

## CONFERENCE REVIEW

### *Against Fear and Terror: Una Nueva Conciencia Sin Fronteras*

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*Against Fear and Terror: Una Nueva Conciencia Sin Fronteras. August 3-6, 2011. California State University, Los Angeles. Under the leadership of Dionne Espinoza, with the MALCS, National and Cal State LA Chapter, the conference was sponsored by the College of Arts and Letters; College of Natural and Social Sciences; Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, Department of Chicana(o)/Latina(o) Studies; Office of the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs; Educational Opportunity Program, Cross Cultural Centers, University Student Union, CSULA Kennedy Library, and California Faculty Association.*

This year's conference focused on the theme "Against Fear and Terror: Una Nueva Conciencia Sin Fronteras." In the program welcome notes, conference chair Marie "Keta" Miranda and chair-elect, Mónica F. Torres outlined their two key goals for the Institute: to be critical and to focus on bylaws. They clarified that while bylaws often appear "merely a bureaucratic feature of an organization," within MALCS they provide the foundation for "who we are, what we do, and how we operate," especially significant as the organization evolves into the 21st century. They also emphasized the importance of cultivating a sense of individual and collective responses that take into account "the need to balance our home lives, work lives and larger social pressures, such as the extended economic downturn and ongoing attacks on immigrant populations."

Throughout the conference, a large number of sessions were devoted to these explorations. Spotlight panels addressed such matters as career development

throughout the pipeline of higher education, from graduate programs into the ranks of the professoriate and administrative leadership. There were also several workshops on dissertation, academic, and creative writing; featured staged performances about navigating the scope of women's experiences, from personal to political struggles; and keynote presentations by scholars, activists, artists, political leaders, and community activists. These voices included: former state senator Dr. Gloria Romero; immigration and human rights activists Angela Sanbrano, Angelica Salas, Azalea Ryckman Vasquez, Dora Olivia Magana, Rossana Pérez, and Carolina Rivera; and transgender activists Frank Galarte, Bamby Salcedo, and Mónica Enríquez-Enríquez. Selected conference artists were Margaret "Quica" Alarcón, Karina Oliva-Alvarado, and Lilia "Liliflor" Ramirez. Javier Hernandez designed the program cover and layouts. The Institute also featured performance events by the Latina Dance Project, Las Cafeteras, Las Ramonas, and In Lak Ech. Additionally, the conference included a number of film screenings, among them *Abuelita Perfecta* (dir. Adriana Virgil), *A Crushing Love: Chicanas, Motherhood and Activism* (dir. Sylvia Morales), and *Thresholds* (dir. Linda Garcia Merchant). Informal encuentros took place throughout the week, extending the conversations staged by the panels, sessions, workshops, art exhibition, and other events.

The Conference Site Committee, with Dionne Espinoza in the leadership role of Site Committee Chair and Conference Organizer, did a tremendous job in planning and hosting the Institute at California State University, Los Angeles, which holds the distinction as the location of a historic Department of Chicano Studies. The impressive numbers in attendance evidenced the success of the event. There were near full audiences at most sessions, giving the appearance that it was the most well attended conference in the recent history of the Institute. In their program bienvenida, the site committee affirmed the

significance of this annual meeting as a site for “rejuvenation, solidarity, and dialogue” and the importance of our fostering and maintaining a connection between higher education and our communities. They also emphasized, “The presence of Chicanas/Latinas/Indigenous women in higher education, while still small, speaks to our ability to persist and to survive the big battles taking place over our bodies and our communities.” Quoting a recent lecture given at the University of Southern California by Rigoberta Menchu, they invited us to consider her invitation that 2012 is “not about some catastrophic end, but about a profound transformation of consciousness.”

Many panels were explicitly devoted to transforming our consciousness, perhaps most imploringly the Plenary III session, “Gender Que(e)ries: Feminism, Gender, Queer and Transgender Inclusion in Womyn-Only Spaces,” which asked an extremely pressing question: How can we expand and create from scratch sitios y lenguas with those who cling to the existing categories that are uncomfortable for us? How do we get others to recognize the new and expansive categories we prefer and are working to boldly articulate and bravely perform? Many of the speakers offered deeply personal accounts of struggles within their families and communities in an effort to palpably expand our definitions of community and sisterhood as well as MALCS’ sense of critical mission in forging personal transformation and social change. The question and answer session following this panel was largely devoted to a conversation about revising the culture and the language of MALCS to include transgender Chicanas/os and Latinas/os with the discussion carrying over in the membership meeting that concluded the conference.

As part of this panel, Frank Galarte recounted transitioning from being a mother’s daughter to a mother’s son, sharing an illustrative story: His mother

arrived to meet him at a café and declared to the barista that she was there not for coffee but to meet her daughter. Galarte recalled first feeling disappointed with his mother not publicly acknowledging him as her son. Upon further reflection, he realized her response was a maternal reflex. It became important for Galarte to find a way to communicate the value he places on everything his mother taught him as a daughter while “she is just now beginning to know me as her son.” Galarte’s testimonio served as an invitation to the MALCS membership to extend discussion about further opening the Institute to a vast spectrum of Chicana/Latina identity formation inclusive of feminist Chicanos/Latinos and female-centered, -identified, -affiliated and/or -allied men and/or male gender identified Chicanas/Latinas. The younger generation of MALCS membership represented at the session appeared especially vocal in their support to expand both policy and practice, with many foundational and established MALCS members also taking the microphone to offer declarations of solidarity. In doing so, one member emphasized that while they can be useful, the employment of ultra-specific and highly nuanced identity categories can be fracturing, and that there are significant historical and political reasons MALCS has always prioritized hosting its Institute as a space for women only.

Following Miranda and Torres’s call to be critical, and my own editorial commitment to speak frankly in documenting struggle, I want to share some thoughts based on several conversations I had with various members and/or witnessed during sessions. Like Galarte’s mother, MALCS is dedicated to accepting and fostering its daughters. The passionate and supportive conversation generated at and after the Plenary III demonstrated that the membership remains eager to embrace all of its daughters in its goal to provide professional and personal nurturing as part of the work we do at the Institute. The membership has not wanted to create a space that places our

sons at the center of the organization, most especially because so many other spaces already do this work (if not explicitly then certainly in practice).

In reflecting on my own time with the organization and speaking with some foundational members, the observation is that we have yet to see in attendance generations of male students, colleagues, and protégés fostered by female teachers and leaders; nor have we seen such men attend with mentees they wish to foster under the auspices of MALCS. I think until that commitment is demonstrated, many will remain wary of expanding the membership to include men. As Cherríe Moraga reminds us, no one frees an “I.” The work of the Institute largely pivots around the spirit of being and/or fostering daughters. (Notably, many members, such as Lupe Gallegos and Karen Mary Davalos, have raised their daughters to be life long members; see María Olivia Davalos Stanton’s essay and bio in this issue.) The cultivating and honoring of a special path for the daughter is in large part what provides such a powerful dynamic to the week long events of the Institute and what makes so many of us feel nurtured and rejuvenated in ways unmatched in the broader world, most especially our home institutions, which are still profoundly driven by a patriarchal and masculinist culture.

During the concluding membership meeting, discussion included clarification of what we mean by the term “ally.” It was suggested that we more explicitly define ally to mean those who attend MALCS and demonstrate the cultivation of Chicanas/Latinas in leadership positions in our families, institutions, and communities and an engagement with the citational footprints of the scholarship that defines our field, most especially as represented within the pages of the organization’s journal, *Chicana/Latina Studies*. There are several important allies who have consistently dedicated themselves to MALCS and engaged in drawing on the work of

the organization to enact personal change and social transformation for themselves but most especially for students and colleagues.

We all have a need to nurture and be nurtured. How many of us find ourselves at MALCS healing our wounds and helping others heal theirs? Who would not want to belong to an organization that was holistic and included the spiritual and the personal alongside the professional and the political? Reflecting on the MALCS culture and its bylaws, when we call to change or expand the organization—which is never a bad thing—we must remain vigilantly aware about not just what we seek to gain from the organization, but also what we give to the organization and its membership, especially in regards to building toward the future. Most certainly, we need to extend and develop an incredibly expansive network of sisters in struggle.