance. In fact, Raza Womyn uses student activism and *Muxerista* pedagogy to teach social justice.

Muxerista Pedagogy: Learning and Teaching One Another How to be a Raza Womyn

Muxerista pedagogy involves dialogue, praxis (theory and action), and dialectical exchange

between the participants. At the center of this pedagogical experience are Chicana/Latina realities. Some topics can include ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality, health, politics, immigration, intimacy, love, sex, social justice, and revolution. The common factor that brings participants together is a commitment to creating social change through Chicana/Latina resistance to subordination, and this goal is coupled with warmth, love, and fun.

The concept of dialogue often used by Raza Womyn is borrowed from critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire (1970). Many of the women I observed studied his philosophies in education or other fields of study. Amongst student activists at UCLA, his work has been popularized and very actively engaged. I have documented the women's use of the term over time and found that there is a strong connection to critical pedagogy as it is described in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). On several occasions, Raza Womyn have introduced discussions about Freire and discussed his teaching philosophies directly as a means for educating themselves and others about Chicana/Latina/o experience.

Dialogue and questioning take place formally and informally. Informally, it occurs in weekly meetings or during social gatherings, which are designed specifically to create a safe interactive and educational space. Formally, dialogue and questioning takes place during workshops, performance art and *mujer* expression events, the annual Raza Womyn conference, and national conferences such as *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* (MALCS) and the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS).

Safe Space

There is a tenderness and caring culture that makes this space different from most other activists spaces because it is founded on the premise that *mujeres* need safe spaces and that they need to constantly recreate them. As one member of Raza Womyn explained,

> 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...
>
> And 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 to say and if I'm constantly being silenced.

As this member of Raza Womyn, Paula[2], indicates energy, language, and courage are developed in this safe space of *mujeres* in order to engage in social justice activism outside and inside of Raza Womyn. Many of the *mujeres* have encountered marginalization and/or discrimination within other student organizations for a variety of reasons, such as being a women, feminist, Queer, and/or radical. The sense of belonging and connecting with one another is a constant variable in the success of making Raza Womyn a "safe space."

I found that while many of the *mujeres* came to Raza Womyn with their own personal critiques of discrimination and oppression, not all of them had a shared understanding of the multiple facets of oppression and privilege that Chicana and Latina communities face. While some indicate that they recognized discrimination in their personal lives or in society, many did not know how to articulate these issues. When I asked another member of Raza Womyn how she came to define social justice, delia[3] answered,

2 Because this is both a herstorical and social scientific project, I have considered using the real names of the women to honor their contribution and document their work in the organization. After discussion with each of them about whether or not to use pseudonyms, all of them but two have asked that their real names be used. I use only first names to identify the women.

3 delia consciously chooses not to capitalize her name in resistance to institutional demands of "proper" grammar.

> I think I came to that definition, a lot has to do with my involvement of Raza Womyn, but I think that it has to do with my experience and involvement with my community, especially youth. I know that some of the older women in Raza Womyn also started opening my eyes because they would pose questions and we would talk about certain stuff. And it motivated me to challenge myself, and to start thinking about the conditions we were living in.

It is through the process of questioning and dialogue, along with her involvement in her community, that the educative and consciousness-raising process began for this *mujer*. In Raza Womyn, she was able to develop and articulate her early critiques of discrimination as she witnessed at home, in school, and elsewhere.

Discussions during meetings lead to personal and global issues. In terms of global issues, they generally speak about the political actions of social justice activists and struggles against the oppressive actions of societal institutions. They may talk about racism, for example, as it is occurring within the university and other institutions. They also talk about the war in Iraq and the devastating impact it is having locally and abroad. They encourage each other to participate in specific struggles or acts of resistance, such as protests, rallies, conferences, and performances. With regards to their personal issues, they share the intimates aspects of their lives. They sometimes talk about their relationships with male and/or female partners. They often talk about their families, especially their mothers and the struggles that they encounter in their homes. They also confide in each other about their overall challenges in school. These discussions go in many different directions, but include very personal topics that are often believed to be taboo amongst Chicanas/Latinas, such as menstruation, masturbation, love, and sex. The intimacy and vulnerability that these women allow themselves to be involved in this space is not easily or naturally achieved. A safe space is purposefully and continuously (re)created by using specific strategies such as ice breakers, talking circles, and alternative ways of organizing and leading.

Safe Space for Queer and Straight Women

The issue of sexuality and the acceptance of all manifestations of sexuality, including heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender is an important one in terms of building safe space. This has been a fundamental aspect of Raza Womyn since around 1997 when several of the participants of Raza Womyn began to question their "straight" sexuality and "come out" as Queer women.[4] They struggled early on with their own internalized homophobia, but through dialogue and shared education they worked to create a safe space for both "Queer and hetero" women. This was and continues to be a struggle for Raza Womyn because the issue of sexuality is sensitive. They learned that this would need to be an on-going process. The recreation of safe space would entail consistent dialogue and work. "Rae"[5], a *veterana* of Raza Womyn during the initial move for a Queer friendly space, told me about her fear that Raza Womyn would again become unsafe for Queer women.

> I [told delia] that even though we had found a place, we had to create it and make it the way it was, and to do me the favor, even though there may not be out Queer women, make sure that the space was still there and that it still would be safe if someone were to come out because the last thing you need is to reinvent the wheel, and that's hard because we had to do that. We had to make it Queer friendly...

The issue of sexuality continues to be a complex but a fundamental aspect of the *Muxerista* vision to create safe spaces for women. It is also one of the most distinguishing aspects of Raza Womyn as many Queer members of Raza Womyn indicate that most other organizations that they have participated in has suppressed this identity and their desire to organize around Queer issues, even when the organizations profess to do otherwise. Queer activism in organi-

4 The term Queer is commonly used by Raza Womyn to identify gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender people. Like many others in the Queer Movement, they have claimed and redefined the word Queer as a form of empowerment.

5 "Rae" is a pseudonym.

zations of people of color continues to be overlooked or tokenized. Furthermore, Raza Womyn has reportedly been different from other activist organizations in that there is a concerted effort to build understanding and alliances between "straight" and Queer (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) members of the organization, while maintaining a commitment to fighting racism and classism as well. This is something that is absent even in some Queer organizations of color, based on the experiences of some Raza Womyn, have difficulty establishing strong commitments to both heterosexual and Queer issues and to building alliances between them.

Organizational Structure

In response to bureaucracy and hierarchy in other organizations that the women were involved in before or while they were in Raza Womyn, they created and have maintained a different leadership and organization style for the past twenty years. There are no presidents or vice-presidents in this organization; instead, there are coordinator positions for things such as herstory, outreach, education, conferences, and budgets. There is a constant reminder, that this organization is a collective and that all members have equal votes. The Raza Womyn constitution indicates that "Raza Women, unite in the spirit of a *collective* movement to achieve sexual, political, educational, cultural, social and self determination" (italics added). Because the current members strongly oppose regulations that silence members of organizations by posing attendance rules in order to vote, they reject formal voting rules. As new members come to Raza Womyn for the first time, they find themselves immediately accepted and valued in the organization, and responsibilities are just as quickly assigned. A Raza Womyn *veterana*[6] named Carmen, recalled her early days in Raza Womyn and explained that she was very impressed by the level of inclusion she experienced early on:

> I think that the women...have worked hard to maintain [a safe space] in terms of the way that we dialogue with each other and the way that we talk about us as being a collective in terms of the decision-making and in terms of dealing with each other. And that was one thing that I found really surprising too that...it was early on in my first days of Raza Womyn. I remember people wanting to know what I thought about certain things...I remember people were like, 'Okay people need to volunteer...' And I was like, 'Wait a minute. This is just the second time I'm here, and how can you be trusting me with this responsibility?' And sort of feeling like they were giving me that responsibility, and I had to live up to that. That I had to perform and be there and be accountable for what I was doing and for what I was volunteering for.

Carmen was astounded by the amount of trust and responsibility that she was given by other members of Raza Womyn as they worked toward organizing their fifth annual conference. She explained this was a determining factor in why she returned to Raza Womyn and continues to support and work with the organization today.

Meetings appear to be informal, but still have particular components that facilitate dialogue, intimacy, and organizing. The women purposely sit in a circle or around the table. Usually, there is a waiting period of fifteen minutes to an hour (they wait for other *mujeres* to arrive), during which the women "catch up" with another by discussing their day, family, school or home pressures, community issues, and/or the world abroad. Many times, these discussions can be the most educative part of the meeting because the *mujeres* will bring up issues that are most pressing to them.

When the meetings start, they sometimes begin with an opening "icebreaker," where they say their names and answer a question, such as: "How was your day?", "Do you want to have children and if so, how many?", or "If you were a fruit, what would you be and why?" Over the years, questions for the icebreaker have been both funny and serious. They construct a point of engagement, during which the women might learn something different about one another, or

6 A *veterana* is literally a veteran. Former Raza Womyn are affectionately referred to as veteranas rather than as former members.

it might just give them an opportunity to laugh or cry together, both of which are extremely valued in this space.

After the icebreaker, there may or may not be a formal agenda. The *mujeres* discuss events and activities that they are planning or organizing. They divide the responsibilities amongst each other, and ask for support for other activities they might be involved with outside of Raza Womyn. There is an expectation that if a member of Raza Womyn introduces a new topic or activity, the other members will be encouraging and hopefully just as interested in becoming involved. As members have brought up particular issues that are of interest to them, there has been overwhelming support for them. For example, a Raza Womyn member might be interested in promoting Queer issues or labor issues, and other Raza Womyn will be invited to help organize events and discussions toward this effort. Thus, the commitments or agenda of Raza Womyn have changed over the years to reflect the interests of the individual members. The only events that have been constant over years are the annual conferences and the *Mujer* Expression Nights.

Finally, meetings often end with a "talking circle," during which the women have one more chance to share an intimate aspect of their lives. During busy school periods or conference organizing, there is a desire to end meetings quickly and meetings do at times become strictly "business" oriented. Thus, women during the 1990s employed a strategy called a "talking circle," done at the end of every meeting, during which every woman present has the chance to speak and share how she feels at that time and point in her life. These talking circles can last anywhere from ten minutes to a couple of hours, depending on the needs of the individuals and the group. Many tears have been shed and much laughter shared during this part of the meeting. It is the single most unifying strategy that Raza Womyn use to maintain a "safe space" and to connect the members of the organization. Due to time constraints there is a tendency to not want to always do a talking circle, but inevitably a few members will note the absence and need for the return of talking circles.

Raza Womyn de UCLA was not the first or only organization to use the strategies mentioned above. They drew on different ideas for organizing that they learned in other organizations, they added their own perspectives on how to best implement these strategies, and mostly importantly, they taught and continue to teach each other what works best for their specific needs. Furthermore, these strategies change over the years, and archaic practices are not preserved merely because they worked in the past. This is very different from other organizations in which Raza Womyn have been involved.

Learning, (Re)Defining and Producing Chicana/Latina Identities

The learning and educational process evolves and manifests itself in a variety of ways. One of the best examples includes the production of knowledge that leads to such things as new, redefined, reclaimed, and/or reconstructed terminology used for self-identification. As the members of the organization encounter new politics and experiences, a new "naming process" develops. Sometimes they create or redefine terms to express their identity as it relates to their critical consciousness and lived experiences. For example, *Muxerista* was a term claimed by the members of the organization who were influenced by Chicana/Latina feminists and other feminists of color who use the terms "mujerista" and "womanist." However, they make it their own as they redefine it and spell it differently. Raza Womyn have created or claimed a variety of terms to identify their raced, classed, gendered, and sexual politics. Some of the terms that have been used (not necessarily in chronological order) include the following.

Chicana/Latina/Xicana: Debates about the political significance of the term Chicana as opposed to Latina arose in Raza Womyn meetings in 1996, when the 1st annual Chicana/Latina conference was created. Half the women argued that the term Chicana was too political and that it would alienate potential participants of the conference from the community. They argued that Latina was less political and would therefore be more inviting. The compromise was to use both. Today, the term Latina is still used

because it encompasses more women than those of Mexican-origin. Sometimes Chicana is spelled with an "x"–Xicana–in recognition of an indigenous ancestry. The Chicana versus Latina, (or Hispanic) debate has taken place before and after 1996 in Raza Womyn; nevertheless, as new women come in with different understandings of these terms, they become new points of education and discussion.

Raza Women/Raza Womyn: In 1979, the founders of the organization wanted a name that would encompass all of the women who were involved and not all of them were Chicanas; some were from Central and South America. They decided that the term "raza" included all Latinas and Chicanas. Because they branched off from an organization that was both male and female, but also embraced the term "raza," they distinguished themselves from them by adding the word "women" to the name of the organization. For many years, the name remained unchanged. However, in the 1999-2000 academic year, many of the women with strong feminist politics chose to rename the organization by removing the "e" in "women" and replacing it with a "y" making it "womyn." As delia eloquently wrote,

> the reason the collective of womyn of color that i am part of and my self spell womyn with a y is to deconstruct the language that speaks of us. since the language, especially western culture is very sexist and male centered (as in wo-men. men think that they are the center and most important being of fierce mother earth and that womyn cannot exist and do anything if they are not present). we resist this and rather self define ourselves. in other words being that language is part of our voice and existence we engage in not only deconstructing it and transforming our language but in its process of transformation it is also womyns' empowerment, and a process of renaming, redefining and reclaiming our existence. with no doubt, then, that traditional, mainstream, western educated minds often find it hard to recognize, challenge, and engage in the reconstruction of a language that constantly silences, objectifies, and disempowers womyn, queer community, people of color, immigrants. indeed in reclaiming and rewriting our language, it is a challenge to the hierarchy and sexist structure of this patriarchal, capitalist, eurocentric, sexist, homophobic world.

And this was how "Raza Womyn" came to be renamed in very recent years. The self definition and resistance to patriarchal language is evident in this women's explanation.

Although Raza Womyn were not the first to engage in this practice of removing the "e" from women, their use of "womyn" does not merely mimic white feminist practice. Quite on the contrary, before it was used by the organization, the women dialogued about the rationale and relevance of the name change for this organization. Some of the women voiced similar opinions expressed by delia in the above quote, but others had never even thought about the issue until it was discussed in the meeting. They embraced this ideology once they had a clear understanding of its significance.

Feminista or Chicana/Latina feminist: Not everyone in the organization identifies as a feminist, at least initially. In fact, in the early years of "Raza Women" very few women wanted to be identified as feminist because feminism was believed to be a White women's movement, as was common amongst other Chicana activists of the 1970s and 1980s (Garcia, 1997). Heteronormativity, homophobia, and chingon politics[7] (Martinez, 1998) were strong characteristics of the organization and their members prior to 1997-1998. These women, like many other Chicanas/Latinas active in the 1970s-1990s Chicano movements did not identify as feminist. However, in the late-1990s a new generation of women grew into the leadership of Raza Womyn. They read and dialogued about Chicana and women of color feminism and

7 Another member of Raza Womyn named Gar defines chingon politics as "tough guy politics." She says, "Those are terms from Betita Martinez. 'Yo soy mas chingon.' Like, I'm the one who you can't fuck with because I'll fuck with you...It's very penis driven, phallic driven, patriarchy driven, and it is embraced and expected in many organizations." (Martinez, 1998) She says that her experience in a co-ed Chicano organization led her to internalize this type of patriarchal, sexist, and homophobic leadership.

LGBT studies. They encountered fierce sexism and patriarchal conflicts with the Chicano/a organization on campus, and in response, their feminist politics and identities became more prevalent. These women had a strong impact on the future of the organization. They fostered and taught a new "radical" sense of Chicana/Latina feminism that remains today. They initiated what I identify in the data as *Muxerista* theory, pedagogy, and praxis. At times, the members of the organization have again expressed a rejection of the term "feminism" because of its connection to white women. Instead they have adopted terms offered by Chicana feminist scholars or they have translated the word into Spanish-"*feminista*."

Revolucionaria [Revolutionary]: In 1999, the phrase "re-constructing revolution" was adopted by the group. It was a direct challenge to the Chicano Movement that espoused calls for revolution (equated with racial and class justice), but ignored issues of gender and sexuality. During a focus group interview, I asked what "re-constructing revolution" meant. One woman answered:

> Revolution is not about creating a revolution or deconstructing the old revolution, but it is our own movement toward ourselves and toward social justice, we are reconstructing revolution. It is revolution when you start becoming a woman who speaks for yourself. It is real when you're making real changes in your life or affecting other people and when your organization is changing people's lives. When you create a space that has never existed, like the space we created in Raza Womyn, to talk about the real situation and to create empowerment. (Focus group interview 1999)

The age-old call for "revolution" was called to task by members of Raza Womyn as they recognized the contradictions of early activists who claimed to be revolutionaries or to want revolutionary social change, but who nevertheless maintained oppressive dynamics of patriarchy, imperialism, and homophobia. They rejected this vision of revolution and called for a "re-construction" of revolution, a Chicana/Latina/Queer/Feminist revolution.

Several of the women I interviewed identified as revolutionaries, or *revolucionarias*, meaning that they were actively engaged in fighting for social justice against all forms of subordination. When I asked the mujeres, who came up with the theme "re-constructing revolution," they answered, "we all did." Even when I insisted that there must have been one person who had the original idea, they maintained that the collective group had come up with the idea together. I did not realize how true this was until I participated in the meetings during which the annual conference themes were decided. Indeed, several different ideas are brainstormed and they are pieced together to create one theme. It is especially during these meetings that I have witnessed *Muxerista* pedagogy in practice.

Central American/ *Salvadoreña/ Guatemalteca/* GuaNica [*Nicaragüense/ Salvadoreña*]: As I noted earlier, even the founders of Raza Womyn had the foresight to recognize that the Latina/o population in California was rapidly diversifying. While the majority of Latinas/os were Mexican and Chicana/o, there were also many Central Americans and some South Americans and Latinos/as from the Caribbean. This was why the Raza Womyn founders used the term "raza" as an umbrella for all Latinas. In recent years, there has been a larger number of Central Americans that come to Raza Womyn with the experience of having people assume that they were Chicanas/Mexicanas. They are frustrated by the omission of their his/her-story even in Chicana/o Studies programs and Chicana/o organizations. They have brought this issue to attention and have asked for the support of all Raza Womyn in bringing awareness about difference and diversity amongst Latinas. Raza Womyn has welcomed this contribution, and slowly changes have been made to incorporate their differences and herstories. For example, their was a "Central American revolutionary women" workshop at the annual conference, "a feminist analysis of the El Salvador Peace Accords" presentation during a Raza Womyn meeting, a film about Central American women poets was screened, and several poetry work-

shops by Central American women were held. The overall inclusion of Central American issues in Raza Womyn discussions increased in the past two years. One Raza Womyn in particular who has been an advocate for ensuring a Central American presence in Raza Womyn created her own identity label, "GuaNica." She writes,

> As I grew older I needed to expand my identity from Latina to Salvadoreña, Nicaragüense, but 'American' born. Through my own personal research into these two beautiful countries and countless questions to my family, I slowly began to piece together finally an understanding of my families' history and where I stood as a 1.5-generation nieta, daughter, and sister. I now stand before you a proud *'GuaNica' and Centro-Americana*. (Anayvette, 4-11-03)

"Guanaco" is the term used to refer to people from El Salvador, and "Nica" refers to her Nicaraguan heritage; thus GuaNica is the blending of the two. Some scholars have theorized biracial identities, but few have consider trinational ethnicities that include more than one Latin American country and the United States. As Anayvette and other Central American women have taught us, there are growing numbers of people with these multiple identities.

Hocicona [Loud mouth/Outspoken]/ *Malcriada* [Miseducated/Defying Cultural Norms]/ *Descarada* [Shameless]/ *Malinchista/ Chingona:* In the tradition of the Civil Rights Movements, Raza Womyn have reclaimed, redefined and empowered an array of words that have traditionally been used to disempower Chicanas/Latinas. For example, by patriarchal definitions "*hocicona*" means that a woman talks too much, but Raza believe that an *hocicona* is a woman who speaks out against male oppression. A "*malcriada*" is a woman accused of misbehaving or not abiding by the rules she was raised to follow. However, Raza Womyn argue that a *malcriada* is a woman who defies patriarchal prescriptions of "proper" women's behavior. *Descarada* literally means shameless and is used to insult women who reveal "deviant" behavior. Raza Womyn, on the other hand, assert that a *descarada* is a woman who removes her mask of silence and is not ashamed to speak her mind and reject oppressive conditions by empowering themselves and other women. Malinche is a key figure of Mexican history. Often she is said to have betrayed the indigenous people of Mexico by translating and assisting the Spaniards in the conquest of the Aztecs. However, many feminists have contested her role as a "bad woman" revealing the intricate details that indicate that this negative image is used as a tool to oppress women.[8] Likewise, Raza Womyn claimed the term "*Malinchistas*" and printed it on their conference t-shirts. They define a *Malinchista* as a strong, intelligent woman who rejects the negative aspects of her culture.

Chingona is a term that signifies power-a "bad ass" or strong woman. However, this term is highly contested amongst Raza Womyn because some feel that the root word, "*chingar*" which translates into "to fuck" continues to signify patriarchal notions of power. Others argue that there are multiple meanings of "chingar" and "Chingona," and they seek to self-define and empower the use of the term. To them, a Chingona is a strong, fierce woman. Because of the conflicting views and inability to agree on the use of the term, Chingona had not been used in any of the conference titles although it had been suggested for three consecutive years until this spring, 2004. In line with the *Muxerista* consciousness of the space, the women respected the different convictions shared about the term and because they had not come to a consensus, they did not use it previously. This year however, there was yet another discussion and finally agreement that led to the following title, "Muxerista (Re)Visions: Chingonas Dismantling Oppressive Structured and (Re)Constructing Revolution".

Again, the members of Raza Womyn may have not been the first to develop some of these shifts in language and terminology, but they have negotiated what they learn in books and classes, from their families or communities, and from each other to determine how they wish to identify themselves. Some of the *mujeres* have never

8 See del Castillo (1978) Candelaria (1979); Messinger Cypess (1991)

heard or defined these terms before coming to Raza Womyn. Others have and they push identities and the process of naming themselves in different directions. In both cases, they bring a discussion about "naming" to Raza Womyn. They teach each other about the changing significance of these terms, and together they produce new understandings and knowledge that is specific to their experiences. The striking thing about this process is its resemblance to the processes that early Chicana/Latina feminists have documented. Although some of these ideas or experiences were quite common early on, they continue to be new and of importance to many of these *mujeres*.

A Muxerista Consciousness

Muxerista was an identity that was claimed by Raza Womyn as quickly as it was introduced during a meeting in 2002. It was suggested as part of a conference title for the seventh annual conference. The theme was "malcriadas soltando la lengua en liberacion: m*uxeristas revolucionando el mundo*" [malcriadas[9] freeing their tongues in liberation: womanists revolutionizing the world]. *Muxerista* is an alteration of the word mujerista, which literally translates into womanist as coined by Alice Walker (1983) who defines womanist as:

> 1....A black feminist or feminist of color...
>
> 2. Also: A Woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength...Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health...
>
> 3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself.
>
> 4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (*xi*)

A *Muxerista* is a woman-identified Chicana/Latina who considers herself a feminist or womanist. The "x" replaces a "j" to signify a connection to the ancestry and languages of Mexico and Latin America. In claiming the *Muxerista* identity, Raza Womyn embrace feminism as defined by some liberal white women and womanism as defined by Black women, but they distinctly alter both to create a Chicana/Latina feminist identity that more accurately represents their realities.

Walker's (1983) definition of a womanist resonates with the meaning of *Muxerista* as it is defined in the Raza Womyn space. Womanist and *Muxerista* identities necessitate the connection to community (female *and* male), culture, language, and the struggle for justice. This differs from white feminism, which is perceived to be more about individual advancement, i.e. the advancement of "women" instead of "women's communities." Chicanas/Latinas and other women of color rarely engage in a social justice struggle that does not include the advancement of their entire community, including Chicanos/Latinos.

As Walker indicates, love is a huge factor of this different kind of feminism for women of color. There is the love for each other, the community, spirituality, food, music, and struggle that must be considered.

Concluding Remarks

As students, Raza Womyn experience alienation and discrimination at a university whose students are predominantly white, heterosexual, and/or privileged. There is a lack of courses and curriculum that allows them to discuss their personal experiences at the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality while connecting them to wider societal issues. Their positionalities are not of general interest to the majority of professors at the university. Thus, they have a commitment to learning their "mujerstoria," or herstory, and to sharing it with students, faculty, family, and their community. They are involved in a constant state of pedagogical practice that I refer to as *Muxerista* pedagogy.

9 Malcriada does not have a direct translation. See description above.

Based on my research of Raza Womyn over the past five years, I have learned that there are several aspects of *Muxerista* pedagogy, as it is practiced by Raza Womyn. They include, but are not limited to the following thirteen characteristics. *Muxerista* pedagogy:

1. is founded on Chicana/Latina feminist theory and activism,
2. involves natural dialogue, questioning, and dialectical exchange between equal participants,
3. is based on Chicana/Latina realities or lived experiences,
4. is committed to creating social change through Chicana/Latina resistance to *all* forms of subordination,
5. takes place in a safe space nurtured by warmth, playfulness, love, and fun.
6. necessitates the connection to community (female *and* male), culture, and language,
7. rejects patriarchal forms of power and leadership,
8. encourages intimacy and loving relationships between women,
9. rejects homophobia and heteronormativity and works to create safe spaces for both Queer and heterosexual women,
10. involves the production of knowledge that leads to new, redefined, reclaimed, and/or reconstructed concepts,
11. creates mentoring and novice relationships and respects the different levels of consciousness of the participants,
12. recognizes diversity amongst Chicanas/Latinas, especially distinct his/her-stories and multiple identities, and
13. is critical of social justice movements that maintain patriarchal, racist, homophobic, and imperialist structures.

Overall, the most important element of *Muxerista* pedagogy as it takes place amongst Raza Womyn is love-love for each other, family, community, justice and learning. It is this love that draws women into the organization, that ensures their commitment to activism, and that leads them to want to share it with others.

Student activism has historically been a tool of resistance and transformation for women in higher education who voice discontent with a particular aspect of society, governmental regulations, or their educational institutions. Students have protested things such as war, sexism, patriarchy, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, capitalism, exclusion, xenophobia, and other aspects of subordination. Women have especially focused their activist goals on the liberation, education, and self-empowerment of women. Reproductive rights and sexual liberation have also been key factors of the women's struggle. Even the right to gain entry and inclusion into institutions of higher education has come as a result of activism and protest. The face of student activism in higher education has included women with different identities, including many different kinds of feminists, environmentalists, peacemakers, Marxists, socialists, Chicanas, Latinas, African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islander Americans, Native Americans, international women, "Third World" women, Queer women (lesbian, bisexual, and transgender), and many more. Student activism has also been largely responsible for increasing the numbers of feminist, gender, ethnic, and sexuality studies professors, centers, conferences, programs, and departments at universities across the world.

My research shows that students who come from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds and go to the university engage in a process of resistance to oppressive practices and environments within those institutions, while continuing their education. While a higher education has proven to be a form of liberation for many of these students, it has simultaneously been oppressive to some. As these students learn how to negotiate both privilege and oppression in the college setting, they develop tools for understanding their conditions. These tools are political and social consciousness, which are often internalized and acted upon in the form of student activism. This research further indicates that student activism has a direct effect on these students' retention at their uni-

versities. It is through involvement in on and off-campus student organizations, that these marginalized students create meaning of their education. In their efforts to accomplish their goals or visions of social justice, these students develop intimate connections between their education and their lives.

As students gain critical consciousness on multiple levels, (including but not limited to race, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality,) they gain a more inclusive sense of activism and build necessary coalitions for their efforts. They become agents of social change on their campus and in their communities, as is exemplified in the case study of Raza Womyn de UCLA.

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