THROUGH A PRESIDENT'S EYES: Reflections on Institutional Violence

Rusty Barceló

Chicana feminist scholars have come a long way since the Civil Rights movement and have built an impressive infrastructure for our work. However, political polarization, conservatism, and lack of institutional resources place those gains at risk. Scholars, who commonly face institutional violence, also conform to the successes of Chicanos/Latinos as a whole, leaving gender and marginalized identities out of the equation. However, assimilation for mere inclusion would mean abandonment of hard-fought struggle with lack of safe spaces to do work that matters. This essay reflects on struggles to promote equality and diversity in higher education. Although some may believe that holding a high administrative position means fewer encounters with resistance and hostility, this is not the case. As president of a university, I have become more vulnerable to attacks and have been openly challenged by those who oppose women in the academy, as well as those who collude with institutions—including some allies. Because of current difficulties, we must continue to create that critical mass necessary to move us forward, and thus prevent us from falling further back into the margins of academia.

Key Words: *Institutional violence, struggles for equality, diversity in higher education, and women administrators*

When I think about institutional violence, I cannot help but look back over the entirety of my long career as a diversity educator. My reflections take me across the parallel and intersecting arcs of institutional violence and resistance that we, as educators, have witnessed and experienced, as we have raised our voices in counternarratives that oppose, seek to neutralize, and, finally, put an end to that violence. As we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, I think of how far the dream of civil rights has taken us. Looking back through the contradictions of higher education, I also see—paraphrasing Dr. King—that even as the arc of institutional history bends toward justice, its course is

uneven and its momentum all too often slowed by complacency and inertia or blocked by opposition and backlash.

And, yet, I still believe, in the words of another great champion of social and economic justice, Dolores Huerta: Sí, se puede. Yes, we can! Especially as our numbers grow, we have the power to create change, even against formidable odds.

Today, we find ourselves directly in the sights of the backlash against educational equity, a backlash that passes for the new normal. Even as our allies and champions in Congress and in state houses and courthouses throughout this country have managed to legislate reform—twelve states have passed the Dream Act, for example—the opposition has grown increasingly hostile and tenacious. Voter suppression is just the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Therefore, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions: in the face of such violence and retaliation, how do we move forward with educational equity? How do we support each other? What lessons can we offer up from our experiences in the trenches as faculty and administrators? What strategies do we have for survival and healing and for institutional transformation? We have been asking these same questions for over forty years. Now, we must ask these questions with greater urgency, as political polarization and conservatism, coupled with diminished institutional resources, put our work seriously at risk, especially in the context of a nationwide surge toward reactionary politics concerning organizations focused on race and gender.

We began this work more than forty years ago by carving out some niches on the margins of the infrastructures of our educational institutions. We created academic borderlands where we could study and reflect on who we are, where we have come from, and how we can become part of the weave of institutional

life without losing our distinctive identities and cultural threads. As we moved toward the center and gained some measure of institutional legitimacy over the years, we transformed the academy to the benefit of all people—but in ways that still have to be fully valued or appreciated. Over four decades, we built an impressive infrastructure for our work—but that infrastructure is fragile and imperiled. Our work remains for the most part on the margins of the academy, making it especially vulnerable to cuts.

As we have breached the borders of the academy, we have also transformed it. For example, we have ushered in a diverse curriculum, diversified the faculty, and developed equal opportunity policies. As we have confronted and embraced the contradictions of our institutional, socioeconomic, and political systems, we have challenged cultural and institutional binaries to create spaces where we could be Chicana *and* lesbian *and* feminist *and* differently abled and so on, as we fully embrace our multiple identities. We have asked new questions, integrated our ways of knowing and being into the prevailing academic narratives, and pioneered the interdisciplinary perspectives that have become a staple of teaching and scholarly work. We have never stopped pushing the boundaries, advancing understanding of our histories and identities, and reimagining the dominant cultural narrative to include our perspectives and contributions.

Still, for the most part, our leadership role as Chicana feminist scholars and administrators in shaping the broader discussion of intersectionalities is barely a footnote in that narrative of growing interdisciplinarity. The contributions of Chicanas to the emerging canon of Chicano-Latino scholarship remain largely marginalized. In discussions of this work, we hear far too often that the so-called radical intersectional—that is, feminist, especially lesbian feminists—perspective makes us vulnerable, makes us targets. That we should just focus

on being Native/Mexican American/Hispano and leave gender out of it. That if we want to find common ground and stay out of trouble, we should dull our critical edge and keep our counternarratives to ourselves. *As if* it were possible to carve our identities and histories into discrete pieces. *As if* we could abandon our hard-won gains to assimilate. *As if* we should give up our struggle to create an academy that is inclusive in the broadest sense. *As if* we should leave parts of ourselves at the door. *As if* we should, to paraphrase Gloria E. Anzaldúa, remain fragmented and abandon the new tribalism that has made us whole.

However, we do not want to do that. It might keep us technically safe in our careers; but it will not keep us safe as Chicanas. Assimilation negates us. Abandon the struggle for full inclusion, and we will have *no safe spaces* to do our work or to be who we are.

It is only in critical mass—*at the intersections of our multiple identities*—that we can defend what we have built. As many, we can move against charges of using feminist Chicana studies just to antagonize; rewriting history for our own ends; playing identity politics and putting our narrow concerns ahead of those of our larger communities; siphoning off resources from so-called more important educational priorities; and playing "race and gender cards" in a supposedly post-racial, post-feminist age. Much of the pushback is familiar—but now it carries the added weight of nationally organized reactionary political movements such as anti-immigration attacks, English–only policies, and legal wrangling against those policies that give access to marginalized people, thus discrediting and undermining our positions, our programs, and our future in the academy. For that reason, we need to meet it head on, in full strength, united in our commitment to the "multiplicity that is transformational" (Anzaldúa 2002, 4).

We have always struggled against the naysayers and had to justify inclusion of gender and sexuality, especially lesbian identity, as a cornerstone of any program. Outing ourselves as lesbian scholars and administrators has made us especially vulnerable to both overt and covert institutional violence. Sometimes, as Chicanas we are blamed for the decline and imminent demise of Chicano Studies.

Sources of Resistance to Our Work

As we struggle for solutions, it is important to begin by recognizing just where the opposition lies. I argue that it comes from three main sources. First, those in the dominant culture who have always resisted our work and who now, emboldened by the rightward tilt in this nation's treacherous political landscape, have seized on the weak economy as a perfect opportunity to mobilize their ideological allies and harness reactionary energy to dismantle everything that we have built. Second, we must challenge those who have become complacent and thus tacitly complicit in the convenient myth of a post-racial, post-feminist world. Third, we must address those from the inside who put our work at even greater risk, as they divide our community.

The overt antagonists may seem to pose the greatest menace, but I would argue that all three groups are committing acts of violence against us; and that in many ways, defending ourselves against the slights and attacks of the second and third groups is our greatest challenge, because their actions are somewhat like friendly fire. Some of those people have been our allies; and many believe they still are. If they are racist or misogynist or homophobic, their bias is covert, invisible even to them.

Some believe we have already achieved our goals. After all, we have a Latina on the Supreme Court, right? And we do have a version of Chican@ Studies,

or Ethnic Studies, at most of our institutions, right? Some have even been our partners in struggle, occupying shared space in the academic borderlands and in the movement but without embracing and affirming our intersectionalities. Rather than wrestling with contradictions on a path toward a new consciousness and embracing transformational multiplicity, they have reaffirmed, reified, and remained stuck in binaries and traditional hierarchies. In short, some of the old dualistic and oppositional ways of thinking have gained currency within our ranks, in ways that privilege traditional perspectives and delegitimize Queer/Feminist Chican@ Studies as vital integrative interdisciplinary areas of study.

We have always had our differences, and those differences have often played out in schisms within Chican@ Studies. Those schisms have sometimes erupted into heated, even bitter, arguments that impede our progress. It is then that a scarcity mentality sets in and the institutional stakes become ever higher, our differences become entrenched, and our internal struggles exact a greater and greater toll. But we do not all pay the same price, any more than communities across this country all pay the same price for voter ID laws or for cuts in education and human services.

Institutional Violence and Systems of Power and Privilege

As I have thought about the theme of violence in this context, I have tried to imagine a transformed multicultural space where structural inequities and systems of exclusion have been disrupted and dissolved, as we all work together across our difference toward shared goals. The problem is that both self-interest and structural inequities keep getting in our way, so that we are not even safe with each other. As long as power is unequally distributed and some of us achieve dominance through (en)forced subordination and submission of others, our institutions, and even our own enclaves within those institutions, will remain contested spaces that are inherently unsafe.

Some may say violence is too strong a word for what we are talking about—what is violence if not an act intended to do harm, to injure, to intimidate, to scare, to belittle or weaken—drawing blood, whether real or metaphorical? Was it not a violent act when a member of my comprehensive exam committee said all those years ago, "I am surprised you did so well," as if *doing well* was not expected of me, as if excellence is the mark and province of a privileged few? Was it not violence when a faculty member is passed over for promotion because she did not publish in the so-called right journals, or whose critique is viewed as hostile rather than constructive? Is this delegitimizing of our work and questioning of our place in the academy not a definition of institutional violence?

Such incidents do violence to our pride and senses of self, our productivity, our lives, and our livelihoods. The invisible violence perpetrated by these acts is no less injurious than physical violence, and just as scarring. It holds us back and, as it spreads, creates a kind of general spiritual malaise, or systemic contagion. Then, it becomes routinized—when, for example, Chican@ Studies programs are devalued, or worse, when we sabotage *each other's* work—and puts at risk everything we have built. When one of us leaves the academy, decides not to seek a leadership position, fails to get tenure, or simply succumbs to stress and exhaustion, our overall position in the academy is diminished and Chican@ Studies is further imperiled. The end result is a return to the margins.

The View from the President's Chair

Some may believe that holding a formal leadership position as president of a Native and Hispano-serving institution places me above the fray. Even I once naively believed that I would encounter little, if any, resistance, or at least be protected from outright hostility. I was sure we would all work together in happy harmony toward shared goals. Not so.

As president, I am often the target of institutional violence. Flyers on campus walls have likened me to Liza Borden (who "took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks") because, to some, I overstepped my bounds when I made some tough staffing decisions. On an even more personal level, misogynist and racist emails have questioned the authenticity of my braid, the truth of my stories, and the value of my work on diversity. Often, I am challenged to justify my efforts to advance equity and diversity at Northern New Mexico College, as if inclusion is at odds with excellence or not keeping with my role as president, or as if it is simply unnecessary, a distraction rather than a core educational concern of the academy.

How do I respond to these attacks in a way that is not defensive or oppositional? As president, I generally cannot directly confront the perpetrators, who have less positional privilege than me and, it can be argued, are simply exercising their right to free speech. However, if I remain silent, that makes me complicit. As president, I am obliged to make every effort to engage in civil and productive conversations with people who commit acts of institutional violence.

The challenges I face are constant reminders that no matter how much institutional authority I may have, no matter how many people report to me, no matter how much I accomplish, and no matter how much I am rewarded by the very system that also casts me in the role of outsider, I am vulnerable as a Chicana president. For me, diversity work is not only a formal institutional responsibility but also, a calling. That vulnerability makes my institution and my work vulnerable.

As president, I come to *represent* whatever ills have befallen students, staff, and faculty; the presidency—the position, not necessarily the person—is a useful

scapegoat for all manner of grievance, from salary disputes to concerns over academic standing. As the college's chief executive officer, I am also highly visible—an easy scapegoat. As a Chicana lesbian, I am an especially tempting target. My voice *as president* may carry institutional weight, but my voice as a *Chicana lesbian* trumps everything, including, for some people my credibility and the very legitimacy of my presidency. That is especially true when the decisions I make put me at the center of already prevailing controversies or create disruptions in the longstanding institutional status quo.

In my role, I cannot pull rank or exercise executive privilege, or presidential prerogative. As president, I am a builder of community. I am expected to share leadership, to lead by example, and to lead *every one*, including those who commit acts of violence, in an effort to form coalitions that will move us toward consensus. This means I must do what I can to empower others. I must create educational spaces where we can all speak truth to ignorance. I must invite people to talk frankly and openly about their biases and fears. I must encourage open and even heated dialogue and try to both welcome and manage the tensions that arise from the collisions of multiple perspectives. I believe that is my role as an institutional leader and activist administrator.

Over the years, I have come to see that violence, or the threat of violence, comes with the institutional leadership territory. And, my challenge is not to feel personally intimidated or to feel under siege. However embattled I may feel, I must act in a way that is open and collaborative and that is viewed as presidential by the community at large. If I fail in that, the trust on all sides erodes. That makes me less effective.

This does not mean that I am nothing more than a mediator. As president, I must take a stand and speak out, and I must be willing to suffer the

consequences. I have always said that we grow in struggle, and if we do not have the courage and passion to stick our necks out and take on the system and its hierarchies of power and privilege and bias, we are not doing our jobs, and we will never see the kind of fundamental change that is needed. According to critical race scholar Maria Montaperto, this work "can get dangerous. Not around the pain. Through it. To do this work is to squirm. If you don't squirm…you're probably not doing it right" (Montaperto 2009, n.p.).

I receive at least a few calls a month from women of color asking about what to do when they hear or are the butt of inappropriate remarks, or are subjected to other forms of indignities, such as being told their research is not valid because it is ethnic. These women are often afraid or embarrassed to discuss their concerns with anyone on their campus for fear of retaliation or of being further marginalized by their colleagues or student peers. These calls especially come around during promotion time, and I am always horrified by the lack of institutional support and by the hostility and disrespect they experience as they negotiate the system. I have heard far too often about acts of violence—and I do not mean physical violence. I mean the kind of routine, systemic institutional brutality that cuts to the quick, paralyzes our spirits, and leaves deep but invisible scars.

The injury is perhaps greatest when it comes from our Chicana and Chicano colleagues and others on the margins with us, those who should be our allies but feel that putting us down gives them a competitive edge. Whatever the source or the damage done, the violence inevitably plays out the context of power relationships—from senior to pre-tenure faculty, from supervisors to staff, from faculty to students, from colleagues who are vying for and voting on promotion and tenure, from mentors who feel threatened by rising stars, from friends who fear that your gain can only be their loss in the zero-sum

academic power sweepstakes. The most powerful remedy is an environment of full inclusion and shared responsibility.

The Role of the Institution in Prevention and Remediation

My first day as president, I found on my desk a folder with a sexual harassment complaint—just one. I thought it odd that it came directly to me and not to the office that should handle such complaints. I inquired and requested a full investigation. There was a finding, and the perpetrator sanctioned. I told students, faculty, and staff there would subsequently be zero tolerance for any form of harassment and/or hostile act.

During my first year, we addressed several other such cases. As we began to look more closely at issues of racial and gender discrimination, the inevitable happened—a faculty member challenged me. These issues never arose before I arrived, he said. Of course, I knew they had always been there; they had just been swept under the rug. A culture of fear and distrust, coupled with an absence of institutional support, had kept people from filing grievances.

By all appearances, I was perceived as stirring up trouble and creating dissension. It was a familiar tactic: accuse reformers of politicizing issues and polarizing communities and playing race and gender cards, when what they are really doing is uncovering a deeply embedded problem, calling attention to an existing condition. I was committed to changing all that, I said, and to breaking the silence. From now on, people would have permission to come forward without fear—and promised fair and impartial reviews, with remedies and sanctions that were appropriate. This, I assured the faculty member, would surely better serve our community—*all* members of our community. I said that the zero tolerance policy would apply to all forms of bias, including misogyny and homophobia within the campus Native

and Latin@ community. Only then would we begin to break the cycles of institutional violence.

Clearly, presidents need to lead on these issues, and many do. They need to be models and advocates for equity and diversity in both policy and practice; educate faculty, staff, and students about hate speech, sexual harassment, and other forms of discrimination; develop and communicate grievance procedures and create institutional structures to ensure compliance; and work across communities to change the institutional culture. Failure to lead on issues of equity and diversity maintains the systems of power and domination that normalize and legitimate violence and perpetuate unjust social relations. It normalizes violence and embeds it ever more deeply in the institutional infrastructure, reproducing relations of domination and submission and perpetuating the hierarchies of power and privilege that were intended from the beginning to keep us in our place.

Leadership against institutional violence must be shared—by all of us.

I have been in far too many situations where an inappropriate comment is just ignored or laughed off as no big deal. I have done that myself—just stood there without comment. I can no longer allow myself to do that. I am expected to respond, and I have a moral as well as professional obligation to respond—and not just as a president, but also as a colleague, friend, and member of the community.

In the end, it is about changing the culture, not just one policy or remedy at a time, but through transformational work. The buck stops, of course, with educational administrators who must explore any and all alternative strategies to address campus violence. That includes weaving diversity education and training into orientation and professional development, and weaving diversity

requirements into every job description and reward system. They also must recognize their legal obligations and culpability. If they know of violations, they are legally, not to mention ethically, obliged to report them; and the people in positions of institutional authority are obliged to act on the information.

We need to keep the conversations going. We need to have the courage to *bring our whole selves* to the conversations. We need to remind our detractors both in and beyond our institutions of what *we* have accomplished, of our contributions to the institutional transformation that would never have happened if *we* had not scaled the walls to question and critique and challenge and decenter the academy. We need to remember and honor our histories as activists for educational access and inclusion and continue to occupy, reimagine, and reinvent the shifting spaces of the academy.

We need, in the final analysis, to *recommit* ourselves to advancing the kind of fundamental structural change that will make Queer/Feminist Chican@ Studies sustainable. That means bridging the divides amongst us as allies. It means being on both shores at once, to use Gloria E. Anzaldúa's metaphor (1987, 100–01). It means creating safe spaces the "new tribalism" that Anzaldúa talked about, "a social identity that could motivate subordinated communities to work together in coalition" (Anzaldúa 2009, 283).

It is also important, regardless of your formal status on your campus, that you begin serving not only on campus-wide committees that focus on "difference" but also on committees like advising, teaching and learning, governance, student life, and graduate education. Yet, services and programs are not enough. We need to raise these issues everywhere, in every context, at every table, in every corner of our institutions. That is how we begin to change the culture and consciousness of the academy. That means enlisting the support

of our Latino and non-LGBTQ colleagues and allies, as well as others who are different from us even as our identities intersect. It is at those intersections where we have the most to gain, and to lose. When our threads are woven together, the fabric is strongest.

I implore every one of us to have the courage to stand up to abuses of power and perpetrators of violence. When it comes to institutional violence, silence is a kind of toxin. Left unspoken, our fears and concerns eat away at us. When we turn away and refuse to act or speak up, we aid and abet the backlash. We perpetuate the systems of power and privilege that have marginalized our people over the centuries. We may have different priorities and strategies. We might not always get along. Nonetheless, in toxic and reactionary times like these, with so much at stake, and with such powerful and well-organized forces working against us, it is imperative that we harness our energies—our differences *and* our commonalities—to work in common cause. It is then that we must move toward the fundamental restructuring of our institutions and the preservation of the Chican@ Studies so as to preserve the infrastructure that we have all struggled to build. If we cannot work together across our differences, we are in trouble. If we do not embrace our own diversity, and make our spaces more inclusive, we will lose the critical mass that we need to keep the movement going.

This means bringing new generations to the table—young people who will push back, rethink, and redefine what we do here and keep the conversations going in the decades ahead. If we do not prepare young people to assume formal institutional leadership, someone else will—and we may not like the results.

As Chicanas in the academy, we have learned the hard way how to navigate the system, even as the system has resisted our efforts. We have learned how

to work within the system while working together to change it. That is our great strength—our ability to negotiate the contradictory spaces in which we live and work. As we move forward, we will, and must, continue to do this, working together in new ways, building new coalitions and platforms for action. That way lays institutional transformation.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Eugenia Smith, who collaborated in the writing, editing, and research for this piece, and helped me take my thinking further.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria E., and AnaLouise Keating. Eds. 2002. *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. New York: Routledge.

Anzaldúa, Gloria E. 2000. *Interviews/Entrevistas / Gloria Anzaldúa*, edited by AnaLouise Keating. New York: Routledge.

———. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: aunt lute.

Keating, AnaLouise. Ed. 2009. *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Montaperto, Maria. 2009. Retrieved October 30, 2013. "What Are We Calling Equity These Days?: Interruption as Praxis and Revising a Word/World." *CCCC: Supporting and Promoting the Teaching and Study of College Composition and Communication*. http://cccc-blog.blogspot.com/2009/10/what-are-we-calling-equity-these-days.html.