

# Jotería Identity and Consciousness

Anita Tijerina Revilla and José Manuel Santillana

As activist scholars, we feel that it is important to begin with our personal testimonies before sharing our research and vision of a collective Jotería identity and consciousness. We tell our queerstories as “counterstories” in the critical race theory tradition to position ourselves and illustrate that there is a direct connection between who we are as individuals and how we participate in an activist and academic community of queer Latina/os and Chicana/os.<sup>1</sup> These stories illustrate the diversity of Jotería identity, as the two of us have had very different experiences in our queer journeys.

*Jota-historia*, *Joto-historia*, and *Jotería-historia* are terms that we use intentionally to indicate the absence of queer history from traditional academic spaces. They refer to a process of reclaiming and documenting our personal testimonies and experiences.

## Anita Tijerina Revilla’s Jota-Historia

By the time I started graduate school at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), I thought that it was quite possible that I was bisexual. I was certain that I was attracted to both women and men, but I had yet to have a romantic relationship with a woman. Through my mid-twenties, I was a self-presumed heterosexual. I had rarely questioned my sexuality, mostly because it was easy for me to maintain a “straight” identity. I was attracted to boys as a teen, and I dated men as a young adult. Heterosexual privilege, heteronormativity, and compulsive heterosexuality can easily lead some people to maintain a lifetime of heterosexual identity despite their diverse sexual desires.<sup>2</sup> Luckily, this was not my case.

I spent two years in Texas between receiving my master’s degree and starting my doctoral program. In San Antonio, fabulous queers and their allies regularly surrounded me. I was one of the acknowledged “allies” in

my group of friends. We frequented the Bonham Exchange and several other gay clubs in town. We all went together—gays, lesbians, and allies. We had fun, and rarely did anyone question people's sexuality or their decision to be in a gay club if they were "straight," although the lines were at times blurry. One evening, a beautiful woman asked me to dance. As in the movies, the music faded away and a spotlight brightened the very spot where we stood. It was one of those moments that seem to last an eternity. To this day, I cannot remember what my answer was or whether I danced with her. What I do remember is that I was intensely attracted to her and had a deep desire for her, a desire I had never experienced for a woman before. The next day, I sat at the kitchen table with my mother and said, "Mom, I think that if I ever meet a woman that I'm attracted to, I will date her." My mom, a working-class Tejana who raised us on her own since the age of thirty, replied, "You know what *mija*? I think that I would do the same thing. I think I only married your dad because I was expected to." Ever since then, my mother and I have both openly proclaimed our desire for and attraction to both women and men.

Soon after, I entered a seven-year relationship with a man, my first adult long-term relationship. While I was in that relationship, I became a member of an organization called Raza Womyn de UCLA. The women in this organization were Chicanas/Latinas, feminists, labor organizers, and educators. Some were queer, others were allies, many were questioning their sexuality, and most were activists who also identified as muxeristas (Revilla 2010a, 2010b).<sup>3</sup> These women became participants in my research, which culminated in a dissertation and several published articles; they were my friends, fellow activists, and incredible teachers. As a member of this organization, I felt free to question my sexuality and to shift my sexual identity. I began to openly identify as bisexual, pansexual, and/or fluid, convinced that I had the right to love and desire any person, regardless of sex and gender identity. Since coming out as queer, I have predominantly dated women, while always honoring my ability and desire to love whomever I wish.

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As a participant action researcher and member of this community, I learned and wrote about the fluidity of sexual identity and the importance of organizations that actively support people who are questioning their sexual identity and coming out as queer. This organization and its members epitomized a muxerista praxis, theory, and pedagogy that led to the early identification of a muxerista consciousness in my work. This in turn has served as a foundation for the Jotería identity and consciousness outlined below.

### **Jose Manuel Santillana's Joto-Historia**

During my last year as an undergraduate at UCLA, in 2006, I enrolled in a Chicana/o studies course titled *The Chicano Movement and Its Political Legacies*, with Professor Maylei Blackwell. It was in this class that I began my research on Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU), formerly known both as Gay Latinos Unidos (GLU) and as Latinos Unidos (LU). The organization was founded in 1976 in Los Angeles to draw people together to support "Gay Latin/Heritage" issues. Co-founders included Rolando Palencia, José Ramírez, David Gonzales, Juan Villagómez, Ernesto Rojas, Ramón Márquez, and Davis Milhauser. In 1982 the group began publishing a monthly newsletter, *Unidad*, which lasted about fourteen years. GLLU called for educating all communities about the multiple and simultaneous oppressions that gay and lesbian Latina/os face in everyday life. Essentially, the organization successfully created a queer Latina/o network through its newsletter, community events, and active role in the larger Los Angeles area.<sup>4</sup> GLLU was one of a very few groups in Southern California organizing around gay and lesbian Latino issues in that era, and it opened the doors for future LGBT Latina/o groups like *Bienestar*.<sup>5</sup>

This was the first time I had conducted any research on queer Latina/o and Chicana/o activism, and I was excited when I began reading the material.<sup>6</sup> The paper became more than a research project: it was a way I could explore my own identity as a queer Chicano. I wanted to know about other people's experiences growing up in a society where white supremacy, patriarchy, and homophobia existed; I wanted to know how others had overcome these barriers and fought against oppression. As I interviewed past members of GLLU, I began making connections with their experiences. Many of them had felt, in the 1980s, that their sexuality was silenced in nonqueer activist organizations; two decades later, I felt the same. Their stories as queer Latina/o activists inspired me to continue doing both my

academic work and my activism in the community. The research process gave voice to my experience as a young queer Chicano activist—to my Joteness, or Jotería.<sup>7</sup>

Although I had begun educating myself about social justice issues during my first years of college, in no other class did I feel comfortable enough to express my experiences as a young Chicano queer growing up in central California. Class sessions provoked discussion of what it meant to be brown in the United States.<sup>8</sup> One session specifically focused on the United Farm Workers of America (UFW) and brought forth images of my *familia*, my grandmother Tomasa and my aunt Lupe, who took part in the farmworkers' movement in the late 1960s. This made me realize and affirm that my history as a brown person mattered. I began to see the women in my *familia* as part of a legacy that belonged to me and to many other young brown people. Just as the personal experiences of my *familia* mattered, so did my experiences as a queer person. Revisiting these experiences ignited the desire in me to pursue my work in documenting Latina/o and Chicana/o queerstories.<sup>9</sup>

The experience of growing up in Avenal, a small Mexican immigrant town in central California, informs my work. Who I was and where I came from is vital to understanding why my research is more than an academic project and is indeed a tool for survival and resistance—as is true for so many of us who engage in Jotería studies and activism. In doing this work, I had to go through a process of remembering. As hard as it was, I had to challenge myself by visiting the not-so-distant past. Bittersweet memories of the “Jem and the Holograms” doll recalled my struggle with gender. What did it mean to want a Barbie doll as a little queer boy? For me it meant humiliation and rejection by my *tías* and *tíos*. I remember my *tía* Angela storming into my cousin's room and shouting at me as I played Barbies with my *primas*, “What are you doing? Barbies are for girls, not little boys! Go play outside with the boys!” As a young “boy,” I was prohibited from exploring my femininity. My gender was confined to other people's definition of maleness. Every touch, every brush to Jem's hair challenged this socially constructed maleness.

Other images come to mind: my grandmother and father working under the hot sun in the San Joaquin Valley fields while white ranchers watched over them. These experiences made me realize that racism had something to do with that fact that my *familia* was picking crops in the dirt and sweltering heat. I remember my father taking me to the fields on one of his workdays; I watched him as he picked onions for hours. At lunchtime,

the ranch owner drove up to the workers in his truck and stood over them to make sure they were working quickly. The rancher would often blurt out racist slurs. I may not have realized what racism was then, but I knew there was a difference between the white ranchers and us brown people. I also understood that my family's encounters with racism (as well as my own) were important and their stories often untold; they represented our community's struggles. Although my experiences do not reflect those of the entire queer Chicana/o community, they provide an example of what many queer Chicana/os have endured growing up. Only by telling our stories can we open doors to our movements and new possibilities. As marginalized people, we must actively remember how we have survived and resisted.

Early in my research, I realized that there were few books and articles on queer Latina/o activism. Little had been written about the history of queer people within the Chicano movement, or about Latina/os in the gay rights movement.<sup>10</sup> Instead, I found that most Chicano movement literature revolved around heterosexually identified Chicano men, perspectives that contributed in one way or another to the homophobia and patriarchy of the Chicano movement. Figures such as Corky Gonzales, César Chávez, and José Angel Gutiérrez were easy to find in textbooks (Acuña 2004; Navarro 2000; Rosales 1997; Vigil 1999). Research on queer Latinos, meanwhile, typically dealt with HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, while queer studies was dominated by white queer experiences and politics. The absence from textbooks of queer Latina/os and Chicana/os and their activism made me question the written histories of various movements. Why had the efforts of Jotería gone unnoticed? Did the absence of queer Latina/os and Chicana/os from history books mean that they did not take part in the important movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s? These questions were the starting point from which I worked.

I felt a great urgency to ensure that queer Latina/os and Chicana/os continued documenting Jotería activism. Members of queer Latina/o and Chicana/o activist organizations such as GLLU were growing older, and for the most part little had been done to document their experiences. At the same time, I felt it was necessary to uncover my own queerstory so that I could continue working toward the liberation envisioned by our queer Latina/o and Chicana/o community ancestors and predecessors, a world free from oppression and domination. I emphasize ancestors because as Jotería, our past is often erased and denied. Therefore, as Jota/os we must acknowledge and celebrate that we, too, have lineages. Thus far, I have documented the queer Latina/o and Chicana/o activism in which I

participated. One of the goals of my research was to find multiple ways to bridge the gap between research and organizing, in particular the organizing that I do as a Joto activist.

Homophobia, patriarchy, and white supremacy are deeply embedded in our communities; consequently, there is a lack of literature that speaks to the collective experiences of Jotería. On one hand, homophobia and sexism have been problems in the Chicano community, preventing the Chicano movement from progressing. On the other hand, in the gay and lesbian rights movement there has been continued white supremacy, which has prevented this movement from fully including queer people of color. Too often, queer Latina/os and Chicana/os and other queer communities of color are pushed aside to the margins of society. Jotería's struggle must be acknowledged in and outside of the Chicano movement and the queer movement. One way to begin this process is to talk about the queer Latina/o and Chicana/o experience: we must write about it and document it.

By documenting Jotería organizing, we can begin to uncover queer-stories that have been systemically silenced and oppressed. Today, we still have very few books on queer Latina/o and Chicana/o activist organizations. Such organizations are often mentioned in passing in books and articles but are seldom documented in depth. While scholars like Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (2003), Juana María Rodríguez (2003), and Anita Tijerina Revilla (2010a, 2010b) have done great work, much more activist scholarship is needed. We should be able to research Jotería and queer Latina/o and Chicana/o organizing and find an array of books addressing the complex realities of our struggles. The queer Latina/o and Chicana/o experience must be told by and heard from all of our communities.

As a Joto scholar, I feel compelled to contribute to and help preserve our queerstories and experiences so that generations after us can reflect on our collective memory. Our community has always actively struggled against injustice; we must be able to understand, theorize, and analyze these struggles. This is why my research addresses race/white supremacy, gender/patriarchy, and sexuality/homophobia in the lives of queer Latina/o and Chicana/o student activists. My master's thesis examined the experiences of nine such students who participated in organizing the 2006 Jotería conference hosted at UCLA. I explored their involvement in social justice movements at the university and in their communities. This group of students eventually formed La Jotería de UCLA, a queer Latina/o Chicana/o student activist group that began in 2006.

I was delighted to find that much of what I was looking for and wanted to do in my own research had parallels in the work of Revilla, who defined a muxerista identity and consciousness in her own earlier research with Chicana/Latina student activists at UCLA. For her dissertation, Revilla conducted a five-year multimethod case study, including participatory action research, ethnography, interviews, and surveys, of Raza Womyn de UCLA, a Chicana/Latina activist organization founded in 1979. In her research, as in mine, race, class, gender, immigration, sexuality, and discrimination based on all of these were major issues within the lives of the participants and the driving force behind their activism. As members of the organizations we studied, we were fully invested in them, playing the roles of researchers and participants simultaneously.

After moving to Las Vegas in 2008, I began doing activist work with the immigrants' rights, feminist, and queer communities; Revilla was already documenting their work and was very engaged in local activism. Soon after, I asked her to serve on my thesis committee. Thus we have worked closely as activist scholars and as friends to formulate the findings shared below, which outline some emerging characteristics of Jotería identity and consciousness. The findings draw on our research projects and on what we have learned from our collective communities in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, as well as from the newly formed Association of Jotería Arts, Activism and Scholarship (AJAAS).<sup>11</sup>

## **A Collective Jotería-Historia**

Through our experiences as Jotería, we have come to understand living, loving, and surviving. The complexities and contradictions of being queer, Xicana/o, working-class, gender-fluid, and/or immigrant have guided our writing and activism. While some scholars have distanced themselves from including personal narrative in their writing, we find it necessary to interweave our own experiences into this work. This allows us to humanize our research and remain accountable to and connected to our community. This human connection, we believe, is essential to Jotería studies and the possibilities it offers within academia. Just as we cannot separate our various identities from one another, we cannot separate our writing from our activism. Our research speaks from the heart and is rooted in radical queer love. While academia has traditionally viewed the heart as negatively emotional and subjective, we believe it is empowering to work from a site that challenges the status quo. Similarly, our research participants and

activist peers connect their activism with their academic journeys. Their will to survive and thrive in an academic setting is rooted in allowing themselves to show up authentically to school, home, and work—always being activists, queers, and seekers/producers of knowledge.

As activist scholars, we have highlighted the voices and queerstories of Latina/o and Chicana/o student activists at UCLA. Our research is driven by an urgency that could only exist for researchers who acknowledge and position themselves as part of the community they are researching. This is a political positionality that allows for the queer and brown to be at the center of knowledge production. Being able to view and theorize from our own perspectives has led us to important insights about Jotería activism, identity, and consciousness.

Below we share emerging characteristics of a Jotería identity and consciousness as expressed in both the academic and activist realms. This identity and consciousness builds on Revilla's (2004) muxerista framework. However, there are specific Jota/o tenets of this identity and consciousness, including but not limited to the characteristics listed below. Jotería identity/consciousness:

1. Is rooted in fun, laughter, and radical queer love,
2. Is embedded in a Mexican, Latin American, Indigenous, and African diasporic past and present,
3. Is derived from the terms *Jota* and *Joto* and has been reclaimed as an identity/consciousness of empowerment,
4. Is based on queer Latina/o and Chicana/o and gender-nonconforming realities or lived experiences,
5. Is committed to multidimensional social justice and activism,
6. Values gender and sexual fluidity and expressions,
7. Values the exploration of identities individually and collectively,
8. Rejects homophobia, heteronormativity, racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, gender discrimination, classism, colonization, citizenism, and any other forms of subordination,<sup>12</sup>
9. Claims and is aligned with feminist/muxerista pedagogy and praxis,
10. Claims an immigrant and working-class background/origin,
11. Claims a queer Latina/o and Chicana/o ancestry, and

12. Supports community members and family in their efforts to avoid and heal from multidimensional battle fatigue.<sup>13</sup>

Our research participants' vision for social justice came from a collective effort to transform their lives and their communities. It was by creating safe spaces that they were able to be active in making those changes happen. In doing so, they produced a specific language and culture that allowed them to empower themselves and to redefine what it means to be queer and brown. Jotería identity and consciousness spoke to them in ways that other identities did not, because it embraced various aspects of who they were.

Our research indicates that Jotería activists, students, and young scholars work to achieve social justice on two levels, externally and internally. Externally, they engage in a variety of collective actions that include protests, marches, rallies, cultural nights, meetings, conferences, and coalition building. In this way they maintain a much-needed visible presence both on and off campus. They challenge other organizations and community members, both Latina/os and others, on their heteronormative, racist, xenophobic, sexist, and homophobic attitudes. Internally, they go through a process of self-education, self-acceptance, self-empowerment, and healing. While some come to terms with their sexuality, others simultaneously explore their intersecting gender, working-class, and immigrant identities. They do so in a loving environment that helps guide them from feelings of marginalization and oppression to spaces of reclamation and transformation.

Various Latina/o and Chicana/o student organizations, queer organizations, and other civil rights movements keep making the same mistakes of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. While some succeed in providing a healthy site for racial justice, they fail to fully include women and queers; or they fail to include issues of race in queer and women spaces. In an attempt to address these issues, the authors present some recommendations for organizations and movements that seek to create inclusive and transformational spaces.

1. Declare a “no one is free when others are oppressed” mindset: Many have made the mistake of failing to see how all our struggles intersect in one way or another. We must be able to make all connections as oppressed and marginalized people. This includes Jotería.
2. Denounce tokenism: The fact that an organization includes a queer-identified person does not in itself indicate that the organization is not

homophobic. Many organizations and movements erect a false façade of inclusion. It is important to challenge this practice.

3. Recognize and challenge privilege: In order to create safe spaces, individuals need to recognize that they might be the beneficiaries of privilege, including but not limited to privileges based on whiteness, light skin, or socially constructed beauty; on passing or identifying as heterosexual, male, or gender-normative; or on citizenship. All of these must be explored, challenged, and dealt with in order to move toward social justice. Simply acknowledging that a privilege exists is not enough. We must explore ways to be authentic allies to others who do not share our privileges and avoid one-dimensional practices and understandings of who is oppressor and who is oppressed. We live layered and complex existences, and therefore we must constantly build and expand upon a multidimensional critical consciousness and movement.

4. Create collective spaces: Hierarchically structured spaces tend to silence people and favor the voices of a few, while collectivity often places more value on democratizing processes. Importance should be given to creating a space that allows for different forms of participation, as well as finding ways to “step up and step back.”

5. Create safe spaces: Organizations and movements should place value on loving environments that nourish self-growth and openness.

6. Ensure accurate representation: Organizations and movements must represent and reflect their membership. They must constantly revisit their goals, manifestos, mission statement, values, defining language, and name to make sure they are including everyone to whom they intend to open the space, even those who are not visibly at the table. As critical race theorist Mari Matsuda argues, we must ask: Who is *not* at the table, and how can we meet the needs of those members of our community who do not have the privilege to be at the table or even know that the table exists? (Matsuda et al. 1993)

7. Be an ally: Individuals, organizations, and movements must explore ways to value and outline effective practices for allies and must be allies to others as well.

8. Celebrate resistance and survival: Traditionally oppressed/silent organizations and movements need to actively celebrate their contributions to this world. They must be vocal and visible.

9. Work toward healing the wounds: Social justice advocates and activists tend to remain in the space of pain and struggle. We must work to heal the pain and to teach, organize, create, and write from a space of healing, love, and triumph.

We humbly offer these suggestions based on our experience and research, but we recognize the difficulties and challenges that exist in implementing them and acknowledge that many more recommendations could also be made. Homophobia, sexism, heteronormativity, classism, xenophobia, gender discrimination, and racism still exist in every part of our society. They are the systems of injustice used to marginalize our communities, and they work together to create borders and institutional discrimination. As Jotería activist scholars, we must continue to work against these structures of domination.

In doing so, we Jotas and Jotos place ourselves within a Jotería movement. We are part of a larger community where our identities, struggles, and collective healing can exist together. These conversations about movement building happen when groups seek to define their liberation. Many of the participants in our research have continued to pursue their vision of social justice long after graduating from UCLA. While some are doing so through established educational and nonprofit organizations, others are forming new organizations and spaces that embrace Jotería identity, consciousness, and growth. Some of the Jotería activists the authors studied have gone on to develop Xin Fronteras (an immigrant rights organization), a brand-new school, and a Latina/o bookstore. Others have received graduate degrees from the University of California, Berkeley, Columbia University, and San Francisco State University, among other institutions.

In Las Vegas, the authors have been working with the United Coalition for Im/migrant Rights (UCIR) and the local chapter of MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), both of which embrace a Jotería and muxerista multidimensional consciousness and practice. On a national level, we are active co-founders and leaders of the Association of Jotería Arts, Activism and Scholarship (AJAAS). There are so many fierce and amazing changes being made, and many more possibilities. Already, because of our Jotería and muxerista identity and vision, we have embarked on a path that is personally healing and transformative. We share this essay as an invitation for others to join us in this Jota y Joto muxerista journey.

## Notes

This essay began as an excerpt from Santillana's thesis. His research built upon the work of Dr. Revilla on muxerista activism with Raza Womyn de UCLA, submitted as her dissertation to UCLA. The characteristics of a Jotería identity and consciousness and recommendations listed in the second half of the essay were created by both authors.

1. Counterstories are told from the perspective of marginalized people, as opposed to stories told by the dominant mainstream.

2. Heterosexism is a system of advantages that unfairly privileges heterosexuals. Heterosexual privilege is a set of unearned benefits and advantages that people who conform with or identify as heterosexual automatically inherit in a heterosexist society. Heteronormativity is the belief in and enforcement of heterosexuality as "normal" and superior to any other sexual identity. Compulsory heterosexuality refers to the idea that heterosexuality is a mandatory, forced, or coercive sexual orientation/identity.

3. A muxerista is a person who identifies as a Chicana/Latina/o feminist and activist.

4. The term *queer* is an umbrella term used to refer to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people.

5. Bienestar is a nonprofit social service organization dedicated to positively affecting the health and well-being of the Latino community and other underserved communities in Southern California.

6. We use the term *Latina/o* to refer to people of Mexican, Caribbean, and South and Central American origin. We use the term *Chicana/o* to refer to people of Mexican descent living in the United States.

7. The term *Jotería* is also an umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual expressions. It refers, however, to queer Latina/os and Chicana/os and gender-nonconforming individuals.

8. The term *brown* is a political, racial, and cultural classification that is based on human skin shade. We use the term to describe the racialized experience of Latina/os.

9. We use the term *queerstory* to make note of the fact that conventional historical accounts continue to be male-dominant, patriarch-centered, and heteronormative.

10. We write "Chicano movement" as opposed to Chicana/o movement to indicate that what most people acknowledge as the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s was male-dominated and patriarchal.

11. AJAAS is an organization dedicated to advancing Jotería through practices that recognize the intimate connections between art, activism, and scholarship.

12. Citizenism is a system of advantages that unfairly privileges citizens of a nation-state.

13. Multidimensional battle fatigue refers to the depletion of energies that results from constantly struggling against discrimination and micro/macroaggressions. This idea expands on Will Smith's (2004) theory of racial battle fatigue.

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