



Activism, Alliance-Building, and the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center

by Sara De Turk, published by Lexington Books

Editor's note: Sara De Turk, professor of communication at UTSA has written a book on San Antonio's Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. A reading and celebration of the book will take place at Esperanza on February 21st at 7 pm with special guests participating in a discussion and cultural arts celebration. See back page of this issue for complete information on the event. The following excerpts give a hummingbird's eye-view of the publication:

Preface (excerpt from p. vii)

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas, serves as an instructive exemplar of a social movement organization. On one hand, its various values and tactics are shared by many other progressive activist organizations, and the challenges it faces are those faced by any collective seeking to disrupt the political status quo. It is, on the other hand, distinctive in at least two important ways. For one thing, it not only tackles sexism or racism or environmental injustice, but all forms of exploitation simultaneously, and with an insistent rhetorical stance.

This multi-issue approach to social change, particularly in combination with its uncompromising style, constitutes one of its greatest challenges—especially in regard to its alliances and coalitions with other organizations—but also what is perhaps its greatest source of strength.

A second characteristic feature of Esperanza as an activist organization is its reliance on the arts as a course of social change. This emphasis on theater, film, music, visual art, and other forms of storytelling provides venues for the critical analysis of social issues, the connection of the personal to the political, and the gathering of allies with shared values. These and other features of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center are shaped by its emergence from Chicana feminism and other movements, and by its unique situation in time and place. It is my hope that this book will serve to illuminate a variety of dynamics that affect social change, and to equip other would-be activists in their quest for a more just and peaceful world.

Chapter 8: Uncompromising Confrontation of Injustice

SIN PELOS EN LA LENGUA (p. 95-97)

One of the most notable qualities of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is the uncompromising nature of its rhetoric. In her description of Esperanza's response to their defunding by the city, Renaud González (1999) wrote: "The Esperanza is a symbol of defiance known for promoting an innovative array of artistic and cultural programs that form a political backbone the city has rarely seen" (¶ 7). Esperanza's staff demonstrates a commitment to the unremitting confrontation of injustice and ignorance in themselves and others. Interviewees consistently used words like "tireless," "determined," "tenacious," and "uncompromising" to describe how Graciela Sánchez, as a person, and Esperanza, as an organization, go about their pursuit of a more just society. As one former staff member put it, "Esperanza winds up often being the

voice ‘*sin pelos en la lengua*,’ without hair on their tongue. They say the truth, and they bring up the things that other organizations are afraid to bring up.”

Marisol Cortez, similarly, reflected:

What Esperanza does well is to refuse to not speak. Refuse to not act, even though it's painful to confront people in power who think they're doing the right thing. It presents an embodied analysis that needs to be heard within public discourse in a loud way. In a determined way. Esperanza refuses to not do that work. Like, no, we are gonna speak truth to power, and we won't ever stop, even if you hate us for it.

Many people do hate them for it. (I was told by a third party observer, for example, that the leaders of another community organization which shares many of Esperanza's goals and values refused—largely because of conflict over gender issues—to even be in the same public conversation with Esperanza representatives.) The consistency with which Esperanza's core staff has both asserted and reflected its commitment to its ideals, though, has earned them both admiration from allies and respect and credibility (if not affection) from city leaders. Santiago Garcia, an economic development specialist who worked for the city, remarked, “I think you can expect certain things from the Esperanza. You can expect a dose of conscience, and being called out, in not a spiteful way, but in a way where certain values are not gonna be forgotten.”

Gary Houston added in regard to Esperanza's staff:

They're honest. And they're impatient. And often angry. And those are understandable responses to some of the stuff that we minorities have all had to deal with. No, I think that kind of directness, and refusal to even consider compromise on certain standards has its own integrity. One of their real strengths is that you really know where they're coming from at all times.

Antonia Castañeda observed, moreover, that Esperanza “demonstrates that you can, and must, take a position for what is right. And that you can challenge the structures of power. And that you should. No matter the cost.” “They began,” she went on, “and continue to be the *unrelenting* social conscience of this city.”

Graciela Sánchez spoke with me on a number of occasions about her evolution in this regard. She pointed out that working-class women of color are generally not raised to assert themselves and their ideas, and noted that in its early days, the Esperanza Center tended toward more of what Foss and Griffin (1995) referred to as “invitational” rhetoric and proposed “for situations when changing and controlling others is not the rhetor's goal” (p. 5). Esperanza staff would look to others to drive the organization's agenda, striving for consensus and participatory decision making. While this participatory decision making is still how she strives to lead among her staff and allies, Sánchez has, over time, shifted to a more assertive leadership style in public. “We have a vision,” she told me, and “you have to be courageous.” Her assertiveness manifests itself in a variety of ways. She takes the initiative not only to raise issues, but to reach out to potential coalition partners and media alike. She pitches stories to newspapers, for example, and presses them to devote attention to them. Another aspect of Sánchez's assertiveness is her insistence that “people have to be out. Not just as lesbian and gay, but as Latinos, as feminists, as working-class or poor people, as people who are internationalists, or whatever.”

While at a big-picture level Esperanza's leadership tends to find satisfaction in political struggle, confrontation on a daily level is often seen less as a choice than as a necessity. Marisol

“Esperanza's power is only the power of the people.”



Cortez recalled a recent transition in the city-owned utility company, when it hired an African American man as its CEO and decided to replace a coal plant with investments in solar power. Although most people in the progressive community appreciated these changes, Esperanza's response was that the changes were welcome but insufficient. Cortez, who at the time was not on staff but was a close ally of the organization, felt compelled to write a public letter (in collaboration with Esperanza) urging city officials to (1) acknowledge the role of activists in pushing for change, (2) challenge the idea of "clean coal," and (3) more closely examine the nature of sustainability not only from a technocentric perspective but also in terms of social justice (see Appendix A). Despite her compulsion to write the letter, she recalled that it was quite painful to present it to the city officials. "It was awful," she said. Not just because it was difficult to confront people in power, but because

You're sitting around the room at that table were other environmental groups that you might be allied with, but who don't necessarily agree with that analysis, or think it's a strategic misstep. Other groups were wanting to be very congratulatory of [the power company], like, "oh, you're investing all this money in clean technology." But no, we have to go further. It's not enough. It'll never be enough.

As Cortez explained, "Esperanza's power is only the power of the people involved... to contest the way things are done." Many of the organization's political efforts, therefore, have involved protests, marches, press conferences, speeches before the City Council, critical letters to city leaders, and even lawsuits and civil disobedience.

ANGRY HOPE

An article on imperialism in the February, 2012 issue of *La Voz* features the following pull-quote: "injustice and empire have two offspring: anger at the way things are, and courage to change the way things are" (Keene, 2012). The convergence of these two "offspring" is a reasonable characterization of Esperanza's affective response

to the multiple injustices it confronts. In his ethnographic analysis, Rivera-Servera (2012) describes the organization's emotional character as one of "angry hope," grounded in both a history of subjugation and an optimistic engagement in futurity.

Anger, of course, is both a tactical response and a natural emotional reaction to injustice. As Lorde (1981) wrote, "anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification" and "is loaded with information and energy" (p. 8). Lorde went on to stress that "any discussion among women about racism must include the recognition and the use of anger. It must be direct and creative, because it is crucial. We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor to seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty" (p. 8).

Although anger on the part of the oppressed (as noted by Lorde) is very different from the hatred of those who oppress, it is never welcomed by its targets. Women, in particular, are sanctioned for expressing anger, and even their straightforward observations or expressions of disapproval can be interpreted as inappropriate if not softened with a smile. For this reason, the discourse of Graciela Sánchez and other Esperanza staff is often denigrated as being more angry, confrontational, or "in-your-face" than it really is. Monroe (1997), for example, characterized Sánchez (aptly, in my view) as "a petite woman who seems almost shy in personal conversation, [though who] can be blunt when speaking about her convictions and passion for social justice." Yet despite what he describes as her gentle demeanor and "cool seriousness," Rivera-Servera (2012) notes that "Sanchez's performed passion in defense of the Center [in the aftermath of their defunding] was read as unfeminine" (p. 118). "Her performance," he observes wryly, "was decidedly not the happy Mexican of the tourist imaginary" (p. 118). ♦

Bio: Sara De Turk is associate professor of communication at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Excerpts from her new book, Activism, Alliance Building, and the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center were reprinted in La Voz with permission from publisher, LEXINGTON BOOKS, copyright 2015.

le involved... to contest the way things are done."

