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## RAZA WOMYN MUJERSTORIA

ANITA TIJERINA REVILLA\*

Raza Women was born out of a struggle. The struggle was for equal rights and recognition for the women who were members of a Chicano/Chicana group at UCLA but who did not receive the same rights and benefits as the male members. Instead of continuing to be pushed aside and having their specific Chicana issues ignored, in 1981, these women created their own organization, and Raza Women was born.<sup>1</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

THIS piece is based on my research, which examines social justice practices and perceptions of Chicana/Latina student activists who are or were members of Raza Womyn de UCLA.<sup>2</sup> Using participant observations, surveys, document examination and interviews, I conducted this research with Raza Womyn over the course of five years. I joined them at two to four hour evening meetings once a week for four years, participated in on- and off-campus scheduled activities, and assisted with organizing events. Most of my contact with them took place during weekly meetings in their office, but was not restricted to this location. The *mujeres* [women]<sup>3</sup> welcomed me into the space and urged me to document their experiences. They shared their personal and academic lives with me, and I am indebted to them for this.

To guide this work, I used both Critical Race Theory (“CRT”) and Latina/o Critical Theory (“LatCrit”) research methodologies in education, that embrace social justice as an integral element of the research process. By transforming the role of the researcher and the researched,

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1. See Christie Lafranchi, *Viva La Raza . . . Women!*, WEB MAG. ONLINE (Fall 1997), at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu//aasc/classweb/fall97/M163/lafr.html> (explaining origins of Raza Womyn women’s movement at UCLA).

2. In 1979, the organization was called Raza Women. It was created as an organization for women of Chicana/Latina ancestry on campus. In the 2000-01 academic year, they decided to change the name of the organization to Raza Womyn—taking the “e” out of the word women and replacing it with a “y” to remove the word “men” in “women.” This was done as a feminist statement to reinforce a woman-centered ideology for the organization.

3. The words “*mujer*” and “*mujeres*,” meaning “woman” and “women,” are generally used by the participants of Raza Womyn to refer to women of Chicana, Mexicana, and Latina ancestry, but beyond that these words imply a connection and a sense of identity between Chicanas/Latinas. I use these words to refer to the women in the organization, as is common amongst Raza Womyn.

CRT and LatCrit challenge objectivity and positivistic research traditions. CRT and LatCrit research methodologies necessitate revisioning research as a more equitable process.<sup>4</sup> Those of us that use CRT and LatCrit to develop our research methodology recognize the danger of focusing on dichotomies and realize that students' life experiences are affected by many different factors. As researchers, we avoid one-dimensional analyses of students' lives; that is, we carefully examine the ways that different aspects of people's lives intersect (e.g., ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, culture, language, nationality and religion). Education research must undertake careful examination of these intersections in order to make appropriate recommendations for the improvement of educational conditions of all students. Furthermore, researchers must push themselves to recognize the centrality of the voices of the researched. I see the participants of this work as part of my research team. They have helped me to name the study and to recognize the immense contribution and need for this kind of research. At their request, I share this *testimonio* and counter-narrative offered by the *mujeres* of Raza Womyn.

On the evening of February 10, 2000, after a weekly Raza Womyn meeting, I walked from Kerckhoff Hall to Bunche Hall with five *mujeres* to a Raza social mixer for undergraduate students hosted by the César Chávez Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Chicanas and Chicanos. After the gathering, a discussion commenced about previous experiences between *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana y Chicano de Aztlán* ("MEChA")<sup>5</sup> and Raza Womyn. According to the *mujeres*, Raza Womyn formed in response to the sexism and homophobia that many Chicanas and Latinas encountered in MEChA. They shared their own experiences and their belief that their encounters with sexism and homophobia in Chicana/o organizations were part of a recurring problem within the organization. In dealing with the sexist and/or homophobic incidents, the *mujeres* had no idea that these were shared experiences that other women and Queer<sup>6</sup> people had

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4. See generally Laurence Parker, "Race is . . . race ain't": An Exploration of the Utility of Critical Race Theory in Qualitative Research in Education, 11:1 INT'L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. IN EDUC. 43-55 (1998); Daniel G. Solorzano & Tara J. Yosso, *Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method: Counter-storytelling: Chicana and Chicano Graduate School Experiences in Education* 14:4 INT'L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. IN EDUC. 471-95 (2001) (applying CRT to examine discrimination toward Chicana and Chicano graduate students).

5. MEChA is a national organization that exists at many colleges, universities and high schools throughout the nation. MEChA is an acronym for *el Movimiento Estudiantil Chicana y Chicano de Aztlán*, which roughly translates to the Chicana and Chicano student movement of Aztlán. Aztlán refers to the land, a sacred ground, of the Southwest that was appropriated from Mexico by the United States. MEChA was founded in 1969, when students, faculty and community leaders came together at the University of California at Santa Barbara to create *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, which was considered a Chicano plan for higher education.

6. "Queer" refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people. It is the most commonly used term amongst the *mujeres* in Raza Womyn because it is viewed as all-encompassing and as politically charged.

gone through. But as they left the organization and were able to reflect on their experiences, they came across other *mujeres* who had been through similar struggles. As these *mujeres* shared their stories, the more they heard and collected new ones. They came to identify these stories as the “herstory” of *mujeres* in the *movimiento* [movement]. At the end of our conversation, they said that this herstory needed to be documented because they were sure that other *mujeres* would one day be faced with the same issues in male and female activist organizations, and they did not want others to go through it thinking that they were alone. They urged me to include their stories in my research. The following is a collection of Raza Womyn *cuentos* [stories] or “*mujerstorias*,”<sup>7</sup> narratives and interviews—written and oral, formal and informal—it is a *mujerstoría* of Raza Womyn collected from and by the *mujeres* that I have studied in the organization for the past five years.<sup>8</sup>

## II. THE EARLY YEARS (1979-1981)

### A. *Growing out of MEChA*

In 1979, a group of women who were involved in the UCLA student organization MEChA created a subcommittee for the female members of the organization to focus on women’s issues. They felt they needed a “space” where they could address these issues separately from the entire membership of the organization. As a subcommittee, the desire to speak openly and consistently about women’s issues became more pronounced. Consequently, they began to consider the creation of a separate women’s organization. As these women approached the male membership of MEChA to advise them of the need for this space, they were met with harsh resistance. The men were against the creation of the new space and argued that these issues could be addressed within MEChA.<sup>9</sup> According to one of the founding members, Isabel, the men said that they wanted to

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7. Delia, a member of Raza Womyn, often reconstructs language to create words that she can identify with and that she feels comfortable using to describe her experiences. In an email, where she was referring to the herstory of Raza Womyn, she used the word “*mujerstoría*” as a Spanish equivalent of herstory. But the significance of replacing “her” with “woman” is meaningful because it literally means woman-story or women’s stories. This term has a direct connection to delia’s feminist/*mujerista* politics. I purposely do not capitalize delia’s name because she does not do so. She asserts that rules and regulations, especially in the act of writing, are conformist and oppressive. She feels that in order to freely express herself she must break all the rules of writing. Therefore, in the tradition of Black feminist scholar bell hooks, she chooses not to capitalize her name.

8. There will be some glaring gaps and fragments in this herstory, as is usually the case in the retelling and recollecting of silenced women’s stories, but this is an attempt to begin piecing it together.

9. Indeed, today many MEChA chapters throughout the country have created gender and sexuality components that specifically deal with gender and sexuality discrimination. At the time, however, these issues were not being adequately addressed by the membership of the organization according to the women who decided to create Raza Womyn.

learn about women's issues as well. "We want to be sensitive to your needs . . . We wanna figure out what this women issue is about, so let us participate," they argued.<sup>10</sup> Isabel felt that the men were not "evil, super duper macho"<sup>11</sup> men, but rather they were men that wanted to be taken care of and taught by women while still refusing to focus on the issues that women found most pertinent. She said that "the women felt a strong need for an independent organization of Latina women."<sup>12</sup>

A narrative that has been passed down through oral *mujeristoria* was that in the early days of the organization, the men in MEChA were so opposed to these separate meetings that they continuously showed up to meetings to disrupt them. In frustration, the *mujeres* began meeting in the women's restroom, knowing that this was the one place the men could not follow them and invade their space. Eventually, the women made their first break from MEChA to become their own organization. They struggled over what to call the newly formed Chicana and Latina group. While many of them had a strong Chicana or Chicano identity because of their participation in MEChA, at least one member was Puerto Rican and another one was South American. The Chicanas and Mexicanas in the organization wanted the name to reflect their background, but they did not want to exclude the other Latinas. Furthermore, they were aware of the small, but growing populations of Central Americans and children of mixed heritage (Mexican and Central American) in Los Angeles. Although the *mujeres* were already beginning to redefine the terms "Chicana" and "Chicano" to incorporate others besides people of Mexican background, recognizing that the term signifies a political identity and solidarity with the *movimiento* [movement], they also wanted to give Latinas the right to define themselves and not feel forced into a Chicana identity. After many discussions, they decided on Raza Women because they felt that "Raza would encompass the spirit of the organization."<sup>13</sup> While Raza also had Mexican origins and was widely used throughout Chicana/o communities, it was a term that could symbolize a Latina/Chicana community or a united "race."

#### B. *Raza Womyn Seeking University Recognition*

In 1981, the women decided to go through the university for recognition, but they were met with yet another obstacle—the university's resistance to the name of the organization. According to their advisor, the university felt that calling the group Raza Womyn "was a discriminatory practice because it sounded like [they] were being an exclusive organiza-

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10. Interview with Isabel, Member, *Raza Womyn* [hereinafter Interview with Isabel]. I only use the first names of the participants of the study as was agreed during the interview process.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

tion.”<sup>14</sup> This was an unfounded accusation, considering that other “ethnic/racial” organizations such as MEChA or women’s organizations already existed at the time. The *mujeres* stood by their decision and were able to maintain the name they chose and still receive recognition. At the time, the members had no critique of the word “women,” spelled with an “e.” Thus, the official name on all organization and university literature read “Raza Women.” The change from Raza Womæn to Raza Womyn did not occur until twenty years later, during a Raza Womyn meeting, when everyone decided that they would write Raza Womyn with a “y” rather than “e” to make a feminist statement against being male-identified—taking the word “men” out of the word “women.”<sup>15</sup>

After splitting organizationally from MEChA, the women were able to concentrate on their internal development. They wanted an informal setting for their meetings, a space free of “rigid structure with motions, seconds and Roberts Rules of Order” because that “was a very oppressive way to run meetings.”<sup>16</sup> They avoided strict voting procedures and instead concentrated on “talking, dialoguing, and consensus building.” Isabel says that:

[T]he goal was raising the consciousness of the women in the group, especially about why [they] needed [their] own space and why it was important to talk about [their] own issues, and for [them] to reflect, as women, on what [they] wanted out of the

14. *Id.*

15. See E-mail from delia, Raza Womyn Member to Anita Tijerna Revilla, Assistant Professor, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (Dec. 11, 2001) (explaining why organization uses “y” instead of “e” in “women” (on file with author)).

[T]he reason the collective of womyn of color that i am part of and myself spell womyn with a y is to deconstruct the language that speaks of us. since the language, especially western culture is very sexist and male centered (as in wo-men). men think that they are the center and most important being of fierce mother earth and that womyn cannot exist and do anything if they are not present. we resist this and rather self define ourselves. In other words being that language is part of our voice and existence we engage in not only deconstructing it and transforming our language but in its process of transformation it is also womyns’ empowerment, and a process of renaming, redefining and reclaiming our existence. with no doubt, then, that traditional, mainstream, western educated minds often find it hard to recognize, challenge, and engage in the reconstruction of a language that constantly silences, objectifies, and dis-empowers womyn, queer community, people of color, immigrants. indeed in reclaiming and rewriting our language, it is a challenge to the hierarchy and sexist structure of this patriarchal, capitalist, Eurocentric, sexist, homophobic world . . . through the use of womyn we resist and actively engage in critical, fierce, mujerista (womyn politics and activism) analysis about our existence and world that is so oppressively persistent in defining and dictating who and how we should be. we engage in self love, embrace our voice and existence and collectively empower and respect one another to fight and speak out against any injustice.

*Id.*

16. Interview with Isabel, *supra* note 10.

university and for [them]selves in [their] lives and on [their] identities as Latinas as Chicanas, as *mujeres*.<sup>17</sup>

From its inception, the organization developed in opposition to oppressive practices that they experienced in other organizations, particularly in MEChA. Nonetheless, a strong link between MEChA and Raza Womyn would last until the late 1980s, when a second symbolic and physical break occurred.

### III. RAZA WOMYN DURING THE LATE 1980s

#### A. *Latinas Guiding Latinas, a Community Service Branch of Raza Womyn*

In 1987-88, Raza Womyn members created a community service branch of Raza Womyn. It was a group that would allow the *mujeres* of Raza Womyn to become mentors and reach out to the young Latinas in selected schools. Their vision was to empower young Latinas in public schools. The tutoring and mentoring program for high school and middle school students was called Latinas Guiding Latinas ("LGL"). Other organizations had created these kinds of programs for Latino and Latina students, but the *mujeres* felt the need to provide mentorship and assistance in college planning for Latinas by Latinas. According to an ad in *La Gente de Aztlán* (the people of Aztlán), a Chicana/Latina/o university student newsmagazine:

In response to the under education and high school dropout rate of Chicana and Latina students, Latinas Guiding Latinas was implemented by UCLA students with the intention of motivating young women to pursue higher education by:

- providing a network in which LGL volunteers serve as mentors and resource aids for young Chicanas and Latinas,
- providing professional women in varied careers as speakers, guests and role models, [and]
- ensuring that participants and volunteers are exposed to educational goals and opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

The need for a mentoring and tutoring program for *mujeres* by *mujeres* was immense. Hence, while it had its origins as a Raza Womyn project, LGL also developed into an independent organization that continues to bring together college, high school and middle school *mujeres* toward the goal of increasing the numbers of Latinas in higher education.

#### B. *Establishing a Separate Identity and Physical Space at the University*

At around the same time that LGL was founded, Raza Womyn was met with another obstacle with regards to space. On paper, they were still

17. *Id.*

18. LA GENTE DE AZTLÁN (1996) at 33.

a branch or extension of MEChA, and as a result they were being asked to share office space with MEChA. Isabel notes:

Knowing how important the organization was for Latinas at UCLA as a support group and the importance to have its separate identity from MEChA, which was male dominant for awhile, we fought to have our own office space. Unfortunately, that landed us in the second floor of the men's gym. However, with much struggle and resistance, the following year Raza Women became an independent group with its separate budget and thanks to Lisa, our office became 324 Kerckhoff Hall.<sup>19</sup>

This would not be the last time that the Raza Womyn's office and physical space would be threatened, but it was the last time that Raza Womyn was forced to move.

As the leadership of the undergraduate student government (USAC) changes yearly, their politics change and student advocacy organizations are always amongst the first to be targeted in terms of funding and space changes. As recently as the 2000-01 school year, a white female (sorority-affiliated) student became the president of USAC, and she began talking about taking away certain privileges from student advocacy groups, namely office space. She felt that there was no distinction between the chess club and the ethnic and women-identified organizations on campus and that neither of these organizations should have offices. And if the student advocacy organizations did not occupy the office space, then the long-desired space that the Greeks requested of the university would become available. Luckily, she was not successful in her campaign against the advocacy organizations.

There is a long history of tension and hurtful politics between the sororities and fraternities and the student of color organizations on campus, which I learned by way of organizations that primarily serve students of color. Essentially, the leadership of the undergraduate student government largely determines what organizations and events will be funded and supported by the university. As early as 1980, students of color at UCLA created a coalition and ran a slate of students for the USAC positions against "the Greek machine" that dominated student government prior to 1980. The coalition has undergone several name changes, including the Third World slate, Students First, Praxis and Student Empowerment, all of which have been focused on improving the educational environment for underrepresented students at the university. These coalitions were a result of increased student organizing and raised awareness around issues of social justice and change, coupled with the support of ethnic studies programs and race-based student organizations. I learned about students' election politics from candidates on the Praxis slate. They defined Praxis

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19. Interview with Isabel, *supra* note 10.



as reflection and action, and their vision statement was a call for collective action:

We believe that education is a right, not a privilege. This is why we believe that a student issue is anything that prevents a person from enrolling in or graduating from higher education. We are committed to working on all fronts to increase access by organizing students to represent themselves. As students, our power lies in our ability to act collectively for change, not through student government titles.

The students of color that participated in this slate were self-identified, critically conscious students who sought to implement their theoretical foundations of social justice into practice; hence the name of the slate—Praxis. For five years Praxis successfully ran their candidates and won the elections. The slate of students that was in opposition to the students of color was made up primarily of members from Pan-Hellenic Greek organizations on campus. According to the narrative of campus politics, the Greeks felt that as Praxis gained leadership of the student government, Greek social events and access to office space suffered. Many students of color, who often came from nonprivileged backgrounds, opposed student funding of Greek-organized social activities because of the enormous privilege and wealth of most Greek organizations (especially those with large alumni endowments) and their members. In general, funding for Greeks meant increased spending on social events predominantly attended by white students, while funding for student of color organizations resulted in an increase in community service and consciousness-raising activities on and off campus primarily for students of color. This dynamic resulted in a tug of war between the two groups. It became a struggle for funding and university support on both sides, but for very different agendas. In 2001, the students involved with the Praxis slate decided to change the name of the slate to Student Empowerment because of internal conflicts, shifting politics and possibly the defeat of Praxis the previous year.

Raza Womyn has fluctuated in their level of involvement and support of the slate. Raza Womyn has usually endorsed Students First/Praxis/Student Empowerment, but they have consistently had serious concerns about the levels of sexism and homophobia exhibited by some of the members of the slate and/or the organizations represented in the coalition that makes up the slate. Raza Womyn has not always been a key participant in these types of campus politics. At times, this has been due to Raza Womyn's refusal to become involved in on-campus "drama."<sup>20</sup> Other

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20. Drama is one of many terms that has become a part of Raza Womyn linguistic expressions. Drama signifies a multitude of things, but mostly it refers to things that are considered inappropriate, especially in terms of politics or consciousness. Sexism and homophobia are excellent examples of the "drama" that many of the women choose not to deal with in co-ed student organizations. For

times, Raza Womyn has been excluded or tokenized by the slate as the women and/or Queer representatives on the slate.

#### IV. RAZA WOMYN IN THE EARLY 1990s

Throughout the years, participation in Raza Womyn has fluctuated, usually remaining in the area of ten to twenty, but sometimes decreasing to only a couple of members. At times, there were no members, but the group always revitalized as the need for a woman and Chicana/Latina space returned. The individual goals and political inclinations of Raza Womyn members have basically defined the goals and politics of the organization. Early on, the organization was believed to be extremely political and even radical. Isabel indicated that Raza Womyn: “was more about raising consciousness. We were very militant. We were very anti-racism, anti-classism, anti-sexism and it was threatening to a lot of people;” she says:

We were militant in our approach. We wanted to push people’s buttons. We wanted to make people feel uncomfortable. We wanted to be in people’s faces . . . We wanted other Latinas to feel uncomfortable and to think about stuff, to do things to challenge this whole idea of what success means, what being Latina means, and what a woman is. And I think we did that. We did it to ourselves and to other people.<sup>21</sup>

Consciousness building or *conscientización*<sup>22</sup> has been a central focus and goal of Raza Womyn, but the definition of consciousness has shifted based on the different identities and politics of the members involved. *Conscientización* indicates that a person is aware of the historical/herstorical social and political implications of a particular aspect of a human being’s life/identity, particularly in terms of the discrimination, subordination and oppression of a person based on that aspect of their life. It should, however, also include a critical assessment of the power dynamics, in terms of privilege and oppression, involved with that aspect of life/identity. The roots of *conscientización* are in life experiences—that is, people develop their consciousness as a result of their life struggles, but consciousness and awareness can also be learned or developed from theory shared in academic classes or amongst communities, families, friends and other allies. This is the case in Raza Womyn and many other student organizations.

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example, a lack of consciousness about women’s and Queer people’s social justice or equity issues is considered dramatic or drama.

21. Interview with Isabel, *supra* note 10.

22. See generally PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* (Myra Bergman Ramos trans., 1970) (describing process of conscience building as awareness of life surroundings).

The four primary areas of *conscientización* that I was concerned with in this research are race, class, gender and sexuality. The members of Raza Womyn have come into the organization at different levels of *conscientización*. Some Raza Womyn have had an awareness of race, but no awareness of gender, class/labor and sexuality issues or vice versa. But as the *mujeres* have come together, they have often engaged in Raza Womyn pedagogy, which is the process of sharing knowledge and increasing understanding through dialogue, *hermandad* [sisterhood], organizing and activism; thus creating *conscientización* on different levels about different “isms,” phobias and other aspects of subordination and oppression.

Even though the early days of Raza Womyn and the more recent years of Raza Womyn have been defined as radical with a focus on raising consciousness, this was not always the case. Raza Womyn has also been a very social space with members that had no political affiliations on or off campus. At one time, Raza Womyn members were primarily sorority members, in which case Raza Womyn funds were primarily used to organize social activities. In 1994 (as well as other years), even men were involved in Raza Womyn. At one point, men from the Iranian Student Group (“ISG”), who share the office with Raza Womyn, were actually coordinators of Raza Womyn! This occurred because one of the female members of Raza Womyn had a boyfriend in ISG; consequently the boyfriend and some of his friends participated in Raza Womyn events and meetings.<sup>23</sup>

#### A. *The Resurgence of Radical Mujeres in Raza Womyn; The Late 1990s*

In 1994, the “Raza Women” members offered a scholarship to a woman named “Janie.”<sup>24</sup> After being awarded the scholarship, she began attending the Raza Womyn meetings and learned about the men involved. Because she was unhappy with the dynamics of the space, in particular with the male membership, she asked her friend, “Gina,”<sup>25</sup> and some of the other *mujeres* from MEChA to come to Raza Womyn. Gina and the other women had major conflicts with the male membership and even with the male-identified women in the organization. Gina says that her purpose in Raza Womyn was solely to “kick the men out” of the organization.<sup>26</sup> Soon Gina was left alone in Raza Womyn, and she worked to recreate it by outreaching to new *mujeres*. Because the new members were members of both Raza Womyn and MEChA, the link between the two organizations was reconnected. Gina was the internal coordinator for MEChA and Raza Womyn in the 1994-95 school years; thus, her leadership in both organizations served as a direct link for collaboration between the two.

23. Based on lists of members that I found in Raza Womyn archives, there may have been male members at other times as well, but this is unconfirmed. They may have been male supporters rather than members.

24. “Janie” is a pseudonym.

25. “Gina” is a pseudonym.

26. Interview with Gina, Member, *Raza Womyn* (May 2002).

## V. RAZA WOMYN AND MEChA WORKING TOGETHER

Because members of Raza Womyn continued to participate as members and leaders of MEChA, the connection and allegiance to the organization was strong despite the reoccurring breaks between the two organizations. In the 1994-95 school year, two students cofounded the Raza Youth Conference (“RYC”), a conference that today draws over a thousand Chicana/Latina/o youth throughout Southern California. Gina, a Raza Womyn, was one of the cofounders of the RYC. Gina had been a member of MEChA since 1989 when she became involved with the San Diego chapter in her community college. But even while Gina was still a member of MEChA, she struggled with sexist politics in the organization. Since her early involvement in MEChA, she was outspoken and assertive about women’s issues and refused to succumb to male dominance. As a result, in her final year at UCLA, as a MEChA coordinator and RYC co-chair, she had a falling out with the other leaders of MEChA.

The governing body of the organization, called the *Mesa Directiva* [Directive Table], met secretly to discuss whether or not to dismiss Gina from the organization. A vote was officially taken, and they decided to allow her to remain in the organization. She was extremely unhappy in MEChA; however, she made the choice to continue working within them because of her strong commitment to the youth and the conference. Gina’s participation in MEChA came to an end soon after. Although MEChA was the place where much of her activism and consciousness first began to flourish, she could no longer support what she came to regard as a hypocritical movement for social justice.

Gina reports that after she came out as a lesbian, she was “deleted from MEChA history as a co-founder of the conference,” implying that her omission from this history was not an accident at all.<sup>27</sup> In fact, she believes that because of their homophobia, MEChA members did not want to acknowledge her contributions to the RYC. The year after she graduated, she worked to rebuild Raza Womyn. Because most of the earlier members of Raza Womyn had graduated, Gina decided to continue working with the organization to mentor the two *mujeres* that she helped recruit, Nena<sup>28</sup> and Cristina. When Gina was still a member of MEChA, she made a proposal to the women of the organization to create a conference similar to RYC but solely for women. The group voted on the proposal, but due to the lack of interest, preparation and commitment to women’s issues, the conference was voted down.

A. *The First Annual Chicana/Latina Conference*

In 1996, Gina’s vision of a woman’s conference organized by and for women became a reality, but it was planned by the *mujeres* of Raza Womyn

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27. *Id.*

28. “Nena” is a pseudonym.

rather than MEChA. Unfortunately, there were only two other active coordinators in Raza Womyn at the time, Nena and Cristina; but between the three of them, they were able to recruit a handful of *mujeres* who offered their support. They organized the first annual Chicana/Latina conference on February 24, 1996, which was called “*La Liberación de Nuestras Mujeres*” [The Liberation of our Women]. Although the conference was held on the UCLA campus—and targeted a Chicana/Latina population off-campus comprised of young women in middle school, high school and community college—the conference drew women of all ages. Raza Womyn received little or no funding for the conference from the university that year, but they sought donations from people off-campus and used their own money to fund it. Less than a hundred women attended the first annual conference, but every year since, the numbers have doubled and the program has reached 600 participants. The first conference program indicated:

The theme of this year’s conference is entitled, “*La Liberación de Nuestras Mujeres*”. It is our belief that as Raza Women, we educate and motivate our *hermanas* to fight against the continuous attacks on our *mujeres* and our community. We will begin our step towards liberating ourselves through becoming aware and taking action in our struggle against the oppression that we face on a daily basis. However, we must first support each other in order to strengthen ourselves in *nuestra lucha*. We *mujeres* carry that determination and *corazón* that is necessary for the betterment of ourselves and our communities.<sup>29</sup>

The women clearly felt a strong sense of attack taking place against *mujeres* and their wider communities. Thus, increasing consciousness amongst women and ultimately struggling for liberation were high priorities for the conference. Although the Chicana/Latina conference was held on the university campus, the presenters were from off-campus communities, including Chicana/Latina activists, artists, performers, resource centers and students. The information shared specifically addressed the struggles of Chicanas/Latinas and various aspects of Chicana/Latina lives and was delivered in small group workshops, which allowed for discussion and sharing. Furthermore, Raza Womyn expressed their desire to come together and struggle against assaults on them and their communities through consciousness-raising, dialogue and activism. Every year since, the *mujeres* have organized an annual conference, which includes a unique theme, over twenty workshops, keynote and closing speakers, entertainment and other activities—all in hopes of raising consciousness and awareness against the subordination of *mujeres*.

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29. See RAZA WOMEN, “*¡La Liberación de Nuestras Mujeres!*” [The Liberation of our Women!], FIRST ANNUAL CHICANA/LATINA CONFERENCE PROGRAM, UCLA (Feb. 24, 1996) (setting forth agenda for conference).

In 1996, MEChA (both men and women) were supportive of the Raza Womyn conference, but later that year, Nena and Cristina had a very negative and traumatizing experience as they helped organize the Raza Womyn Conference for MEChA. Although Gina had left MEChA earlier, the younger *mujeres* had not. They continued working with the organization. Janie (Nena's sister and also a member of Raza Womyn) became the coordinator for the women's unit of MEChA, and eventually she became the MEChA chair.

B. *The Most Recent Break Between Raza Womyn and MEChA and La Familia*

Nena and Cristina volunteered to organize the Raza Youth Conference for MEChA in 1996 and were responsible for organizing and confirming all of the workshop presentations for the conference. Nena and Cristina were asked to read the evaluations from the previous Raza Youth Conference and to derive a list of recommendations for workshops for that year. Amongst the recommended workshops was one called "Queer Aztlán," which was conducted by *La Familia de UCLA*, the Queer Latina/o organization on campus, but when Nena and Cristina presented it as one of the tentative workshops, they were told that they should reconsider the presenters. In other words, MEChA did not want *La Familia* to do the presentation. When the *mujeres* asked why, they received mixed messages. Eventually, Nena says that they were told that, "some members from *La Familia* [had] spoken out against MEChA and condemned [them] of homophobia and [MEChA felt that they were] not homophobic."<sup>30</sup>

Nena believes that because there were a few openly gay people in MEChA, the organization was tokenizing those members and using them as "proof" that they were not homophobic. When Nena and Cristina argued that the participants of the conference specifically requested in their evaluations that *La Familia* return to conduct the workshop, the Mesa Directiva of MEChA called an emergency meeting to discuss the workshops. Nena recounted the event.<sup>31</sup>

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30. Interview with Nena, Member, *Raza Womyn* (Aug. 15, 2001) [hereinafter Interview with Nena].

31. See *id.* (recounting events of meeting).

They ended up calling an emergency meeting with me and Cristina. They sat us down, my sister was there because she was chair, then you had "Lisa" and "Enrique" who were the chairs of the conference and you had "Emilio" there, who was the "founder," or some shit like that, co-founder with Gina of RYC. So we had to justify for three hours why we needed every workshop. Three hours girl! We were going off. I was arguing with him the whole time. My sister just sat there. [Afterward,] I go "Janie I can't believe you put me in here." And she was like, "Well we're here as MEChistas." I'm like, fuck you man. You're still my sister. So it went personal. It went home . . . . So after justifying for three hours, we came out of that meeting crying. We were like, "What the fuck was that? That was fucked up!"

*Id.*

Nena and Cristina were caught in a very difficult situation because they were feeling pressure from the MEChA leadership to throw out all workshops that were conducted by people who spoke critically about MEChA, but their conscience would not allow them to feel comfortable knowing that these were valid experiences and perspectives that needed to be shared. This was an especially trying time for Nena because her sister, who had also been a member of Raza Womyn in the past, was now the MEChA chair, so both sisters were caught in a bind because of the politics of the organization. According to Nena, there was no space for self-criticism or balance—"either you were for MEChA or against MEChA."<sup>32</sup> Consequently, Janie seemed to side with MEChA and Nena seemed to side against MEChA. Nena and Cristina felt that they were blacklisted for challenging the decisions and advice of the Mesa.

The drama continued to build until the day of the conference. "Mundo"<sup>33</sup> (a member of *La Familia* and the previous coordinator of the gender and sexuality component of MEChA) approached Nena to protest that *La Familia* was not going to be allowed to conduct the "Queer Aztlán" workshop. Nena was under the impression that *La Familia* was still going to present the workshop, but someone else from MEChA told Mundo that they were not. When Mundo went to MEChA to complain, another emergency meeting was held between MEChA and *La Familia* to discuss the issue. The Mesa Directiva, however, did not ask Nena and Cristina to attend this meeting. It was supposed to be a closed meeting, but the *mujeres* showed up anyway. During the meeting, the MEChA chair (Janie) told Mundo that the workshop committee had decided not to ask *La Familia* to present at the conference—she essentially placed the blame on the workshop committee of Nena and Cristina. Nena and Cristina were devastated. On one hand, they had MEChA refusing to allow them to invite *La Familia* to present, and on the other hand, they had *La Familia* angry with them and accusing them of being homophobic.

After trying to argue their side of the story, Nena and Cristina were excluded from another meeting that consisted of only the members of the Mesa Directiva. At this meeting, the members of the Mesa Directiva decided to have a "Queer Aztlán" workshop led by the gender and sexuality component of MEChA at California State University, Northridge. This was a closed meeting and the *mujeres* were purposely excluded, but *La Familia* continued to blame Nena and Cristina for their exclusion from the conference. As a result, on the day of the conference *La Familia* showed up to protest the whole incident. Nena describes the day's events:

N: So we're at the day of the conference . . . . And *La Familia* comes up with all their flags and everything . . . . They're all Queered out. And they go, "Are we doing the workshop?" I go, "What are you talking about?" I go, "Well you're doing whatever

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32. *Id.*

33. "Mundo" is a pseudonym.

you guys discussed at the thing.” He’s like, “Well did Terry tell you we were doing it?” I go, “Yeah, but MEChA didn’t say anything about it. They wouldn’t listen to me” . . . . And they were videotaping me. They have a videotape of everything that went on, to document it . . . . And when it came down to the workshops, I guess security ends up going to the room where the Queer Aztlán workshop is at. And *La Familia* goes to where the workshop is at and they’re like, “You know what, we were supposed to do this workshop . . .” starting all kinds of shit. And they had their signs for the workshop too . . . I passed by them and they had their sign, “Queer Aztlán” workshop. They were going to take them to workshop, no matter what . . . . And so they got security . . . .

A: So what happened at the workshop?

N: I wasn’t there. I didn’t want to go there. I go, “No because they’re going to point it at me,” so security ends up coming in, kicks them out — kicks out *La Familia*, and the other people proceeded with the workshop. So *La Familia*’s just sitting there like, “fuck this shit.” Videotaping everyone. Saying shit about them.<sup>34</sup>

After the Raza Womyn Conference, Nena and Cristina had no choice but to distance themselves from MEChA. They felt that they were black-listed for questioning the Mesa Directiva authority and for not remaining silent. Nena says that she went back a couple of times, but she never felt comfortable again amongst them. One of the last times she went to a meeting, she told the members that she was a lesbian. She felt more distant from them than ever. She remembers their reaction to her coming out: “So after that, no one said anything. You know when people come out, you need to give them a hug, you need to show them love, that ‘I’m so proud of you.’ No . . . .”<sup>35</sup> Still, her commitment to MEChA was difficult to sever, and she tried going one more time, but that was her final visit to MEChA:

And I think I went back one more time, and I knew it wasn’t going to happen. I was stared at. Like, “Why are you here?” Like I had those looks, the “Why are you here” looks. Besides I had nothing that I could grow from. There was nothing there that I could grow from anymore. It was just bitter, trying to be the best, really machismo shit. The sad thing was that it was embraced and reciprocated by all the women. So everyone eventually left MEChA and came out.<sup>36</sup>

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34. Interview with Nena, *supra* note 30.

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*



Eventually Nena completely left MEChA, and she rebuilt a space for herself within Raza Womyn. Raza Womyn allowed her to be herself, which was something that she was struggling with because she was trying to come out as a Queer woman as well. As Nena indicated, several students who were active in MEChA (both male and female) left the organization and soon after came out as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. A handful of them became members of Raza Womyn, and others became members of *La Familia*. They felt a strong need to feel accepted, supported and understood based on all of their identities, including sexuality. Although these former MEChA members were unable to fulfill their needs within MEChA, other Queer people in MEChA had better experiences.

## VI. A QUEER MUJERSTORIA: COMING OUT IN RAZA WOMYN

The person who was most responsible for opening the conversation of sexuality in Raza Womyn during the time that I arrived in 1998 was Nena. Nena made me feel safe enough to discuss my own sexuality in the safety of Raza Womyn. Before I came to Raza Womyn, I was not out as bisexual to anyone but my family. Likewise, many of the *mujeres* were unable to speak about sexuality freely before Raza Womyn for fear of using the wrong words or sounding uninformed and unaware, but Nena engaged in extensive dialogues with all of us. We finally developed a sense of comfort with regards to sexuality. This was a powerful and liberating experience. Even after Nena graduated, the precedent that she set led to many more encounters and dialogues about sexuality with future *mujeres* of Raza Womyn.

“Queer” is the most commonly used term amongst the *mujeres* in Raza Womyn because it is viewed as all-encompassing and as politically charged. “Queer” includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (“LGBT”) people, and it is connected to a social political movement against sexual subordination. Other *mujeres* prefer terms such as “*lesbiana*,” “*jota*,” “two-spirited” or “*tortillera*,” which are more closely linked with their identities as Latinas, Chicanas, Mexicanas or indigenous women.

*Lesbiana* is preferred because it is in Spanish, and the *mujeres* feel that the word “lesbian” is more closely identified with white women. *Jota* is a derogatory term used in Latina/o communities to identify lesbians and bisexual women, but it has been redefined by those women who choose to use it as a means of empowerment and to reject the negative use of the term. “Two-spirited” is a term that is intricately connected with an indigenous identity. Indigenous people who house and can love both male and female spirits are referred to as two-spirited. *Tortillera* (tortilla maker) is a term that has gained popularity within lesbian and bisexual communities in Los Angeles (and other places). A professor at UCLA, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, has used the term, and several of the women in Raza Womyn and the Los Angeles community have also taken it on as an identifier. When I

asked delia (a Raza Womyn) where the term *tortillera* originated, she replied:

I've heard it before when I was younger, but it didn't really mean anything to me, but then I started hearing it through Gaspar<sup>37</sup> and then through Claudia because she's taking that term too. The other day I was talking to my mom . . . and she was telling me, "O, si miya, [Yes, my daughter,] the other day I was talking to the lady that works in the *tortilleria* [tortilla factory]." And my mom asked the lady, "*Quien sabe como sera que las lesbianas hacen amor si no hay nada hay* [Who knows how lesbians make love if there's nothing there]," meaning that there's no penis involved. The lady told her, "*Pues, sera asi como haciendo tortillas, como tortilleras.* [Well, it must be like this, like making tortillas, like tortilla makers]."

And that's where it actually comes from . . . . *Tortillera* meaning two vaginas, two women's bodies making love. That's where Gaspar got it. It's not something that she came up with or that Adelina came up with.<sup>38</sup> It's something that she learned through her *comunidad* [community], and she brought it into her academics and made a theory out of it. It is actually a term that is used within our *colonias* [neighborhoods] and our *comunidad* [community] to define our *gente* [people], to define *tortilleras*, to define lesbians.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, *tortillera* was a term that originated in Mexican and Latina/o communities that was used in derogatory ways as well, but that has been redefined and embraced by Chicana/Latina lesbians and bisexual women in the same manner that the word Chicano was redefined during the movement. "Queer" has a similar trajectory—it was once used in a demeaning manner to signify that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people were odd or abnormal, but today it is used frequently, especially amongst academics and activists, to signify an LGBT political movement. Still, many people active in these communities do not want to limit people

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37. According to several of the *mujeres* of Raza Womyn, Alicia Gaspar de Alba ("Gaspar") has been their only professor at UCLA to deal with issues related to Chicanas/Latinas, feminist and Queer issues. She has been key in raising many students' feminist and Queer consciousness. In class, she popularized the term/identity "*tortillera*," which is used in Mexico and other Latin American countries to identify lesbians. See generally *TORTILLERAS: HISPANIC AND U.S. LATINA LESBIAN EXPRESSION* (Lourdes Torres et al. eds., 2003) (collecting articles about gender, sociological and lesbian issues for Latinas).

38. Adelina is a producer, playwright and actress who is pursuing a Ph.D. in performance arts at Stanford University under the mentorship of Cherrie Moraga. She is a long-time Raza Womyn supporter and her partner (Coral) is a Raza Womyn. She wrote and performed a Chicana lesbian show called, "How to be a Tortillera 101."

39. Interview with delia, Member, *Raza Womyn*, in Los Angeles, Cal. (Nov. 28, 2000).

to specific terms, and they want to honor people's decision to identify as they wish. At the first ever Queer Youth of Color Conference held in Los Angeles in April 2002, the student organizers referred to their community as LGBTQ; again this simultaneous use of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and Queer signifies that every term is just as important as the other.<sup>40</sup> They have also used the umbrella label "LGBTQI" to include intersexed individuals.<sup>41</sup>

Because members of Raza Womyn have dealt with different social, political and economic issues internally, their events have reflected these issues. For example, the area of *conscientización* that was least developed by early participants/members of Raza Womyn was Queer sexuality. Raza Womyn founders and members during the eighties and early nineties, for the most part, did not deal with Queer sexuality; in particular, they did not address homophobia. Several Raza Womyn alumnae have remarked that sexuality was never an issue that they dealt with or that they felt comfortable discussing. Naturally, this resulted in a homophobic and sexually repressive environment. To develop a sexually liberated and Queer-friendly space—that is, *conscientización* with regards to sexuality—dialogue, questioning and educating must take place around that issue. Most often, these women came from homes, communities and friendships where sexuality was also taboo. Thus, this aspect of identity and life experience was sorely unexplored or ignored in dealing with issues that related primarily to race, class and gender, including issues of family, immigration, religion, politics and education.

Although the *mujeres* felt more comfortable in Raza Womyn than they did in MEChA, this did not mean that Raza Womyn was free of some of the same oppressive issues that they fled. Nena admits that much of the "chingon politics" that she learned in MEChA followed her into Raza Womyn, and that she and the other *mujeres* had to consciously work to create a different environment within Raza Womyn.<sup>42</sup> Cristina notes that both she and Nena were growing inside and outside of Raza Womyn, especially with regards to sexuality. Nena was in a relationship with Gina, although she was not out to everyone about it.<sup>43</sup> Cristina was slowly beginning to

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40. The Queer Youth of Color Conference was created by high school and middle school students from Los Angeles and by Raza Womyn members, Gina and Nena. It was held at Manual Arts High School in south central Los Angeles.

41. See generally BODIES LIKE OURS at <http://www.bodieslikeours.org> (last visited Nov. 9, 2004) (providing support for intersex persons); INTERSEX SOCIETY at <http://www.isna.org> (last visited Nov. 9, 2004) (exploring ways to end shame and secrecy associated with intersex persons).

42. Nena defines "chingon politics" as "tough guy politics." She says, "Those are terms from Betita Martinez. 'Yo soy mas chingon.' Like, I'm the one who you can't fuck with because I'll fuck with you . . . . It's very penis-driven, phallic-driven, patriarchy-driven, and it is embraced and expected in many organizations." *Id.*; see also ELIZABETH MARTINEZ, *DE COLORES MEANS ALL OF US* 172-81 (1998) (describing *chingon* politics).

43. Interview with Cristina, Member, Raza Womyn (June, 2002) [hereinafter Interview with Cristina].

question her own sexuality. She recalls that she was attending several conferences through her role as a member of the student government. Within these conferences, the discussion of LGBT issues was common. Cristina says, "It's natural that when you start talking about these issues, you begin to question. We're socialized to never consider these things by the environment that we're in, but once you start hearing people talk about it, you start thinking about it."<sup>44</sup> She remembers discussing the issues with others at the conferences, then bringing these issues back to Raza Womyn. Eventually, they created a space where they could openly talk about sexuality, and where they began to connect sexuality to their Chicana experiences. It is not clear to me who came out first, but what is clear is that their coming out distinctly changed the Raza Womyn space.

The intimacy and closeness between the women that allowed them to discuss such private issues was not always welcomed by other women who came to the organization. Cristina believes that Raza Womyn has always had a small number of participants for this reason—because of the closeness and because it is a Queer-friendly space. She remembers being envious of the large membership of other organizations and thinking that Raza Womyn had to increase their numbers.

She adds that Raza Womyn was different because although they knew it was important to organize against Proposition 209, immigrant backlash in Los Angeles, sexual abuse from the Greek men on campus and many other injustices, they also knew that it was even more important to provide support and understanding to each other.<sup>45</sup> Cristina thanks Nena for helping accept the small size of the organization and for helping her make sense of it. She remembers Nena telling her, "Yeah, our organization is small, but we're dedicated to one another one hundred percent. We're workers, we're there to support each other, and we may not be able to do that if the organization is big."<sup>46</sup> Cristina believes that especially because Raza Womyn dealt with the issue of sexuality directly and because they had open discussions about their own sexuality, many women may have been scared of the Raza Womyn environment. Cristina reconciles this issue saying, "[t]he women were there definitely because they wanted to be there. Our group was not about building a resume at all . . . . We got the really dedicated women."<sup>47</sup>

Cristina and Nena began taking classes in LGBT studies and Chicana/o and women studies, and brought the issues that they learned about in class to their meetings. They connected several things that they

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44. *Id.*

45. The text of Proposition 209 can be found at <http://vote96.ss.ca.gov/Vote96/html/BP/209text.htm>. On its face, Proposition 209 seems favorable to the Raza Womyn, as it prohibits the state of California from discriminating on the basis of "race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting." *Id.*

46. Interview with Cristina, *supra* note 43.

47. *Id.*

read about to their own traumatic experiences within MEChA. They realized that what they experienced was not abnormal at all; rather, it was a historical reoccurrence in terms of the way that women and Queer people have been treated in Chicano organizations. Nena says that coming out in Raza Womyn was a natural process for her, and she distinctly remembers the night it happened:

With Raza Womyn, it wasn't like "let's have a meeting, I want to come out to you." It was more like if you were there in our crying session [you knew]. One time we were just going through madness . . . . We were in a meeting, and I go, "I think we're all going through a lot of shit and I think it'll be good if we close the meeting right now and we just talk about what's going on in our life." So it must have been about 7 or 8 of us, and we sat around the round table and we were holding hands, going around, crying, everyone was crying. I was crying. I was telling them about me trying to come [out] to my mom, how hard it is, and that's when I came out to every one else. No one judges me. No one treated me different. No one ignored me. We all gave each other a hug, then we did the cinnamon roll hug, all these little things that we did. I felt loved. And if you want a revolution, that's what you need. You need love.<sup>48</sup>

Once Cristina and Nena came out, several other women followed. Cristina says she is not sure why that was, but she has some theories on the issue:

Once you start talking about [sexuality] and you are open about it. The process of questioning in that safe space is just catchy. You start doing it with every thing. "Am I really political? Am I really down?" . . . it's a natural process. Everyone starts questioning themselves . . . . Sometimes we would just get really excited; we would just want everyone to be out. If we thought they were going through what we went through. We were like, "you need to just come out." But it wasn't their time. Everybody has to go through their own process. And so it was just like, "We're going to keep talking about it. We're going to go to straight places, gay places. We're going to dance with whoever we want." And people just started slowly questioning themselves.

I don't know if people that are questioning were particularly drawn to the organization, like subconsciously maybe they were drawn to it, or if it's just a natural thing that if you're in this kind of space that you just start questioning yourself. It could be two different things. But from what I've noticed is that everyone that really questions themselves, they become open to loving all sorts

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48. Interview with Nena, *supra* note 30.

of people. They kind of release that barrier. And then it even transcends sexuality and just becomes the ability to love people at a different level.<sup>49</sup>

Again and again these sentiments that Cristina voiced have resonated and recreated themselves within Raza Womyn. Women that have never met Cristina, but have experienced the same thing she did years later, have voiced the same theories. Over the past six years, there have been at least three different waves of women coming out as Queer in Raza Womyn. Cristina and Nena were the first in 1997, and there were at least three other women in their cohort that followed. For some of them, it took place after they graduated. In 2000-01, five women came out and three who were already out joined Raza Womyn. In 2001-2002 a woman who adamantly identified as straight was in a relationship with a woman by the spring quarter. In 2002-03, no new women came out, but a woman who identified as two-spirited found a welcoming environment in Raza Womyn. And throughout the years, there have been many, many more women who have questioned their sexuality, but have not yet come out as Queer.

In 2001, four of the *mujeres* who had defined themselves and believed themselves to be “straight” or heterosexual before they became involved with Raza Womyn came out. At the same time, there were three women that were “out,” meaning they already identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or Queer before they arrived at Raza Womyn, but were drawn to Raza Womyn because of the safety they felt in being out in that space. Two of them indicated that they did not feel safe in *La Familia*, the Queer Latina/o organization on campus, because they felt that their Queer politics and identity were questioned by members of *La Familia*, often while they were still in the process of coming out and still unready to deal with those issues.

Women who identified as bisexual were accused of being imposters by other Queer people, of being afraid to be out as lesbians and wanting to continue to be privileged because of their relationships with males. This issue has been discussed often by Raza Womyn members; especially amongst the women who came out in 2001, there was a general consensus that forcing bisexual women to choose heterosexuality or lesbianism was oppressive. These women have supported each other and been able to discuss their sexuality in the way that Cristina spoke of—they feel that they could transcend sexuality and love people at a different level. One *mujer* described her bisexual identity in the following manner:

I don't want to or expect to identify as a lesbian today or ever because although I think it's politically strong for women to do so and I support that, my experience lately has been that it can be just as limiting as the identity of being heterosexual. And I have a problem with limits and I think it's time that we start

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49. Interview with Cristina, *supra* note 43.

embracing ambiguity and that gray space. We live in such a dichotomous world, where we're like, "You're A or B and that's it," and there's a space between A and B that we need to embrace. And like even the term bisexual, it's ambiguous enough, but honestly, in all honesty I fall in love with people, not with a guy or girl. And I want to embrace that. And just being a lesbian is being like, "oh I can't be with men," like why? What if I were to meet this guy that was great or that could understand me with my crazy ideals.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, other *mujeres* have indicated that they respect people's desires to love whomever they choose. They indicate that their sexual identities are in line with their visions of social justice as they resist oppressing themselves and others based on sexual identity as they do with regards to race, class and gender.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Student activism has historically been a tool of resistance and transformation for students in higher education who voice discontent with a particular aspect of society, governmental regulations or their educational institutions. Students have protested things such as war, sexism, patriarchy, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, capitalism, exclusion, xenophobia and other aspects of subordination. Women have especially focused their activist goals on the liberation, education and self-empowerment of women. Reproductive rights and sexual liberation have also been key factors of the women's struggle. Even the right to gain entry and inclusion into institutions of higher education has come as a result of activism and struggle.

This research shows that students who come from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds and go to the university can engage in a process of resistance to oppressive practices and environments within those institutions, while continuing their education. While a higher education has proven to be a form of liberation for many of these students, it has simultaneously been oppressive to some. As these students learn how to negotiate both privilege and oppression in the college setting, they develop tools for understanding their conditions. These tools are *political and social consciousness*, which are often internalized and acted upon in the form of student activism.

As people of color involved in social justice movements, we are often struggling with "speaking secrets," as Chicana feminist scholar Deena Gonzales indicates.<sup>51</sup> As I wrote this article, I wrote it with much apprehension because I recognize that activists and progressive people in this country

50. Interview with Coral, Member, *Raza Womyn* (June 27, 2001).

51. See generally Deena Gonzales, *Speaking Secrets: Living Chicana Theory*, in *LIVING CHICANA THEORY* (Carla Trujillo ed., 1997) (discussing social justice movements).

are currently under attack. Often, women of color activists have been urged not to publicly denounce or criticize the men in their communities. Likewise, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people have been silenced as they have voiced their concerns of homophobia and heteronormativity within social justice movements. This tendency has led to the demise of many of our political struggles and coalitions. Many of us want to believe that internal struggles with discrimination are in the past and that we have learned from the mistakes of the 1960s to the present, but, as the Raza Womyn *mujerstoria* shows, our communities unfortunately repeat their mistakes. I write this article and do this work not to criticize particular Chicana/o organizations or people within those organizations, but to urge us to learn from these lessons. We must do the work of bridging the older generation of activists with the newer generation of activists. Everyday, young people are joining our progressive moves for social change and there must be a process of education that they engage in to help them move toward social justice rather than away from it. We know that working in coalitions is the most effective means for change. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to be able to be self-critical in order to make real change.



