

SPEAKING FRANKLY, DOCUMENTING STRUGGLE: Chicanas/Latinas in Academia

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Some of us work in environments where we are the only person of color. Whether the institution is private or public, we face similar questions and battles. How many of us have had to get up and shut the office door out of concern about recriminations from colleagues if they were to overhear our actual responses to demonstrated instances of institutionalized sexism, homophobia, and racism? How many of us feel compelled to conduct meetings before the meeting? How many Chicanas/Latinas have left academia out of sheer exhaustion or been forced out due to illness resulting from unbearable conditions of stress?

This essay launches a new occasional section focused on documenting our struggles in academia by speaking frankly and publicly about the very issues that fuel our conversations at panel discussions, conference gatherings, mentoring conversations, late-night phone calls, and e-mail exchanges. It seeks to narrate, theorize, and otherwise work through the kind of struggles we rarely translate into print due to our instinctive feelings of professional vulnerability and/or our ingrained reluctance to position personal narratives about professional life as theoretically engaged and critically noteworthy. It is my hope that the contributions to this section will enlighten our understanding *and foster the survival* of the profession, invigorate mentoring alliances, and expand critical discourse about Chicanas/Latinas in academia.

This section was originally conceptualized while I was recovering from

frustration and exhaustion due to a condition that strikes too many of us, a malady I call “the endless dance of the half-ass.” By this, I mean the state of finding oneself in the middle of extreme overcommitment, to the point that one is juggling fifty things and doing none of them with a sense of full engagement—hence the phrase “half-ass.” This is typically the result of a sense of moral obligation to forge change in academia and a deep sense of political responsibility born from the clear knowledge that if *you* don’t do the work, it won’t get done. We initially begin this series of movements in earnest, even with joy, but soon find it nearly impossible to step outside what eventually evidences itself as a relentless rhythm. The energy of those initial intentions breaks down until we find ourselves unable to do anything but obsessively dance in place, the urgent and demanding steps of teaching, writing, and service obligations overtaking nearly every waking minute, sucking out the marrow of our spirit, ostensibly infusing us with energy yet quietly and consistently depleting our reserves. The result is a dramatically insistent refusal of any fully visible or measurable movement forward. To simply stop rarely appears as an option. Most of us who leave the dance floor do so under the pressures of illness or emergency. Or, if good fortune intercedes, by winning the equivalent of the academic lottery, a sabbatical or other forms of leave time. And usually even this is at a cost, such as reduced salary or destabilized family life.

My reflections here result from years of movement within the endless dance of the half-ass. Some highlights: I deliver work at a national conference where I experience “drive-by racism,” unexpected comments that leave me feeling surprised, assaulted, and injured; I plan a major conference on my campus that is protested by a small but vocal group of students who I later learn were encouraged by Chicano faculty seeking to school me about crossing disciplinary boundaries in university politics; at a university meeting, I express

concerns about hiring priorities only to have them categorized as angry and agitating comments from a person of color overly invested in identity politics, a reductively categorizing move that severs me from the larger faculty body; at a meeting of colleagues in my principle field of English, I raise the issue of faculty diversity and am effectively told that if I want to work in that kind of environment, I should “go back to ethnic studies.”

Each of these events leaves me angry and exhausted, and on some level professionally irritated, politically outraged and—yes, I will say it—personally wounded. The questions and thoughts that dance through my throbbing head: Why are so many Chicano males not invested in creating meaningful, productive, and lasting alliances with Chicanas in academia? Why is it that despite degrees, experience, awards, and other expected markers of professional achievement, it seems so impossible to be simply heard and recognized as a faculty member? Do the professional and personal conversations we share with colleagues when we work side by side on committees make no impact at all? How many of us have spent literally hours of our time propelled into action (the phone calls, the rants, the memos, the confrontations both real and imagined) struggling to just personally recover? What has this time cost us in terms of weakening our spirit, distracting us from writing, and deflecting our focus away from the people and projects that matter most?

There is no denying the sense of injury. However, I think it is vital to also recognize that the catalysts for our responses, a defensive posture, are symptomatic of larger issues of struggle over resources and power. In these instances, Chicanas/Latinas are turned into a targeted screen for the projection of anxiety and made to embody total disruption of the status quo. Surviving protest taught me that, ironically, things that appear tremendously personally directed usually are not. That we are so objectified and easily made monstrous

actually speaks volumes about the reality that we are also clearly understood as increasingly occupying positions of real power and leadership.

Understanding this can help us to flip the script. In hindsight, drawing on only one example, these are the things I wish I had said to the colleague who suggested I relocate my work from English to ethnic studies: “Let me make sure I understand you correctly. You mean to say that you believe faculty of color have no role in the field of English and that intellectual projects focused on critical issues about race, gender, and culture should be solely relegated to ethnic studies? And do you envision ethnic studies as some sort of identity politics haven devoid of intellectually rigorous scholarship?” It seems simple to say now. Yet, such a rhetorical move demands an amount of calculated distance and a strategic plan to be confrontational without being defensive in order to plainly and clearly spotlight the power struggle being waged. It requires training oneself to be an active interpreter of feelings. At those moments when I find myself being objectified or feeling turned into a screen, I work to pause and refocus the attention back to the projector. Getting to this point has necessitated learning how to strategically use personal response as a launching point for critical engagement. This is a type of work I would like to see more fully theorized in print outside the informal archive of our oral testimonies.

Notably, my title’s invocation of the words “speaking frankly” indicates that it is something we do not readily do when it comes to these issues. Even in writing this essay, I struggled with self-censorship. Admittedly, I have not fully spoken in an entirely free manner. It is an incomplete document. Accountability gets buried in the omission of details and the generalized accounting of events. Whom am I protecting? What does it mean that this is the way I have learned to function in academia? What is the appropriate tone?

How to balance the need to be brave and self-indulgent with the need to create a critically situated professional rhetoric? Given that Chicanas and Latinas are still fighting for visibility in academia and still struggling to have our work read not as the intellectual equivalent of salsa (i.e., a nice addition to the main course), but rather as the *huesos*, the meat and bones of scholarly work in our various fields, we well understand that while speaking frankly we also cannot afford to speak without professional courtesy, personal diplomacy, and critical strategy. To speak without some level of restriction is a luxury of access and entitlement not yet afforded to most of us.

In my work about how people survive violence, I have learned that the biggest emotional hurdle—one that fuels the quest for personal and political change—is to see oneself defined as bigger than the events. Ultimately this is the work I hope this section performs in its explorations of the being and making of Chicana/Latina studies. More than anything else, this first essay offers itself as an invitation and therefore leaves with a question: What kind of experiences do we need to document here, and what do we want this kind of writing to do?