

## PREDATORY RECIPROCITY AND THE POLITICS OF CHINGONA FIERCE

Rosanna Alvarez

We speak in codes  
carry the truth in our bones  
be.cause . . .  
the body  
— re-members  
lays claim  
— re-collecting  
attempting to  
— re-calibrate  
heal  
— soul wounds of  
the heart.

As a multi-faceted Xicana, I wander through the halls of academia wondering why our departments and our gente insist on cutting open our wounds on the daily. Our narratives and the rhetoric of social justice are inviting; the poetry of our words and the ferocity of our stories beckon us to bleed for the cause, and many of us do so willingly—myself included. The perspective I carry is one of a poet, who finds solace in metaphors, while crafting analogies and weaving inspiration. It feels like resistance beyond my existence.

In spaces designed to exclude us, I center my adjunct work on grounding my students in the power of who they are, as they occupy seats that our educational systems never

meant for them. I am equally concerned, if not more so, with their well-being and their ability to cling to our collective humanity as I am with the course objectives. They tell me they feel like imposters, and I wonder if their insights of unbelonging are reflections of my own internal conflict. They gravitate toward those of us they see as windows, mirrors, and doors—not realizing how much they inspire in us by way of their own tenacity. In those moments of mutual vulnerability, I am grateful that they don't know about the struggles we adjuncts face to hold on to the ability to engage this heart work.

When I first came to this work, I knew that academia was only a sliver of what I wanted my life's work to entail, and yet, I found it so easy to lose myself in spaces like this. In spaces like this, students perpetually steal your heart. In truth, I gave it willingly, living the legacy of the profesoras/xs whose stories I carry in my own narratives and seeing so much of myself in their stories, but I digress. The opportunities in academia are scarce, especially for women of color; navigating the work from semester to semester, or quarter to quarter, is relentless. The work is never certain. You put in more hours than you bargain for. You will be severely underpaid for your work compared to full-time faculty. And, there are never any guarantees—except for these: you will work well-beyond the bounds of what you are compensated for; as a *mujer*, you will be expected to grin and bear beyond your share of emotional labor, sometimes picking up for the shortcomings of male peers or senior faculty (*mujeres* included); you will receive requests that are backhanded compliments and worded in ever so manipulative ways to extract more labor from you than necessary; you will find yourself bruised by the perpetual onslaught of micro-aggressions; you will be shafted by some of your mentors in spite of their “good intentions;” and you will keep signing up to do this to yourself again and again because this work matters.

Until you don't. Or, more fittingly, until it doesn't matter. Because at some point, it won't. Really, it won't matter—because your silence will compel you to scream. The system counts on our complicity and extols our silence. We play the game of plantation politics in academia (and nonprofits aren't all that different; I come from that world and it is equally peppered with similar dysfunction). We are led to believe that it is our duty to “serve” under such oppressive conditions because it is the price of maintaining our collective precarious access to the work—as marginalized disciplines, minoritized scholars, and because our students “need” us. I have felt the tension of this struggle manifest in my body. Knots of tension so fierce, there are days when I can barely move. And yet, I find that the silence of my complicity amplifies my physical pain. It's as if the spirits of my ancestors are tugging at me, pulling me toward my truth, so that I cannot ignore my spiritual and emotional need to speak truth to power. It's a haunting I welcome because it grounds me in my truth and reaffirms why I occupy spaces like this: the truth is liberating.

On those days, I find myself reflecting on the painful parts of that truth, tired of clinging to the positives in ways that co-sign on the patterned dysfunction. I find myself scrolling through the many instances of unspoken and yet psychologically and emotionally ransomed forms of forgiveness I have obliged as part of my ongoing generosity. The process of letting go requires that release the feeling that my silence is protecting anybody in this space. The most painful parts of this work include both microaggressions and outright aggressions where folks I have considered mentors have weaponized my trust against me. They have imbricated me within an expectation of silence, making me complicit in my own oppression.

I also find myself deeply appreciating the colleagues who consciously and conscientiously value adjunct work: Those who check on us knowing about

the nickel and diming of our time, the inadvertent demand of service, and the reflex responses of pimping our labor in deference to this lopsided system. The woundings may not always be deliberate. After all, many of these interactions are based on the collective culture of how adjuncts are treated within a dysfunctional system that requires part-time faculty to prove their capacity and commitment to the work. But, here's where the trouble in that lies: my commitment and capacity is never a question, and my life's work is an ongoing declaration of, and testament to, that relentless competence.

So, I come back to the question of my belonging. As attached to this work as I find myself, I also know I occupy a space of relative privilege because all of my eggs are by no means trapped in this basket of academia. My work is vast, and when I am most in my freedom, my truth can be read as a threat; and yet, my intention in writing about my struggles is to craft the words of my canto hondo of liberation. I am reminded that I belong in this body, in the spaces of my heart's choosing, *bien hocicon*, wielding the voices of my ancestors, weaving our stories in the spirit of the *flor y canto* that is our legacy; and in that sense, my work threatens no one—except for those who are afraid of their own freedom.