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The Future of Chicanx/Latinx Community-Academic Praxis in the Neoliberal University

Mari Castañeda

There is no denying that we are under attack. Chicanx/Latinx communities are feeling the pressure from ICE, the aggressive and violent language and actions of the White House administration, and the various policies and policing that are taking place across our many neighborhoods throughout the country. For example, the Family Separation Policy currently in place by the White House administration and the persistent pattern of ICE raids at sanctuary cities are both forms of state violence that are terrorizing many of our immigrant communities and deepening a culture of fear that is already in place.¹ In this context of increased deportations and dismissive treatment of our gente, I have been contemplating and asking myself, what can we do within the university? Is it possible to push back, resist and reimagine what it means to live in this country through the work we do in higher education? I often feel I'm not doing enough to change and transform what is going on around me, particularly as a professor, particularly at a research institution that emphasizes grants and publications. Can our courses really transform our students? Can our research actually impact the world and our communities? Can our subaltern presence and unapologetic voices at faculty meetings and the various spaces we inhabit recreate, alter, and decolonize our institutions?

Lately, this line of questioning has influenced my conversations with colleagues, familia, and friends, many of whom are from communities of color, and some of whom are progressive allies. These discussions have centered on the history of Chicanx studies, ethnic studies, feminist studies, and community studies, and their interventions to break down the structural barriers in higher education, and the insistence that our communities have much to contribute to the knowledge production efforts that many of us are involved in within and outside our classrooms.

My first encounter with community engagement and social justice knowledge came from home, very similarly to what Judith Carmona-Flores describes in her powerful essay, "Motherists' Pedagogies of Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Rights and Space in a Xenophobic Era."² My first teacher was mi mama, who didn't have more than a sixth-grade education but imparted her wisdom of how to treat others with dignity, inclusiveness, and love; and instilled in my hermanas/hermanos and myself how to

engage in the world with openness, generosity, and reciprocity. I carry those lessons within me and everywhere I go, and they have influenced my praxis along with recent discussions with scholar-activist friends about how we can continue to work closely with our local (and in some cases transnational) communities to enact collaborative social justice approaches to educational access, economic equity, political participation and cultural inclusion/significance/impact.

There is deep concern about the future of Chicax/Latinx community-academic praxis in light of the ever-growing neoliberal university.³ Is it even possible to do this critical community and civic engagement work given the increased efforts to commercialize and monetize higher education? In this moment when we are under attack, I believe that this work is more important than ever if we are to change the tide of hate that is growing every day; we need to think about what our community-academic praxis look like locally, regionally and even globally as institutions of higher education trouble the waters as they double down their efforts to transform students into consumers. We are under attack as gente trying to provoke un Nuevo mundo, but we are not going away silently or without resistance.

This is expressed and demonstrated by the transformational forms of Chicax/Latinx community-academic praxis that faculty, students and community partners are enacting in relational ways through love, respect, and inquiry; through the much-needed reckoning of who gets to produce new epistemologies and ontologies; and lastly, the ongoing reflection of who benefits from the critically oriented and innovative knowledge production that emerges when we collaborate with our communities, however we define those and which are not homogenous but complex, contradictory as we as healing spaces. For indeed, the communities we work with are not laboratories or basins of data but relationships of cuerpo, sangre y espiritu. We must continuously be aware and reflective of how our scholarly desires can reproduce structures of power, and therefore we must double down our efforts to reexamine how our community collaborative engagements can embody and express a decolonial community-academic praxis.

Here I want to briefly note some examples of Latinx community-academic praxis that I think are challenging traditional interpretations of what it means to occupy, claim and operationalize our college/university positions in an increasingly neoliberal context, especially as first-generation professors of color from immigrant familias. These examples are from a newly published co-edited book about civic engagement in diverse Latinx communities that aims to show how, despite the hate and attacks on our communities, faculty, students and community partners are working together to disrupt, decolonize, be creative, and make interventions about what it means to be Chicax and Latinx today and in the future. The co-edited book, *Civic Engagement in Diverse Latinx Communities: Learning from Social Justice Partnerships in Action*,⁴ emerged from many

conversations over the past five years, including panels at NACCS, in which the book contributors discussed and described the various social justice partnerships they were enacting in collaboration with community partners and students. We gathered together as a group of self-identified Chicana, indigenous, boricua and Latinx scholar-activists aiming to challenge the status quo of civic engagement scholarship as well as to make a positive intervention at our universities by bringing community knowledge to campus spaces.

I also want to note that the forthcoming examples of social justice partnerships in action are building upon a long tradition in Chicana/o studies, Latina/o studies and ethnic studies (including black, indigenous and Asian American studies), which were forged through the battles by our communities to gain entrance into higher education and be recognized as veritable and inimitable organic intellectuals with deep rooted knowledge born out of lived experience, everyday struggles and histories passed down through storytelling and counter-narratives. The scholarship and documentation of community lived experiences by writers such as Rosaura Sánchez (this year's NACCS Scholar), Antonia Castañeda, and Tomás Ybarra-Frausto as well as reports such as *The Chicano Struggle: Analyses of Past and Present*, efforts come to the forefront of my mind.⁵ Indeed, la lucha sigue and thus the partnerships described below point to the possibilities of what Gloria Anzaldúa professes: “the creation of a yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and the planet... We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures.”⁶ Similarly, as Boricua scholar Sonia Nieto states, our “difference in the world is but a ripple in the pond, yet” we know we are making a difference.⁷

Today we see Claudia Evans-Zepeda, an assistant professor at Cal State Fullerton, who worked with her students and both local and national organizations to change the Library of Congress' usage of the word “illegal” which was part of a broader effort called, “Drop the I” that was especially aimed at media coverage and representation. She writes in her chapter, “these efforts reveal how Latinx undocumented youth can resist linguistic hegemony and transform their student identities to support their educational success... Moreover, such involvement demonstrates why the work of Latinx youth, who have engaged in co-curricular learning and in anti-racism action, are having huge victories, transforming institutional and public consciousness and fighting for more inclusive campus environments and society at large.”⁸

There is also the work of Jonathan Rosa, an assistant professor at Stanford University, whose adaption of the “community as campus” framework developed a partnership between students, educators and community partners in order to document and challenge how mainstream language practices racialize interactions and landscapes.

Through community connections and civic engagement, students and teachers were able to “document, analyze and contest the stigmatization of language practices in a predominantly Latina community where linguistic diversity is often viewed as a problem from mainstream...while also demonstrating the resilience and ingenuity of its residents... It reimagines the participants in learning processes by positioning community members as legitimate teachers and researchers.”⁹

Another example is Katynka Martinez, associate professor and chair of Raza Studies at San Francisco State University, who addresses in one of her courses the impact that neoliberal municipal and corporate policies are having in restructuring who has access to the city, and how community-based newspapers are sites of struggle and testimonio about the historical and present lived realities of Chicana/o populations. She states, “by interrogating California newspaper coverage of Latinas/Latinos and reading counter-narratives in the ethnic press students can link their own acts of resilience and organizing to a legacy of self-determination.”¹⁰

Lastly, my dear colega J. Estrella Torrez, also associate professor and Co-Director, of the Indigenous Youth Empowerment Program at Michigan State University, has co-created partnerships through principles that emphasize collective knowledge building and storytelling as our medicine. Through such storytelling, trusting relationships can be developed and sustained since reciprocity is practiced as well as presence: “this time spent with my partners doing everyday activities and engaged in ordinary conversations, time that many university bureaucracies may not acknowledge, emerges from my willingness to listen, reflect, and act when called upon.”¹¹

There are many more examples of social justice-based Chicana/Latina community-academic praxis that we can point to that are taking place despite the increasing pressures to produce work that is largely revenue generating, apolitical, and disinterested in civic engagement. Eimear Enright and her coauthors note that the neoliberal university is indeed pressing a market driven orientation to education and research, and thus, influencing so many aspects of academia.¹² Although we are certainly operating within conditions not entirely of our own making as Marx once noted, we are no doubt social agents that can embody and practice different ways of imagining and being social justice scholar-activists.

For me, the academy only makes sense if I am in relation with others, in community, both on and off the university grounds, and it is my aspiration that we continue transforming our lived realities and structures of feeling. It is what motivates me to do my part to smash down the walls of the Ivory Tower. Do I fail and make mistakes? Constantly. As Eden Torres noted in *Chicana without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies*, “eliminating all forms of oppression is an ideal that no single person can hope to achieve – nor can we expect complete agreement [yet] we must fight to

maintain connections, stay with complexity, work our way through our differences and the despair that comes with defeats along the way.”¹³

For, indeed, we are still in the midst of the aftermath of the revolutions from the 1960s and we still feel the attack dogs upon us. Because of this we need to be real about where we work, where we study and where our communities exist in those spaces. But I am also hopeful in large part because it is clear that youth and young adults – beginning with DACA and the immigrant rights social movements to Black Lives Matter to the most recent anti-gun walk-outs – are leading the way and rupturing language, sexual, gender and racial normative identities as well as cultural practices and long-held political ideologies. That is the future of our mestiza consciousness, and community-academic praxis. And ultimately, of higher education itself.

NOTES

¹ Julian Aguilar, “Federal government tells border prosecutors to adopt ‘zero-tolerance’ policy on immigration,” *The Texas Tribune*, April 6, 2018.

<https://www.texastribune.org/2018/04/06/feds-order-border-prosecutors-adopt-zero-tolerance-policy-immigration/>; Curtis Mills, “Sanctuary cities targeted with enhanced raids,” *U.S. News and World Report*, March 24, 2017. <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-03-24/sanctuary-cities-targeted-with-enhanced-raids-report-says>.

² Judith Carmona Flores, “Motherists’ pedagogies of cultural citizenship: Claiming Rights and Space in a xenophobic era,” in *Civic Engagement in Diverse Latinx Communities: Learning from Social Justice Partnerships in Action*, eds. Mari Castañeda & Joseph Krupczynski (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 125-142.

³ Estrella J. Torrez, “Translating Chicana testimonios into pedagogy for a white Midwestern classroom,” *Chicana/Latina Studies* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2015):101-130; Sofia Villenas, “Latina/Chicana feminist postcolonialities: Un/tracking educational actors’ interventions,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 19, no. 5 (2006): 659-672; G. L. Ochoa and E. C. Ochoa (2004). Education for Social Transformation: Chicana/o and Latin American Studies and Community Struggles,” *Latin American Perspectives*, 31, no. 1 (2004): 59–80.

⁴ Mari Castañeda and Joseph Krupczynski, eds. *Civic Engagement in Diverse Latinx Communities: Learning from Social Justice Partnerships in Action* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018), 125-142.

⁵ Juan A. García, Theresa Córdova, and Juan R. García, eds., *The Chicano Struggle: Analyses of Past and Present Efforts* (Binghamton, NY: Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1984).

⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera* 2nd Ed. (San Francisco, Aunt Lute, 1999), 103.

⁷ Sonia Nieto, *Why We Teach Now* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), 44.

⁸ Claudia Evans-Zepeda, "Subject-Heading or Social Justice Solidarity? Civic Engagement Practices of Latina Undocumented Immigrant Students," in Castañeda and Krupczynski, 59-61.

⁹ Jonathan Rosa, "Community as a Campus: From 'Problems' to Possibilities in Latina Communities," in Castañeda and Krupczynski, 112, 121.

¹⁰ Katynka Z. Martinez, "'I Exist Because You Exist': Teaching History and Supporting Student Engagement via Bilingual Community Journalism," in Castañeda and Krupczynski, 226.

¹¹ J. Estrella Torrez, "Responsibility, Reciprocity, and Respect: Storytelling as a Means of University-Community Engagement," in Castañeda and Krupczynski, 150.

¹² Eimear Enright, Laura Alfrey and Steven B. Rynne, "Being and Becoming an Academic in the Neoliberal University: A Necessary Conversation," *Sport, Education and Society* 22, no.1 (2017): 1-4.

¹³ Eden Torres, *Chicana without Apology: The New Chicana Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 182.