

*Voces* in Dialogue:

What is our work in the academy?\*

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If you ask me who I am,  
 I often say  
 LATINA.  
 Cubana y Ecuatoriana.  
 Nuyorkina-born, Jersey raised.  
 A daughter of diasporas-meeting-at-the-borderlands,  
 learning to speak the tongues of tradition and creation:  
 Spanglish, English, Español, Académe.  
 I am a madrina, sister, partner, (re)searcher,  
 knowledge facilitator, eternal student, recent doctora.  
 I am many voices...

Each voice, a note in my biography, narrates a different understanding of what my/our work is in higher education. Here, I slide between poetry and prose as I grapple with what these multiple voices and interpretations tell me about my place and mission within a system of education penetrated by corporate interests, shifting funding priorities, as well as pockets of action, possibility and transformation. Throughout my experiences growing up con mi familia, going through graduate school, participating in a transformative teaching experience, and engaging in participatory research, I am learning that mission is about connection, community, reintegrating imposed ruptures and fragmentations.

#### Growing up with el baile de biculturalism

Growing up in a river of multiplicities, my biculturality was a skill of fluidity I caught onto early. In my first years of schooling, I was placed in a bilingual/ESL class so my school and home voices were both part of the classroom. Later on, changing contexts from one that was primarily Latino to one that was predominantly White meant that speaking Spanish in the classroom or amongst friends was now considered inappropriate, rude, a marker of difference, possibly a sign that I may encounter academic or behavioral

difficulties. It was here that I first heard the word “Spic.” I came to understand that aspects of my-self needed to be kept separate: who I was at school, with my Latina/o group of friends, with my White group of friends, with my Ecuadorian family where I had to use *usted* and *señora*, and switch to a Cuban pitch (a few decibels louder) with the other side of the family. I learned the codes appropriate to each group and could slip and slide between them if/when I chose to. But I wonder...

Am I like  
fading footprints in the snow  
that melt and transform  
to a still water  
who changes shape  
according to what holds me,  
what surrounds me?

I also discovered thin lines of intersection, spaces where bridges could be forged between the worlds I kept separate (Anzaldua, 1987). Sometimes I danced around that thin line, sometimes I felt I was that thin line between.

### Cancion Mestiza

In graduate school I learned another vocabulary to discuss the everyday injustices; introduced to the work of Chicana/Latina thinkers, critical race theory, queer theory, feminist/womanist understandings.

I am a witness/perpetrator of violence,  
Oppression's stepchild.  
Seen many of its faces,  
On the outside,  
as the isms that bleed us,  
through policies that exclude us  
and shout  
“Go home. You don't belong You don't deserve.”  
In structures that move the clouds to our skies  
so the sun can shine on theirs.<sup>1</sup>  
But on the inside, where the shadows are cast,

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<sup>1</sup> This line was inspired by a poetry slam poet.

we often drink the poisoned rain,  
and spit it on each other,  
bruising the face,  
tearing the flesh,  
killing the spirit  
of too many in our communities...

My learning happened in a huddle of program peers, in offices, faculty living rooms and kitchens, in seats on subway cars, in local dives, and in studying lives. It happened in a bi-coastal project, where I co-taught a class with community based and performance partners. We incorporated a form of healing/talking circles, community work, local knowledge holders as speakers, and a community reproductive health conference organized in collaboration with students (see Ayala, Herrera, Jimenez, Lara, 2006).

These experiences helped me think about teaching and research as social justice work, as healing fragmentations, as collaboration with community, as bridge work, but I feel a surge of interruptions from voices of doubt that narrate a tale a tale of inadequacy.

The voice of not good enough:

Say something! You don't have anything good enough to say. Is this rigorous enough? Does it meet the standards? Is it transformative, critical work? How will this help get me a job? Stop hand-holding. You're not helping enough. Too political. Not political enough. You're imposing your liberal views on me. You're selling out.

Yes, the voces of doubt are ever present, but can be informative, and propel me to rethink my assumptions and continue to question, and change.

### Clashes of mission and system realities

There is an overpowering "system" voice that speaks of education as standardization and corporatization. We see it in taking hold in K-12 education, but also increasingly in Higher Education, as authors Aronowitz (2001), Bok (2003), Kirp (2003)

among others, are writing. Students are our customers, corporations are buying/owning university research labs (and sometimes their findings) corporate consultants are being called upon to shape various departments (Bok, 2003; Kirp, 2003). Engaging students in transformative work with communities, committing to social justice, are not recognized as institutional strengths. Typically, rapport with students and student advocacy is not recognized in the reward structure of Higher Education. A college with significant diversity, or professors that engage in community work and student advocacy, often means that their rigor and reputability are held suspect.

The third eye: looking now and ahead

Many times I wondered what I was doing to respond to the civic mission of Higher Education now. I still wonder and know it is not enough. But I felt it in advising students experiencing academic difficulty. In brainstorming with colleagues on micro and macro issues of social justice. Most recently, I felt it in collaborating across disciplines and campuses with community organizations through participatory action research. To me, serving the public means educating all our students, opening the borders of the academy to the community, engaging students with community work through cooperative modes of investigation. It means questioning, stirring curiosity, engaging bodymindspirit, creating borderlands in the classroom, working with students and other college staff partners as community bridges transforming and allowing ourselves to be transformed. I am reminded that I am strongest when in community with others:

With sisters, brothers, allies  
 I am/we are actors,  
 together a Force.  
 We sift through the injustices,  
 so long draped in collective silence,  
 and solder the fragments,

piece by piece,  
with our deseos and sueños,  
our respeto and love,  
our spirits and communities strong.  
Such is our journey.

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