Resisting Spirit Murder

Nurturing Spirit Restoration and Healing through Muxerista and Jotería Mentorship

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In 1991, legal scholar Patricia Williams coined the term "spirit murder" to refer to the spiritual and psychological impact of racism on Black people and other people of color.[1] She suggests that racism causes not only physical damage but also damage at our spiritual core. She writes that spirit murder is the blatant "disregard for others whose lives qualitatively depend on our regard" (Williams 1991, 73). In this way, an act of racism is an affront and an attack on our spirit that can result in a spiritual death and sabotaging of our dreams, hopes, and desires to live. Education professor Bettina Love argues that "slow death, a death of the spirit, is a death that is built on racism and intended to 'humiliate, reduce, and destroy.' . . . Racism is indelible to the Black body and the spirit, and the physical and spirit murdering of Black bodies is unfortunately part-and-parcel of America's history" (2016, 2). Similarly, the attack on Queer, Trans, Black, and Brown people, women and femmes in particular, is intended to be both a physical and a spiritual murder. From a very early age, Queer and Trans bodies of color are rejected, condemned, and too often slain (Galarte 2021). The physical murder rate of Black and Brown Trans women is a nationwide crisis (Brooks 2021). Hence it is imperative that we, as educators, offer interventions within school systems to support and protect students. Jotería and Muxerista mentorship offers some of those interventions within the academy, and I offer my own testimonio with the hope that it might be a guide for others.

In alignment with the concept of spirit murder, critical race theory (CRT) scholar William Smith coined the term "racial battle fatigue," which "refers to the psychophysiological symptoms resulting from living in mundane extreme racist environments. Moreover, the stress of the constant and

omni-present frontline racial battles that people of color face in historically white spaces can become mentally, emotionally, and physically draining and/or lethal from the accumulation of physiological symptoms that often go untreated, unnoticed, and misdiagnosed" (Smith 2004, 171). As a Muxerista, person of color, and Queer person from a working-class background, I know that race is but one facet of a multidimensional battle fatigue. Critical race theorists center their analysis on race and racism, but they also examine its intersection with other social categories that cause marginalization, discrimination, and physical and spiritual fatigue. Our communities and our spirits experience multiple attacks. Muxerista and Jotería mentorship is an intervention that assists Queer and Trans students of color in resisting spirit murder *and* multidimensional battle fatigue. I argue that this kind of mentorship is an act of both spirit restoration and protection.

This essay describes a distinct approach to mentorship that is rooted in Jotería and Muxerista identity, consciousness, and praxis (Revilla 2004; Revilla and Santillana 2014). Focusing on my experience as a professor of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality studies, I share my journey as a student, professor, researcher, activist scholar, and community builder within the academy. I trace the origin of this mentoring approach to a wide range of influences in my life, including my mother; Raza Womyn de UCLA; my advisor Daniel Solórzano, professor of education and Chicana/o Studies; Las Vegas activism; and the Association for Jotería Arts, Activism, and Scholarship (AJAAS), among others.

As first-generation students, scholars, activists, and organizers engaged in social transformation and/or transformative resistance, my students and I practice a kind of mentorship that draws on our commitment to:

1. Living and existing authentically, inside and outside of academia.
2. Honoring the origin of our Muxerista, Jotería, and rebellious spirit connected to our mothers, families, and/or communities.
3. Resisting spirit murder and transforming our spaces into spaces of spirit restoration and spirit healing.
4. Cultivating lifelong individual and community relationships and networks of resistance.

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5. Ending multidimensional struggle and domination.
6. Practicing self- and communal love, pleasure, and spiritual activism.

Below I illustrate how these principles have come into existence and what they look like in tangible terms. Not all of the principles will be discussed, as that would entail a longer written project. Interwoven throughout the essay are my personal, activist, and professional experiences. I do not attempt to separate them. Rather, I show how these aspects of my life come together to formulate my ability to both survive and thrive in institutions and ultimately to become a spirit protector and restorer myself.

The Terms Defined

A *Muxerista* is a person whose identity is rooted in a Chicana/Latina[x] feminist vision of social change committed to ending all forms of oppression, including but not limited to racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and citizenism. The term signifies a layering of identities that speaks to the relationship between ethnicity/race, gender, and critical feminist consciousness and engagement. In this sense, a Muxerista is simultaneously a Chicana/Latina[x], a feminist, *and* an activist—never just one or the other (Revilla 2009).

The definition of a Muxerista, however, has always been organic and evolving. It is heavily influenced by the work of my communities—in particular the work of my students, muxertees and queertees, who are also my colegas, fellow activists, and teachers. I conducted my research with Raza Womyn from 1998 to 2004, and I organized with students and fellow activists in Las Vegas from 2004 to 2019. As a result of this work, I have arrived at a more expansive definition: Muxerista is a gender-fluid and sexually expansive Chicanx/Latinx identity that honors our multiple, intersecting identities and communities while uplifting our radical commitment to activism, organizing, personal and collective liberation, and social transformation (see Revilla et al. 2021). As activists engage in multidimensional struggle, they build a multidimensional consciousness and layered critique of multiple forms of discrimination, including individual, structural, and institutional dimensions. Muxeristas and Jotería work to rectify the mistakes of earlier social movements that were undeniably patriarchal, heterosexist, and gender-static.

Similarly, a *Jotería* identity is built upon both the legacy of Chicana/Latina/x feminism and the contemporary work of Muxeristas. Jotería identity and consciousness is a politics of social transformation rooted in

activism and resistance against oppression *and* in jotx and Queer triumph, joy, and healing.[2] According to AJAAS, a Queer Latinx organization of which I am a co-founder and former chair, Jotería is defined as:

> Noun. 1. queer Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Indigenous people.
>
> "People, listen to what your Jotería is saying." —Gloria Anzaldúa
>
> 2. a reclaimed term of empowerment, derived from the derogatory terms "Joto" and "Jota" which have been used historically to describe people of Mexican descent who do not fit heteronormative standards.
>
> Adjective. 1. relating to or supporting queer Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Indigenous people.
>
> "Did you see the Jotería art exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art?"
>
> 2. a decolonial queer/feminist sensibility and politics, a mode of seeing, thinking, and feeling geared towards empowerment and social transformation.
>
> "Our school district is developing a Jotería curriculum that connects issues of gender and sexuality with environmental racism in Latino communities."[3]

My colega, Jose Manuel Santillana, and I describe Jotería identity and consciousness in terms of several characteristics (Revilla and Santillana 2014). Jotería identity and consciousness are "rooted in fun, laughter and radical, Muxerista queer love," and they "[reject] homophobia, transphobia, monosexism, heteronormativity, cissexism, racism, patriarchy, xenophobia, gender discrimination, classism, colonization, citizenism, ableism, and all other forms of subordination and dehumanization" (173). We wrote that Jotería identity and consciousness support "community members and family in their efforts to heal from multidimensional battle fatigue" (175). Today I would add that Jotería community further guards against attempted spirit murder.

Muxertor/muxertee, *queertor/queertee*, and *jotator/jotatee* are terms of endearment that are playfully used within Jotería and Muxerista communities. Similar to words such as *womxn/womyn*, these terms are intentional paradigmatic shifts away from words that are male and hetero-centered. While *mentor* and *mentee* are not formally gendered, there is an intentional desire to disrupt patriarchal notions by removing the word *men* and replacing it with words and identities that we align with more closely. Hence,

muxertee and muxertor are sociopolitical identities connected to Chicanx and Latinx feminism, activism, and mentorship. Muxertorship rejects patriarchal paternalism and middle-class professionalism and instead uses radical, intersectional feminism and multidimensional struggle as a guide. Muxertors and Joteríators (or jotators) are rooted in familia making; we reject respectability and hierarchy and cultivate reciprocal student-teacher relationships. We are aligned with the concept of femmetors but are more deeply connected to Jotería and Muxerista identities.

A Muxerista Upbringing

I have been able to make it through the academy as a rebel because of my mother. A single parent, she was thirty years old when my father died. Even before she married, she resisted patriarchal, physical, and spiritual oppression in her childhood home. In spite of it, her spirit was strong and joyful.

When my father died, my mother reclaimed her sense of dignity and rebellion. She taught us that we could do anything we wanted, even if we were girls. I grew up emboldened to pursue my goals, speak my mind, and live out loud in a way that my mother had never been allowed to. She was an organic intellectual and a Muxerista who modeled a fierce commitment to liberation before I ever read about it or experienced it outside of my home. Now seventy-two years old, she has spent her life refusing domination and restrictions upon her body and actions. It was her courage that I evoked as I traveled across the country to attend Princeton as an undergraduate, then Teachers College at Columbia University and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) for graduate school.

After leaving my mother and my home, I found spaces of resistance within student organizations. Even on the elite, conservative Princeton campus, there were Black and Brown spaces of activism and study. I became a member of several Black and multiracial student organizations, including the Third World Center, the NAACP, the gospel choir, Acción Puertorriqueña, and the Chicano Caucus. My first taste of activism was guided by Black and Brown student mentors. Two professors showed solidarity with us during a national crisis, when we protested to bring awareness to the brutality against Rodney King and the Los Angeles uprisings. One was the world-renowned Black intellectual scholar Cornel West, and the other was Chicano professor of Mesoamerican religions Davíd Carrasco. Together with my student activism, studying race in classes with Professors West, Carrasco, Toni Morrison, Wahneema Lubiano, and Nell Irvin Painter

changed my life. I did not know it at that moment, but my life course would be forever altered by both ethnic studies and social justice work. When I left New Jersey, I wanted to study race and activism, so I was advised to go to California to pursue a PhD. Before Princeton, I hadn't known anyone who went to college, much less anyone who got a PhD.

Spirit Restoration and Spirit Healing

In "How Schools Are 'Spirit Murdering' Black and Brown Students," Love (2019) writes:

> The spirit murdering of Black and Brown children leaves a trail of unanswered questions: How do children learn after being physically assaulted or racially insulted by a person who is supposed to protect them, love them, and teach them? How does a Black or Brown child live, learn, and grow when her spirit is under attack at school, and her body is in danger inside the classroom? How does a parent grapple with this reality? How are children's imagination and humanity stunted by the notion that they are never safe in their schools because of the color of their skin or the God they pray to? Where does the soul go to heal when school is a place of trauma?

When I took my first "Latinos in the US" course with Jorge Klor de Alva and "Introduction to African American Studies" with Cornel West, I realized that the racism and classism my family had experienced growing up was not an isolated instance. Racism is a pandemic, a social disease impacting Black and Brown people all over the world. Thus, I made it my lifetime goal to ensure that everyone would have this knowledge. I had many questions about addressing wide-scale discrimination, but I understood that raising people's awareness about their own internalized oppression was a first step. I decided to become a high school teacher. Then I decided to teach teachers instead.

Eventually I found myself at UCLA pursuing a PhD in education and studying with Professor Daniel "Danny" Solórzano, a leading CRT scholar in the field of education. Danny is brilliant, loving, and fiercely committed to mentoring students. He rejects the hierarchy of academia by creating interpersonal relationships with his students. Although he is at a top education graduate program, he rejects Eurocentric approaches to scholarship and pedagogy. Both his research and teaching are rooted in Freirean and CRT principles (Freire 1970; Solórzano 1998). In my first year at UCLA, I confessed to him that I did not believe that a PhD was the

answer to the revolution I was seeking. I asked, "How will the research I'm doing create a more just path for my family? How will their lives improve because we write stuff they will never read?" I struggled to find my place at the university and to allow myself to stay within the institution. So much of what I was learning did not seem to matter to my communities, to the people I had left at home— my mother, my sister, my brother, and my community members. In response, Danny said to me, "You have a fire that burns within you. It is my job to keep that fire lit. We both have the same vision. However, we each have our own way of accomplishing and arriving at that vision. It is my goal to ensure that the fire that you have within you, that ignites the passion for social justice, continues to remain lit." Those words guide me to this day, and they epitomize my approach to Muxerista and Jotería mentorship.

Queer and Trans people, women and feminists, and people of color have experienced incredible levels of "push out" that have distanced them from the academy. We have faced horrible instances of discrimination in and outside of school, and often the biggest challenge is simply surviving in society. Thus, while Danny is a cis-hetero man, he has a steadfast commitment to nurturing women, feminists, Queer students, students of color, and critically conscious students. This has been life-changing. He has cultivated community and family, especially for the members of his Research Apprentice Course (RAC); we learned from one another and shared our work with one another to continue the practice of collaborative action research. Danny's mentorship has been spirit restoring and healing to me and to many of my colleagues. Each of us has pursued our own version of his teaching, research, and mentorship. Mine has been infused by the Muxerista and Jotería politics I learned from Raza Womyn, Vegas activists, and the AJAAS comunidad.

Living as My Authentic Self

The work of Gloria Anzaldúa has served as blueprint for me since I first read her book in undergraduate school twenty-eight years ago. I have found the following statement to be a guiding force as well, especially in academia.

> Different lesbians and gays scrutinize the cultural/Other to see if we're correct—they police us out of fear of instability within a community, fear of not appearing united and fear of attack by non-gay outsiders. But I fear a unity that leaves out parts of me, that colonizes me, i.e., violates my integrity, my wholeness, and chips away at my autonomy. We police ourselves out of fear as well. (Anzaldúa 2009, 167)

Anzaldúa's commitment to remaining whole and resisting the policing of her autonomous identity is a guide to me and many of my radical Muxerista y Jota colegas.[4] Many of us have experienced policing from our own community members, and we have had to resist their judgements and expectations to show up as our authentic selves. Maintaining authenticity is a very common challenge within the academy. It has been difficult to be my truest self at the university, especially because I grew up in poverty in a working-class Tejanx neighborhood and rarely felt that my experience was welcomed or understood by peers or professors. Today, it continues to be challenging to be Queer, Chicana, and Muxerista in university spaces. I am often viewed as too radical and outspoken, too much of a feminist, too honest and unapologetic. While at times I have been insulated within departments of women, gender, sexuality, and ethnic studies, I inevitably hit a barrier with peers and supervisors external to my department and sometimes even with people within my own department. I have had to push myself to press against those boundaries and abandon the comfort and pseudo-protection of silence. As a senior professor at California State University, Los Angeles in Chicanx/Latinx studies, I feel emboldened to practice authenticity because I am not alone. There are many senior, radical faculty of color at Cal State LA, which is indeed a refreshing experience.

Over the past twenty-plus years, I have witnessed students and colleagues who feel they can no longer be themselves in a university setting because of the spirit-murdering attacks they have experienced. I have been in similar scenarios, especially when surrounded by white middle-class colleagues, but also at times among middle-class faculty of color.[5] In every instance I have resisted by speaking my truth and calling upon my spirit protectors. My approach to Jotería and Muxerista mentorship is to offer students that freedom as well—the freedom to be audacious, Queer, critical, and even scandalous, rejecting politics of respectability (see Cooper 2017).

In academia, there is a network of supervisors and experts in place to determine whether or not our theories, writing, and speaking skills are legitimate enough to allow us to continue on our academic journeys. Hence, showing up in spaces at the university and allowing myself to be my embodied, whole Muxerista and Jota self gives my colleagues and students a glimpse of what is possible for them. Similar to Anzaldúa, I challenge the "rules" of the academy as well as the rules that are self-imposed. I take to heart what Anzaldúa describes as the Shadow-Beast, our own internal struggle:

> There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts. (Anzaldúa 1987, 16)

When I served as chair of the Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), I started faculty meetings with check-ins, asking people to share how they were feeling. I modeled vulnerability in those instances. In and outside of meetings, I shared personal struggles and glimpses of my personal life in ways not typical of the academy. I challenged rules that minimized the knowledge of undergraduate and graduate students, insisting that they were mature enough to occupy space in the department without supervision, and I argued that even without graduate degrees they had the expertise to teach their peers in the classroom and offer faculty training. I hired undergraduate students to collaborate with faculty in ways that were previously limited to other faculty.

Beyond that, I cultivated community and family with my students and colleagues, becoming a part of their communities. I opened up about my life in and outside of class and shared my struggles related to the "isms and phobias" we discussed in class. I came out to them as Queer. I talked about physical violence I endured in my home growing up. I was honest about my political vision for change and showed up at protests and organization meetings. I attended birthday parties, drag shows, happy hours, family quinceañeras, weddings, graduation parties, Santeria celebrations, and meetings with moms. I supported students through breakups *and* new relationships. I received them when they came out as queer, undocumented, or a sex worker, or shared with me that they were disabled, depressed, or a survivor. I even helped take care of younger siblings when parents were deported. At the same time, I invited them into my home to break bread, to meet my mom, my children, and my partner, to celebrate my birthday or tenure, and to be a part of my life. We became familia, and today many of them are my best friends. They are also my lifelines within the academy, and some are now my colleagues entering the professoriate. They have always been my teachers, my reciprocal Muxertors and Jotators, from whom I have learned. I have tried not to practice hierarchical boundaries with them, but we do have boundaries. They are guided by reciprocity and mutual respect, a clear knowledge of power differentials, and honest and open communication.

The social aspect of our relationships as Queer and Trans and Jotería community is very important for this model of mentorship because LGBTQueer clubs and social settings have been documented spaces of refuge for us. Often, Queer clubs and parties are the only spaces where Jotería can be their authentic selves, where Queer and Trans identities are truly celebrated and welcomed. Sometimes, though, Queer and gay clubs are not safe for Jotería, Queer, and Trans people of color, so my colleagues, students, and I have worked to cultivate Jotería social settings that have a Muxerista politics that is markedly antipatriarchal and antiracist. This is most apparent in the social and academic settings created by AJAAS, our national Jotería organization that focuses on Queer and Trans art, activism, and scholarship while simultaneously hosting social and cultural events that celebrate our whole selves and center Queer and Trans experience.

Some have questioned my friendship and familia-making practices with students. At UNLV, a very well-meaning white male dean told me that my way of running a department was "unorthodox." It was true that my leadership approach was unorthodox, because orthodox within the university means Eurocentric, patriarchal, and middle-class-serving practices. I reminded him that if he wanted faculty of color, women and feminists, Queer people, and first-generation scholars from working-class backgrounds in these positions, we would inevitably appear unorthodox to him and to other hetero white middle-class male and female chairs. I watched him struggle with my call-ins and my pleas for a different reality. I believe he wanted to understand, wanted to be a better supporter of diversity, but he had no idea how steeped in multidimensional discrimination he and the institution were until I pointed it out in detail. This may seem like a common story. The difference was in the act of "talking back." Time and again, I sat with this dean to explain the level of harm he and the university were causing. Unlike other white men and women with whom I have worked in administration, he at least heard me. He allowed himself to feel uncomfortable, and he committed to doing better. I'm not sure he ever arrived there, but I am certain change happened as a result of those discussions. I am clear that the department I was able to co-found and cultivate was markedly different and provided a much-needed alternative to the Eurocentric, patriarchally designed departments throughout campus.

The dean encouraged me, the first Chicana department chair in the College of Liberal Arts and possibly any department on campus, to consider stepping out of my position as chair and into a different position that would highlight my commitment to diversity and community.

Interestingly enough, those strengths were not seen as essential qualities for *all* department chairs. As chair, I practiced and modeled Muxerista and Jotería mentorship and invited others to do the same. The opportunities and resources that my students, like-minded colleagues, and I were able to offer to hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students, staff, and faculty were remarkable given the limitations of the institution. Unfortunately, as I stepped out of the chair position and returned to being a teaching faculty member, I immediately witnessed the department shift back toward its previous commitment to following Eurocentric, middle-class, patriarchal, heteronormative, anti-immigrant authority.

Still, during the time I was department chair, I was able to hire more feminist, Queer, immigrant faculty and instructors of color, and recruit and graduate more working-class, immigrant, Queer, Trans, and feminist students from a department of gender and ethnic studies, than ever before on the UNLV campus. My colleagues, students, and I were able to create a presence and voice for marginalized communities throughout the university and even pursue a dialogue with administrators that led to fundamental shifts in experiences for students, staff, and faculty. Sadly, when I left the university, my position was not replaced with another tenure-track position specializing in Chicana/Latina or women of color feminism. Instead, my department was offered a highly exploited visiting assistant position, which I can only assume was done intentionally to avoid hiring another "unorthodox" queer, first-generation, feminist of color faculty member.

Conclusion: Spirit Protection and Spirit Restoration

When I was getting ready to start my first job in Las Vegas, I was scared to leave UCLA. Danny had nurtured me and given me all the tools that I needed to succeed in a doctoral program, but a career at a different university without him and my Raza Womyn/Muxerista community felt daunting. Walking across campus, I admitted to Danny that I was scared. He said, "Anita, I know that you will take all of the knowledge you have gathered and all of your passion and do wonderful things in the field and for your students." His faith in me was spirit restorative. It was similar to my mother's faith in me when she sent me off to college across the country. She has always said, "I can't believe my daughter is a professor. My teachers were racists, so I hated school, but I'm so proud of you mija. Don't ever let anyone stop you. Shoot for the stars!" My mother and Danny have been my *spirit protectors* and my *spirit restorers*, as have my students, friends, and

colleagues, particularly those who are a part of my Jotería and Muxerista familia. I am grateful to have a spirit-restorative community deeply rooted in Jotería and Muxerista consciousness. It has been lifesaving and life-changing for me and for so many others in my communities.

In *Light in the Dark*, Anzaldúa (2015) writes:

> The path to desconocimiento leads human consciousness into ignorance, fear, and hatred. It succumbs to righteous judgment and withdraws into separation and domination, pushing most of us into retaliatory acts of further rampage, which beget more violence. . . . Conocimiento, the more difficult path, leads to awakening, insights, understandings, realizations, courage, and the motivation to engage in concrete ways with the potential to bring us into compassionate interactions. . . . En estos tiempos de la Llorona we must use creativity to jolt us into awareness of our spiritual/political problems and other major global tragedies so that we can repair el daño. The Coyolxauhqui imperative is to heal and achieve integration. (19)

Jotería and Muxerista mentorship, in conjunction with ethnic/race, feminist and Jotería studies, enacts *conocimiento*, the act of intimate knowing and remembering, for the purpose of healing our communities of students and faculty. In the face of attempted spirit murder, it is our Jotería and Muxerista conocimiento that protects us.

Notes

1. My adviser, Dr. Solórzano, introduced the concept of spirit murder to us in 1999. It has resonated with me deeply. I have shared it with students and through the UNLV Creates program of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas; see https://vimeo.com/232571581. See also Revilla (2021).

2. Jotx is a gender-expansive identity used by queer Latinx people who desire inclusivity of people of all and/or no gender.

3. From the AJAAS website at www.ajaas.com under "Jotería."

4. For gender inclusivity we use *x*, as in *Chicanx/Latinx*. However, members of Jotería communities often use the feminine word *Jota* in opposition to patriarchal norms that defer to masculine identifiers, especially when referring to more than one person. Thus I use *Jota* and *Jotx* interchangeably to refer to various members of our communities.

5. Faculty who grew up in poverty and became first-generation members of the middle class as professors have a markedly different and marginalized experience in the academy when compared to their peers from affluent backgrounds. They often continue to struggle financially because of a need to support their families and because they do not have much savings passed down to them from their families.

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