



RACE, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER IN POLITICS AND POLICY

# LATINAS AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN SPACES

Edited by  
**SHARON A. NAVARRO**  
**AND LILLIANA PATRICIA SALDAÑA**

ROUTLEDGE

*Latinas and the Politics of Urban Spaces* has a wealth of knowledge to offer the student and scholar of Latina issues in the United States today. By using intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches, *Latinas and the Politics of Urban Spaces* allows for a first-time truly comprehensive understanding of the lives of Latinas in urban areas. The authors' rich application of feminist, intersectional, indigenous, and queer theories to the range of Latina experiences provides an excellent richness and depth to the study of Latinos/as in the United States in general.

—**Julia Marin Hellwege**, *University of South Dakota*

This innovative collection on community organizing and social movements among Latina feminists inspires! It motivates new writing, theorizing, and organizing. The authors deepen our understanding of the multiple forms of Latina resistance by writing about Chicana environmentalism, bruja feminism, intersectional praxis, and Queer Latinas' pláticas. When read together, these clear, on-the-ground chapters also offer frameworks for activism for those of us committed to creating more just spaces and communities.

—**Gilda L. Ochoa**, *Pomona College*

In *Latinas and the Politics of Urban Spaces*, Sharon A. Navarro and Lilliana Patricia Saldaña bring together diverse scholarly voices to share case studies of how Latinas occupy, reclaim, and transform political spaces in urban centers, through collectives, non-profits, neighborhood groups, and digital networks. We meet Latinas who draw upon intersectionality, queer epistemologies, feminist theory, and decolonial thinking in their political praxis to create social change in urban spaces, from Chicago to San Antonio to Puerto Rico, and digital spaces in-between. This volume brings needed recognition to the political work of urban Latinas and helps us all to imagine the work of building more just and emancipatory futures.

—**Susanne Beechey**, *Whitman College*



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# LATINAS AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN SPACES

This book illuminates the ways in which Chicanas, Puerto Rican women, and other Latinas organize and lead social movements, either on the ground or digitally, in major cities of the continental United States and Puerto Rico. It shows how they challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-immigrant policies through their political praxis and spiritual activism. Drawing from a range of disciplines and perspectives, academic and activist authors offer unique insights into environmental justice, peace and conflict resolution, women's rights, LGBTQ coalition-building, and more—all through a distinctive Latina lens. Designed for use in a wide range of college courses, this book is also aimed at practitioners, community organizers, and grassroots leaders.

**Sharon A. Navarro** is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Texas at San Antonio and the author most recently of *Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of the American Judiciary* (2018), *Latinas in American Politics* (2016), and *Latino Urban Agency* (2013).

**Lilliana Patricia Saldaña** is an Associate Professor of Mexican American Studies (MAS) at UTSA and co-director of the UTSA MAS Teachers' Academy. She has published in various edited volumes and in nationally recognized journals, including *Latinos & Education*, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, and *Association of Mexican American Educators Journal*.

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# LATINAS AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN SPACES

*Edited by  
Sharon A. Navarro and  
Lilliana Patricia Saldaña*

First published 2021  
by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Names: Navarro, Sharon Ann, editor. |

Saldaña, Lilliana Patricia, editor.

Title: Latinas and the politics of urban spaces /

edited by Sharon A. Navarro and Lilliana Patricia Saldaña.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. |

Series: Race, ethnicity, and gender in politics and policy | Includes

bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2020032567 (print) |

LCCN 2020032568 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367652623 (hardback) |

ISBN 9780367432058 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003128649 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Women in community organization—

United States. | Hispanic American women—Political activity. |

Community development, Urban—United States. | Urban policy—

United States. | Social change—United States.

Classification: LCC HQ1421 .L355 2021 (print) |

LCC HQ1421 (ebook) | DDC 305.48/868073—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020032567>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020032568>

ISBN: 9780367652623 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780367432058 (pbk)

ISBN: 9781003128649 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo

by codeMantra

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## x Contributor Biographies

she terms collective skepticism, as a valuable tool against continued neighborhood exploitation. Her other areas of interest include leadership development, nonprofits, and grassroots movements, adult play within Black and Latina/o/x communities, and the barriers to inclusion within rural redevelopment initiatives. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Urban Affairs*, and she regularly blogs for Everyday Sociology Blog. She has received support from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the SSRC-Mellon Mays Graduate Initiatives, the Community Development Society, the U.C. Berkeley Center for Latino Policy Research, the Hispanic Scholarship Fund, and the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship.

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iconic figures that embody these principles. Many of these themes can also be seen in her mural work like “Mis Palabras, Mi Poder” (Burlson Elementary) and “Stained Glass Mosaic Mural for Herbolaria La India.” Rodríguez’s work has also been shown in major exhibitions including Cheech Marin’s “Chicano Now: American Expressions” and “Portrait of Xicano Conscience: the Great Judge Albert Peña, Jr.” She has also exhibited her work at Texas Women’s Museum (Dallas), The Esperanza Peace & Justice Center, Centro Cultural Aztlan, Gallista Gallery, and 1906 Gallery.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to thank all the contributors for believing in this project and sharing their research with us. We would like to thank Routledge for giving us the opportunity to provide a Latina *feminista* perspective to urban cities. I wish to thank Ashley and my sister Faith for all your love and support. I am also deeply grateful to my co-editor Lilliana. She is an intellectual powerhouse. Without her, I could not have completed this project.

*Sharon A. Navarro*

Our deepest gratitude to all the scholar activists in this project who have documented the intellectual, creative, spiritual, and organizational labor of mujeres on the frontlines of community mobilizing and social movements. Thank you Routledge for your support in publishing this important contribution to Chicana/Latina feminist studies. A special thank you to Mary Agnes Rodriguez for giving us permission to embellish the cover of this book with her beautiful artwork. I am forever grateful to my co-editor Sharon for her tremendous femtorship and feminista solidarity on this project. It was such a pleasure working on this book with you! And to my husband and best friend, Eddie Muñoz, and my mother, Raquel Centeno, thank you for all your love and support.

*Lilliana Patricia Saldaña*



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# INTRODUCTION

## Latinas/xs and the Politics of Urban Spaces

*Sharon A. Navarro and Lilliana Patricia Saldaña*

### Introduction

According to the U.S. Census, there are 58.9 million Latinos/xs/as living in the United States as of July 2017, making people of Latino/a/x origin the nation's largest ethnic or racial minority. Latinos/xs/as constitute 18.1% of the nation's total population. According to the *PEW Research Center*, five states (Texas, California, Illinois, Florida, and New York) are considered majority-minority Latino/o/x as of 2017.<sup>1</sup> In recognition to this growing population, few scholars have taken on the task at examining the way in which Latinos/xs/as have revitalized, politically negotiated their identities, sexuality, culture, and spaces in majority minority urban centers. To date, there are no studies that focus on contemporary Latina women's everyday collective resistance—either digitally or physical—in urban city centers.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, few have examined how Latinas/xs, in particular, use intersectionality, queer epistemologies, feminist theory, or decolonial thinking in their political praxis to create social change in urban spaces. Our edited volume fills this much-needed gap in the literature. More importantly, our book offers the reader a look into how Latina women are organizing not only on the ground but digitally. We recognize that resistance occurring digitally is a relatively new vehicle for Latina women's organizing efforts denouncing misogynist policies, laws, and practices of heteropatriarchal-capitalism. We also recognize that most research excludes lesbian and queer Latinas organizing in urban centers and our edited volume seeks to highlight the growing importance of these communities in the analysis of urban politics. The few works discussed below examine the way in which Latinas/xs meander their political space in urban cities.



## Latinos, Urbanization, and Political Agency

Mike Davis's 2012 publication *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City* sought to explore the kind of impact the rise of the Latino population had on American society using cities as laboratories.<sup>3</sup> Davis explores the social, economic, educational, racial, linguistic, legal, and demographic nature of Latino emergence in urban America. He discusses the way in which Latinos are reinventing cities culturally as well as politically. His incisive critique of urban policy and its effect on Latinos is considered to be a major contribution to urban landscape studies.

Building on this work, David R. Diaz and Rodolfo D. Torres 2012 publication *Latino Urbanism* moves beyond a traditional analysis of Latinos in the Southwest to account for the ways in which planning ideology reinscribes racialized, exclusionary urban policies that dismiss, at best, and wipe out, at worse, Latino urban barrios.<sup>4</sup> The volume unveils the relationships between urbanization and Latinos, including Mexican Americans of several generations, within the context of the restructuring of cities, in view of the cultural and political transformation encompassing the nation. In sum, the scholarly work in Diaz and Torres' volume sheds light on various issues related to barrio urbanism and highlights the way racism in city planning and public policy work to dismantle barrios.

While Diaz and Torres problematize the impact of urban policy on Latino barrios, Sharon A. Navarro and Rodolfo Rosales' 2013 publication of *The Roots of Latino Urban Agency* examines Latino urban agency and politics at the grassroots level, across multiple cities and time periods.<sup>5</sup> Given the greatest demographic expansion of Mexican American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban American communities in the United States, this edited collection examines the way in which Latinos have gained access to the same political institutions that worked so hard to marginalize them. Navarro and Rosales contend that in order to understand the Latino community in all its diversity, the analysis has to begin at the grassroots level and how Latinos, through their political agency—voting, lobbying, organizing, protesting, networking, and mobilizing—seek political inclusion and access in urban spaces.

Erualdo R. Gonzalez's *Latino City*, published in 2018, examines the contemporary models of choice for revitalization of US cities from the point of a Latino-majority central city, and thus initiates new lines of analysis and critique of models for Latino inner-city neighborhood and downtown revitalization in the current period of socioeconomic and cultural change.<sup>6</sup> Gonzalez provides an intimate knowledge of how revitalization plans reimagine and alienate Latinas/os, working-class people, and immigrants, and how community-based participation approaches address the needs and aspirations of lower-income Latino urban areas undergoing revitalization through grassroots mobilization. Through an in-depth, interdisciplinary case study, *Latino City* offers a nuanced analysis of Latino mobilization against urban planning and displacement.

While the works mentioned above have contributed greatly to Latino urban studies and scholarship on Latino urban agency, few if any, have solely examined the ways in which Latinas/xs enact their agency in sociopolitical movements in urban spaces. We begin with the premise that Latinas/xs are at the forefront in challenging social injustices in urban spaces and have been central to creating social change through their activism and advocacy in social movements. The contributors to this project come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and link their own unique theoretical interpretations and methodological approaches to the analysis of Latina/x women's agency in community organizing and social movements in urban spaces. This volume seeks to illuminate the ways in which Chicanas, Puerto Rican women, and queer Latinas/xs lead social movements, either on the ground or digitally and how they challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppressive ideologies, policies, and practices through their political praxis and spiritual activism.<sup>7</sup>

### Documenting and Interpreting Chicana/Latina Feminist Praxis

Chicana historian Vicki Ruiz offered one of the very first intersectional, feminist analyses of Mexican American and Mexican immigrant women's agency in resisting interlocking systems of oppression and transforming their physical environment.<sup>8</sup> Through oral histories and archival research, Ruiz examines the ways in which Mexican American and immigrant women during the 20th century claimed public space as labor organizers, feminist activists, elected leaders, writers/theorists, and artists, challenging the constraints of familial oligarchy, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchal ideologies within and outside their ethnic/race communities. As Ruiz notes, Mexican American women "claimed space for themselves and their families by building community through mutual assistance while struggling for some semblance of financial stability, especially in the midst of rising nativist sentiments" during the early part of the 20th century (p. 7). Ruiz also examines the ways in which Chicana activists of the 1960s took collective action through their emergent Chicana feminist consciousness to lead organizations and social movements that "bridged individual and community empowerment" (p. xiv).

More recent cross-disciplinary feminist scholarship like *Chicana Movidas: New narratives of activism and feminism in the movement era* by Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell<sup>9</sup> has focused on the ways in which Chicana activists of the 1960s responded to Chicanismo as a political philosophy and how they challenged the pervasive sexism and homophobia of the Chicano movement and its struggles against labor exploitation, institutional racism, and political exclusion—struggles that Chicana feminists actively lead on the ground. While Chicanas were at the front lines of creating "new cultures of rebellion," and were leading major mobilizations for regional and national organizations like the United Farm Workers, Crusade for Justice, the land grant movement in New Mexico,

and La Raza Unida Party, few studies had actually documented women's narratives of the 1960s to analyze how Chicanas moved within and between multiple sites of struggle. Citing Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, the editors note that Chicana feminist activists have many movements—political, literary, and artistic *movidas*—which

are discarding the patriarchal model of the hero/leader leading the rank and file. Ours are individual and small group *movidas*, unpublicized *movimientos* – movements not of media stars or popular authors but of small groups or single *mujeres*, many of whom have not written books or spoken at national conferences.

*(Chicana Movidas, p.1)*<sup>10</sup>

Their work is important in documenting individual and collective maneuvers, strategies, and everyday labor to intervene within movement spaces.

This book includes interdisciplinary contributions on Chicana/Latina women in contemporary movements and their political efforts, both on the ground and in the digital world, to claim and transform urban spaces which continue to be sites of exclusion and struggle for women of color, particularly poor, working-class, and queer women. These movements draw from the rich theoretical legacy of Chicana and Indigenous feminist thought, intersectionality, queer epistemologies, and decolonial theory to document and analyze women's political praxis in urban spaces across the United States, including the occupied territory of Puerto Rico.

Below are five chapter summaries that illuminate this interdisciplinary scholarship that draws from feminist, decolonial, queer, and intersectional analyses to center Latina women's political agency in urban and digital spaces.

## Outline of the Book

The chapter by Teresa Irene Gonzales, “Semillas de Justicia: Chicana Environmentalism in Chicago,” asserts that Chicana activists in Chicago are at the forefront of challenging environmental racism, rethinking conventional urban design practices, and advocating for environmental cleanup of contaminated land within Latino/a communities. Drawing on a 30-month ethnographic case study of grassroots organizing in La Villita (Little Village), a predominantly working-class Mexican immigrant neighborhood of Chicago, and 14 interviews with local community organizers and residents, Teresa Irene Gonzales highlights how Chicana activists empower residents to reimagine and redefine their communities' dirty, neglected, abandoned, and polluted areas. Using an asset-based framework, women activists in La Villita employed a Chicana environmentalism that cultivated local skills, strengths, and knowledge as seeds of justice. Their work included a community garden and the reimagining of the

closed Fisk and Crawford coal plants, two projects carried out by the women-led Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO). These activists' efforts have led to increased resident ownership over local land and to civic activity by both residents and community-based organizations. These actions showcase the flexibility of Chicana-led grassroots organizations in addressing racist development policies at the city, rather than the neighborhood level.

The chapter by Norell Martinez, "Brujas in the Time of Trump: Hexing the Ruling Class," offers an Indigenous feminist analysis of "bruja feminism"—the act of reclaiming *la bruja* for political purposes among Latinas and other women of color. When Trump was elected, public displays of witchcraft rituals against him performed by women began to surface around the country and the world. Holding what they call "witch-ins," many women gathered to protest Trump's bigoted policies and especially his sexist, anti-women, misogynist positions. In this chapter, Martinez focuses on two groups, "Feminists Against Trump" and Yerbamala Collective. "Feminists Against Trump" has posted YouTube videos, one calling for a "mass hexing" to "cast magical spells of love and feminism to destroy the Great Orange One and the racism, xenophobia and sexism he feeds on" (Dancyger).<sup>11</sup> The other group called Yerbamala Collective, has mobilized fellow *brujas* through the publication of numerous e-zines that include anti-fascist poems to "destroy fascism with poetic witchcraft" (qtd. in Sollée 141).<sup>12</sup> This chapter focuses specifically on digital *brujería* performed by Latinas as a form of political protest and anti-Trump digital activism to assert their politics and create space to vocalize their opposition to the racism, xenophobia, and sexism imposed by the Right. Martinez focuses on the ways Latinas challenge the white ruling class males who have historically asserted themselves over women's bodies with impunity by making parallels between Afro-Caribbean healers, the so-called *brujas*, who performed rituals, spells and poisoning against the white plantation owners during times of slavery and young Latina feminists today who are reclaiming the term to confront the historical violence against women of color, particularly those who challenged patriarchy and conservative Christian ideology. Martinez argues that digital *brujería* transcends borders and serves as a democratizing space that allows young Latinas to "be defiant, unapologetic about their beliefs, and engage in feminist resistance." Digital media is also a space to build community, create new forms of knowledge, and mobilize Latinas and other women of color on a global level against sexism, heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and misogynist policies.

In the chapter by Fernando Tormos-Aponte and Shariana Ferrer-Nuñez, "Intersectional Synthesis: A Case Study of the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*," a social movement organization created by radical Black and queer feminists, Fernando Tormos-Aponte, a political scientist, and Shariana Ferrer-Nuñez, an activist in the movement, rely on their ethnographic research, intersectional theory, and activist experiences to document and analyze the organization's intersectional approach to organizing and political praxis.

Intersectionality emerged as a critique of civil rights and second wave women's groups for their exclusion of Black and Latina feminists in their leadership and movement agendas. Now, more than 30 years since its emergence, intersectionality is an increasingly mobilizing approach for popular resistance. In Puerto Rico, *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* organizers arrived at an intersectional organizing approach through experiences of exclusion and marginalization within the Puerto Rican Left. From this positionality, they saw their experiences and identities reflected in texts of Black and decolonial feminist political theory. Since its founding, the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* has worked to build popular resistance to multiple axes of oppression, including patriarchy, neoliberalism, and imperialism. Combining grassroots movement building work with advocacy and direct action tactics, the emergent *Colectiva* has already scored important victories in Puerto Rico. These include the resignation and prosecution of a powerful mayor in Puerto Rico for sexual assault, forming a mutual assistance center, occupying unused buildings, mobilizing hundreds for feminist marches and assemblies, and training new cohorts of feminist organizers through workshops and political schools that combine teachings of theory and practice. Despite the organization's recent success, challenges remain as Puerto Rico's descent into autocracy, economic strife, and the Hurricane María disaster in 2017 further closed opportunities for political influence. *Colectiva* organizers are routinely subject to bodily harm at the hands of the state and patriarchal aggressors. This chapter adopts the case of the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* to theorize about the challenges that Latinx movements face in contexts of heightened repression, eroding democratic institutions, and patriarchal violence. Further, the authors detail the elements of an intersectional and decolonial praxis and the pathways by which intersectional organizing enables the formation of new ways of life, new solidarity ties, and the emergence of critical hope for social and political change. Their work has methodological implications within academia and urban spaces where social movements are forged on the group up, and work horizontally across race, class, gender and sexual differences, identities, and relations of power.

The fourth chapter by Sara DeTurk, "Place, Space, and the Esperanza Peace & Justice Center," examines the ways in which this Chicana/Latina-led organization challenged the use and control of urban space in San Antonio, Texas. Established largely as a safe space for marginalized people, namely queer, poor and working-class, and women of color, to come together and to celebrate women and the culture of working-class Mexican Americans, the organization has mobilized against sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, Islamophobia, colonization, gentrification, and environmental destruction. Over the past 33 years, the *Esperanza* has protested and organized direct political action through their cultural arts programming, historic preservation, and cultural organizing in urban spaces. DeTurk's chapter, which is part of a larger ethnographic study on the organization's tactics and its alliances/coalitions with other organizations

and individuals, focuses on three major projects that illustrates how Esperanza has applied a Chicana feminist praxis to challenge the use and control of public spaces: (1) the creation of the Free Speech Coalition—a campaign to protect the public’s right to march in the streets; (2) the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group and its efforts to protect public land from corporate takeover; and (3) Westside Preservation Association which has advocated for the preservation of historically relevant Mexican American buildings and neighborhoods. From lobbying for the right to march in the streets to combating gentrification and protecting the histories of racially and class segregated Mexican neighborhoods, Esperanza exemplifies Latinx and Chicana feminist traditions of organizing in defense of urban space, especially in ways that seek to restore and protect.

The chapter by Lourdes Torres, “The Good the Bad and the Ugly: Amigas Latinas’ Pláticas as a Site of Transformative Knowledge Production,” documents the history of Amigas Latinas, a small support group for lesbian and bisexual Latina women in Chicago that transformed into a non-profit organization. Over its 20-year span (1995–2015), Amigas Latinas created a much needed space for queer Latina women in one of the largest urban centers in the United States. This space was significant in recognizing and understanding the diversity of identities contained in Chicago’s multinational queer Latina community. Through interviews conducted with Amigas Latinas over ten years, a rich archive of flyers and newsletters, and her own activist experience within the organization, Torres shows the ways in which the organization provided advocacy on LGBT issues, education, and support services for queer Latina women. Moreover, she draws from Chicana queer thought and Chicana feminist approaches to plática methodology, to show the ways in which the organization nurtured an intersectional queer identity politics and “queered up” plática methodology to create a “transformative praxis that provided women community, fellowship, intellectual growth, empowerment, and healing” in Chicago (p. 1). Her research not only documents the ways in which Latinas claim urban space for themselves, but in the process, create new forms of inquiry that lead to self-reflection, humanization, and collective transformation.

## The Book Cover

We are honored to feature the artwork of Mary Agnes Rodríguez, a longtime activist and established multimedia artist from San Antonio’s Westside. Her murals depict scenes of intergenerational family relations and cultural traditions in the Westside—practices that serve as forms of resist against assimilationist projects in urban settings. Moreover, her paintings document the struggles of working-class Mexican Americans, particularly their mobilizing efforts to preserve urban spaces of cultural and political significance. As a modern-day *tlacuilo* (a nahuatl term used to describe a wise scribe and painter), Mary Agnes paints what she sees as an activist-artist and relies on her embodied

knowledge of San Antonio and the political struggles of its most marginalized members. Her work, which touches on themes of activism, peace, and social justice, often depicts iconic figures in the community who embody these principles, as well as the voices of women of color who fight for freedom of speech in urban spaces, the preservation of historic and cultural spaces, and the protection of water for urban communities. Her piece “Mujeres Unidas en la Lucha” (2011), created for the International Women’s Day March, documents the spirit of Chicana/Latina feminist political praxis and exemplifies the spirit of this book.

### **Significance of Latinas/xs in Political Urban Spaces**

This edited collection fills a much-needed gap in minority politics, race in American politics, urban politics, and Latino/a/x politics, to name a few. As mentioned earlier, this edited collection is the only one to offer a closer examination of how Latina/x women are organizing digitally and using intersectional, decolonial, and feminist approaches in their political agency and praxis in some of the largest majority-minority cities in America. Latinas/xs, in particular immigrant and queer, are rarely central in political discussions and analysis. We purposely selected these chapters because of their interdisciplinary approach to a subject that has yet to be explored and to reach a broader audience.

We thought it would be appropriate to start with a case study in Chicago and end our edited collection with Chicago bringing the theoretical and methodological approach full circle. Also, in the chapters that follow, Spanish words are not italicized as a way of challenging the Anglo-centric notion that Spanish is a foreign language. While we recognize that Spanish is indeed a colonial language imposed on Indigenous, Black, Afro-Indigenous, and other oppressed people in the United States and its colonized territories, we also understand that the Anglo-centric practice of centering English is rooted in U.S. linguistic imperialism. For the various communities represented in this book, and for Latinas/xs in particular, Spanish is the language of everyday life, political resistance, and community-based cultural organizing in urban spaces. Within this spirit, this book demonstrates the ways in which Latinas/xs create alternative discourses, set radical visions, and do intersectional coalition building that is changing the sociopolitical landscape of urban spaces.

### **Conclusion**

This book discusses the sociopolitical importance of Latina women’s multi-layered ethnic, race, sexual, spiritual, gender, class and political identities in ever-changing urban spaces and the ways in which Latinas draw from their identities, coalition building, and community organizing to launch

sociopolitical change. The contributors do not document and analyze this political praxis from a detached intellectual place. As active members of these spaces, ethnographers, and allies in these movements, they contribute to the production of knowledge and draw up new terms like bruja feminism and Chicana environmentalism to name their conceptual frameworks. They also document the development of new methodologies (like queering up plática methodology) that have brought into existence urban spaces for Chicana/Latina queer women.

## Notes

- 1 Flores, *Pew Research Center*, 2017.
- 2 Mary Pardo's 1998 *Mexican American Women Activists* was the last publication to exam Hispanic/Latina women's organizing but the case studies were limited two Los Angeles neighborhoods.
- 3 Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. Big City*, 2001.
- 4 Díaz and Torres, *Latino Urbanism: The Politics of Planning, Policy and Redevelopment*, 2012.
- 5 Navarro and Rosales, *The Roots of Latino Urban Agency*, 2013.
- 6 Gonzalez, *Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics, and the Grassroots*, 2017.
- 7 Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en el Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, 2015.
- 8 Ruiz, *From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America*, 2008.
- 9 Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell, *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*, 2019.
- 10 Dionnee Espinoza, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell, eds., *Chicana Movidas: New Narratives of Activism and Feminism in the Movement Era*. (Austin, TX: University of Austin Press, 2018).
- 11 See Dancyger, "How Donald Trump Is Making Witches and Christians Fight Again," 2017.
- 12 Sollée, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*, 2017.

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# 1

## SEMILLAS DE JUSTICIA

### Chicana Environmentalism in Chicago

*Teresa Irene Gonzales*

In Chicago, environmental justice organizing in Mexican immigrant and Mexican American communities is overwhelmingly led by women. These Chicana activists have implemented culturally relevant initiatives that empower residents to reimagine blighted, decayed, and contaminated land. To understand these creative processes, I attended a two-hour toxic tour of the La Villita (Little Village) neighborhood in Chicago conducted in the Fall of 2015. Led by guides from the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), these tours operate both as an income generator for the organization and an opportunity to educate people about the effects of environmental racism, which disproportionately affects low-income communities of color.

LVEJO routinely begins tours at 27th Street and Troy Avenue, where the community garden Semillas de Justicia is located (Figure 1.1). Once an industrial area that housed underground oil tanks, this 1.5-acre brownfield site<sup>1</sup> required extensive remediation. It was a colorless, contaminated eyesore, but the space now boasts several culturally relevant Chicana/o/x murals, including one titled *Dedicación a las Mamás Semilleras*, depicting flowers, produce, and local women and children. As we entered the garden through the wrought-iron gate, we were greeted by a small statue of the Virgin Mary. The area then opened to an outdoor classroom, complete with moveable chairs in a variety of colors. To the right was a small, tentlike structure that housed gardening materials. The garden included a mix of raised and ground-level beds with organic soil for produce and flowers. As we moved through the space, our tour guides encouraged us to interact with the collection of chickens, bunnies, and a rooster.

As a tool in local activists' arsenal for environmental justice, toxic tours inform outsiders, who may not realize the extent of environmental racism, and locals, who may have normalized unhealthy conditions. They reveal the various



**FIGURE 1.1** Semillas de Justicia garden entrance. Photo credit: Teresa I. Gonzales, June 19, 2018.

environmental assaults that racially and economically marginalized populations encounter on a daily basis (Pezzullo 2007). Our three guides, Natalia, Cuauhtemoc, and Elizabeth, all in their late teens to early twenties, provided a brief history of environmental pollutants and brownfield sites in the neighborhood. We then walked through the community, down garbage-strewn alleyways toward an industrial area, and arrived in a newly developed park on a remediated superfund site. There, our guides engaged us in conversation regarding the effects of environmental assaults on poor communities of color.

Toxic tours provide information for both residents and outsiders regarding the complex systems that simultaneously structure and constrain impoverished communities of color. Within La Villita, these tours serve two functions. They highlight the work of locals seeking to address environmentally racist conditions – what we can understand as pollution oppression<sup>2</sup> – and they offer an avenue for insiders to reframe a common narrative about their communities. In recounting the ways that industry and city officials mark low-income communities of color as toxic dumping grounds, local Chicana activists shift the popular narrative of individual failure and neighborhood filth and to a new focus on state-level violence.

Within La Villita, the tour also highlights the ways local Mexican Americans, especially women, are redefining environmental justice through a culturally relevant, working-class feminist lens. What I call their Chicana

environmentalism centers the histories, experiences, and epistemologies of both Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans. In Chicago, LVEJO and other Mexican American activists for environmental rights sought to address environmental goals through campaigns to influence physical redevelopment, increase access to healthy food, and empower local residents to reshape their communities. Here I analyze a range of evidence: ethnographic field notes from toxic tours and public meetings, local newspaper articles and development reports regarding greening practices, locally deployed documentaries regarding environmental pollution in La Villita, and interviews with 14 Chicana activists to consider the ways these women used feminisms based in the experiences of working-class women of color to redress ongoing environmental abuses. Extending the rich intellectual work of Black and Chicana feminists, alongside feminist community economic development scholars, I argue that Chicana activists in Chicago employed Chicana environmentalism to encourage resident involvement in addressing environmental racism at both the neighborhood and the city levels.<sup>3</sup>

### **Chicana Environmentalism and Asset-Based Activism**

Scholars of social movements, community development, and women-of-color activism have highlighted the ways women have consistently mobilized to increase collective empowerment and create new spaces and opportunities for residents to combat racism, reimagine their neighborhoods, and maintain organizational autonomy (Combahee River Collective 1978, Gilkes 1994, Feldman and Stall 2004, Emejulu and Bornstein 2011, Grimshaw 2011, Isoke 2013). Activists work strategically to maintain agency over local decisions and provide a buffer against inherently racist and classist policies that disenfranchise marginalized populations. Women have consistently engaged in this work, both as mothers in the domestic sphere and as active citizens in the public sphere (Naples 1991a, Collins 2000, Emejulu 2011, Isoke 2013).

Working-class women and women of color are more apt to work collaboratively, focus on community building and self-transformation, and recognize structural barriers to equality as they strive for equitable access to power for everyone (Collins 1991, Naples 1991a, 1991b, Gilkes 1994, James 1999, Mele 2000, Abramovitz 2001, Brodtkin 2009, Isoke 2013). Feminist scholarship has highlighted the long and varied tradition of community-based activism among women of color that centers on education, social service provision, economic empowerment, and neighborhood transformation (Collins 1991, Naples 1991a, James 1999). This form of empowerment evokes what Burns (1978), Collins (2000), and others call transformational leadership. Within this model, leaders empower those around them to change existing structures for the betterment of everyone. Recognizing times to step back from a leadership position, they seek to increase local skill sets through education and personal development (Burns

1978, Naples 1991b, Pharr 1996, Barker, Johnson, and Lavalette 2001, Polletta 2002, Pyles 2014, Gonzales 2017).

Within Chicago's environmental justice movement, Chicana activists often create opportunities to enhance resident skills and increase civic engagement through an asset-based community development (ABCD) model (Gonzales 2017). ABCD models, derived from the work of Kretzmann and McKnight (1997), address local issues by identifying the strengths and resources of a community. This model contrasts with a clientelist approach, common in impoverished communities, which promotes resident dependency on external experts to solve complex local issues. Within the ABCD movement, development experts work alongside local community organizations to identify the "gifts, skills, and capacities" of "individuals, associations, and institutions" (Kretzmann and McKnight 1997, 6). Once identified, experts and local groups work together to strengthen ties between residents and organizations and work collaboratively toward mitigating or solving social injustices (Green and Haines 2012).

On the one hand, the ABCD model provides a framework for local activists to battle denigrative actions and narratives of developers, urban planners, city officials, and others claiming that poor neighborhoods lack the capacity to address ongoing social issues such as poverty, urban decay, violence, or low education levels. On the other hand, ABCD risks a boot-strap narrative that absolves the state from addressing structural inequities. The 14 women I interviewed understood these tensions. Addressing outside experts, they often balanced promotion of local strengths strategically and delicately with an invitation to help them realize their vision for the neighborhood. Rather than focus on dominant notions of development, women activists in La Villita rooted their goals in both feminist and culturally relevant ways. In Chicago, this asset-based organizing marks Chicana environmentalism as it embraces an ability to use the resources at hand to realize a local vision for the neighborhood.

These activist women do not naively assume that local knowledge is somehow freer or more attuned to the goals of eradicating social inequalities. As Chicanas and as working-class women, they understand that the local – people, place, and knowledge – is embedded within systems of domination and oppression (Crenshaw 1991, Escobar 2001). Wrestling with the contradictions of local need and structural inequality, however, provides them with an avenue for addressing structural barriers rather than individual pathologies. In the realm of community development, their efforts reveal, issues of pollution oppression and environmental justice become prevalent.

### ***Women Activists and Community Development***

How does Chicana environmentalism connect to local development decisions that aim to (re)envision and (re)vitalize poor communities of color? Community development is supposed to improve the quality of life for residents,

particularly those with low incomes living in economically struggling neighborhoods. Part of development centers on empowering locals to better their communities by partnering with experts and engaging with government and nonprofit organizations. Experts in local economic development often assume that poverty persists because of locals' lack of education and relevant skill sets. Local development plans can therefore reinforce racial and class-based hierarchies that privilege affluent Whites and stigmatize the poor, Latinas/os/xs, and Indigenous populations (Bonds 2013). As Emejulu (2011) highlights, this approach assumes that local residents, particularly historically oppressed peoples, lack agency and are "passive [and powerless] objects requiring intervention" by expert practitioners (386). This deficiency-based approach runs counter to feminist, antiracist, and women-centered models that recognize the value and power of the poor and local communities of color.

In Chicago, as elsewhere, environmental justice organizations are overwhelmingly composed of locals who share racial backgrounds and class positionalities with area residents (Whittaker, Segura, and Bowler 2005). Consequently, Chicana activists in La Villita eschewed neoliberal practices and top-down development models that narrowly link growth with economic success and instead promoted projects that represented residents and created a greater sense of local ownership. Because these activists shared race, place, and class status, they could connect ongoing environmental abuses to local issues in ways that resonated with local residents. With locally based, culturally specific initiatives, they sought to redress the ongoing effects of pollution oppression.

### ***Pollution Oppression***

What does pollution oppression look like on the ground? Several studies highlight the impact of environmental pollution on Black, Indigenous, Latina/o/x, immigrant, and impoverished communities across the United States (Anderton et al. 1994, Maher 1998, Hunter 2000, Pellow 2002). Air, water, and ground pollution is linked to increased risks of cancer, brain damage, heart disease, premature death, and respiratory illnesses such as asthma. According to a 2016 report by the Clean Air Task Force, a nonprofit environmental research group, Latinas/os/xs are more likely than other groups to live in communities with high rates of ozone and air pollution from gas and oil that far exceeds EPA levels of concern (Fleischman et al. 2016).<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, recent scholarship reveals that Black and Latina/o/x populations disproportionately live near polluting industries and breathe in fine particulate pollution overwhelmingly generated by White consumption. The result is a "pollution burden" (Maher 1998, Taylor 2014, Tessum et al. 2019). African Americans have an excess exposure to pollutants of 56%; for Latinas/os/xs, excess exposure is 63% (Tessum et al. 2019). Black and Latina/o/x communities are thus breathing in air pollution at higher rates than they create it.

These fine particulates enter into one's lungs and bloodstream, resulting in a variety of health issues. In addition to pollution from gas and oil, mercury toxins from coal-powered plants also present a disproportionate risk to communities of color.<sup>5</sup> The effects of exposure to this air, ground, and water pollution are many and far reaching. For instance, Latina/o/x children are more likely than other racial groups to suffer from asthma (8.5%).<sup>6</sup> But as researchers have demonstrated, industries in Black communities and impoverished areas that violate EPA standards receive lower penalties than industries located in predominantly White communities or high-income areas (Lynch, Stretesky, and Burns 2004).

To address the negative effects of pollution, Chicago's environmental justice organizations have pressured local governments to remediate contaminated sites and either close or relocate polluting industries. At a broader level, these activists call attention to what Pellow (2007) terms ecological violence, which occurs across the globe in poor communities and communities of color. Locally, activists in Chicago work either to close polluting industries or to increase pollution controls. They seek as well to remediate and redevelop contaminated land. One way to accomplish these goals, they have learned, is through public greening practices.

### ***A Greener Neighborhood***

Several studies highlight the importance of renovating abandoned and contaminated land into well-maintained green spaces for improving the mental health, happiness, and quality of life, for local residents (South et al. 2018). For instance, residents who live near green areas experience less noise pollution, have lower levels of stress, and are more likely to use outdoor spaces for recreation (Gidlöf-Gunnarsson and Öhrström 2007). Access to green spaces can thus mitigate health inequities rooted in class and income (Mitchell and Popham 2008). Green spaces also have positive effects on children's development and life outcomes (Taylor, Wiley, and Kuo 1998).

Community gardens are one way to improve vacant and polluted urban land. These renovated sites reveal the ways people both (re)produce space and culture, and promote democratic processes that can reshape the larger city. At the neighborhood level, community gardens provide opportunities for empowerment and community building as local residents grow fresh produce and flowers, transform previously blighted lots, and tend small animals, such as rabbits and chickens. These gardens also provide settings for public socializing and highlight the various ways that urban residents, particularly in low-income, marginalized neighborhoods, can redefine, repurpose, and reimagine unused public space.

Processes that create community gardens further allow for innovation from below, rooted in cultural practices and local histories. Community gardens also

provide opportunities to grow food, maintain culture, and access green spaces – all important endeavors for areas lacking parks, clean air, and community centers (McClintock 2014, Adams, Hardman, and Larkham 2015, DelSesto 2015). The work required to (re)envision, develop, and maintain these shared spaces, in turn, provides opportunities for local residents, notably those in Mexican American communities, to rethink community development and link it with environmental justice.

Recent scholarship has highlighted two approaches to community gardens: guerrilla-style informal renovation and formal community gardening through legal land ownership. In guerilla-style gardening, residents or community groups take over a site without securing ownership of the land and without input from local planning or governing bodies. Because they lack formal authorization, guerilla gardeners risk removal of their work (Adams, Scott, and Hardman 2013, Adams, Hardman, and Larkham 2015). Within Chicago, as redevelopment initiatives encroached into predominantly Black and Latina/o/x communities, the city consistently sold off in-use city-owned land. For instance, after new, high-end housing units emerged in Washington Park, a predominantly African-American neighborhood, the city razed and sold the land that hosted the Black Earth Youth Farm, an established community garden, to make way for expansion projects led by the University of Chicago (Dukmasova 2019).

Conversely, formal community gardening attempts to work with local governments to acquire city-owned lots for redevelopment. Formal routes are particularly useful for sites marred by ground pollution and requiring extensive clean-up and remediation. Community land trusts are one mechanism for local groups to maintain full legal rights over vacant or abandoned lots. Both guerilla and formal community gardening are attempts by local residents to claim and reimagine public space in culturally relevant ways. Greening activities, however, can be constrained by municipal policies that view neighborhoods and vacant land as investment opportunities for higher-income interests seeking to move in.

## Methods

To understand the processes through which Chicago activists implemented culturally relevant environmental justice initiatives, I draw on a 30-month ethnographic study of the La Villita/Little Village neighborhood of Chicago between 2011 and 2017. During my time in La Villita, I became an active member of three organizations with which I shared data and expertise in urban policy, including ArcGIS maps, historical and demographic data, and advice on development metrics, successful community development strategies, and holistic and community-centered development. In addition, I attended local toxic tours and environmentally focused information sessions, land-use planning



workshops, and organizational events held by local activist organizations and offices of the City of Chicago.

Between 2012 and 2017, I supplemented my observations with 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews, focused on environmental issues in La Villita, with Mexican American women, all activists and residents. All of these women were either paid staff or volunteers with local nonprofits. Five were students (three undergraduates and two graduate students). Four had children, and one was a grandmother. Allowing these interviewees to guide the conversation, I asked questions centered on their neighborhood community work. To protect their privacy and identities, I use pseudonyms in this chapter and have avoided including images that contain their photos.

## **Bienvenidos a La Villita**

As of 2016, Latinas/os/xs were the second-largest ethno-racial category in Chicago, trailing behind non-Hispanic Whites. Chicago also remained the metropolitan area with the second highest number of residents of Mexican descent (Guzmán et al. 2010, Zong and Batalova 2018). In Illinois, Latinas/os/xs make up 15.8% of the population, with many residing in metropolitan Chicago, where 29.7% of the city's population is Latina/o/x. Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans make up 79% of the Latina/o/x population, the fastest-growing racial or ethnic group. In Chicago, 72% of this growth is due to a natural increase (versus immigration), with over 92% of Latina/o/x children born in the city (Guzmán et al. 2010).<sup>7</sup> Before the closing of two major plants, Chicago had the highest concentration of people living near coal plants (Quintero et al. 2011). With concentrations in manufacturing and low-level service-sector jobs, many Chicago-based Latinas/os/xs live in high-poverty neighborhoods near polluted industrial areas. Ranking sixth in the top ten metropolitan areas that affect Latina/o/x health, air pollution in Chicago is particularly harmful.

Several neighborhoods throughout the city are known as Mexican enclaves. With its booming ethnic small business district and more than 60 years as a destination for Mexican immigrants, La Villita is known as the Mexico of the Midwest. El veintiséis, the neighborhood's booming small business district extends almost two miles from 26th and Sacramento to 26th and Kostner Avenues. Here one can find ethnically and culturally relevant merchandise: books artwork, groceries, and items for bodas, baptisms, and quinceñeras. Sales in this small business district rival those of Chicago's tony, upscale shopping district for tourists, the Magnificent Mile, downtown, along the lakefront.

A historic industrial community, with a prime location near a waterway and two major highways, La Villita houses a number of factories and a new industrial corridor (under construction during my field work). At the same time, the neighborhood lacks sufficient public transportation, with limited access to

**TABLE 1.1** La Villita/Little Village Demographics as Compared to the City of Chicago

	<i>La Villita/Little Village</i>	<i>City of Chicago</i>
Population size	73,983	2,714,017
Latina/o/x	84%	29.1%
Less than high school education	49.6%	16.9%
Median income	\$31,766	\$50,434
Unemployment rate	9.6%	10.9%
Households below the poverty line	39.4%	27.9%

*Note:* Data taken from 2000 and 2010 U.S. Census, 2016 American Community five-year estimates.

the train system and only two bus lines (Jiao and Dillivan 2013, CNT 2014, Hilkevitch 2014). Furthermore, as indicated in Table 1.1, the population has a lower-than-average median income and educational attainment for the city, and a higher-than-average rate of poverty. Given its location near an industrial corridor, the neighborhood is subject to high rates of pollution (EPA 2008, LVEJO 2009, EPA 2011, Rezin 2013, EPA 2014). It also suffers from a lack of available green space.<sup>8</sup>

## **(Re)Imagining Public Space and the Environment through Chicana Environmentalism**

During my time in Chicago, I noticed that much of grassroots community work was undertaken by working-class Mexican American and Mexican immigrant women. These women overwhelmingly connected social issues – high rates of asthma, high rates of interpersonal violence, low education rates, second-class citizenship, and lack of access to healthy foods – with environmental injustices. These women closed polluting industries, advocated for greater pollution controls, brought residents together to advocate for relevant redevelopment projects, and creatively repurposed abandoned lots into community gardens. Embodying an everyday feminism and ideology opposing pollution oppression, these Chicana activists' efforts have led to culturally relevant redevelopment, increased resident ownership over local land, and civic activity by both residents and community-based organizations, including LVEJO's community garden and efforts to close and repurpose two coal plants.

These Chicana activists provided a unique form of environmental justice work rooted in cultural practices and a sense of shared history. By inviting and training local residents, particularly youth, on environmental racism in the community, they also reframed local narratives, educated residents about city

processes, and increased civic engagement and leadership potential. At the same time, I argue, their actions showcase the ability and flexibility of Chicana-led grassroots organizations in addressing larger structurally racist development policies at the city level. These efforts were more successful in small-scale initiatives focusing on local transformations, among them direct wins – creating the community garden and enhancing resident knowledge about environmental injustices – and a partial win with the closure of a coal plant. Success depended on size, location, and local municipal support. The city supported smaller-scale projects that contributed to the beautification of the neighborhood and might increase land values. City hall more often dismissed large-scale initiatives that could limit tax revenues. Regardless of outcome, however, all initiatives brought people together, built community, promoted transfer and development of skills, and empowered residents to claim ownership of their neighborhood.

### *Chicana Environmentalism as Community Engagement*

An outgrowth of the first National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, held in Washington, D.C., LVEJO was formed in 1991. Under the extensive leadership of Kimberly Wasserman Nieto, the organization seeks to increase self-determination of immigrant, low-income, and working-class families and to combat environmental racism in La Villita. LVEJO accomplishes these aims by connecting local concerns to global issues, building cross-racial coalitions in the city, and countering root causes of poverty and inequality. In 2017, the organization operated with a budget of \$1.2 million, and employed 16 staff working from the basement apartment of a three-flat building in La Villita.<sup>9</sup>

LVEJO activists could advocate for environmental remediation and green spaces because of a strong civil sector at the neighborhood level. To build community engagement, staff held open meetings to educate residents on the effects of pollution. These meetings included training about soil testing, workshops on raised-bed gardening, education regarding effects of diesel pollution on children, and gardening exchanges to promote coalition building between Black and Mexican American communities. Nancy Jimenez, a retired teacher and beloved 50-year activist, quietly explained,

We're located in an area where there are so many issues.... We tried to plant a garden; there was lead in the soil. So then we had to research how serious it was.... We found out it causes brain damage, behavior problems. We had to educate ourselves and others on these issues, no one else would.<sup>10</sup>

To expand her education about community activism, Nancy attended workshops on citizen leadership held by an agency that focused on finding neighborhood

leaders who could implement imaginative transformation. She was impressed with the flat, asset-based leadership model and began offering leadership training to other women in her community. Graduates of the training implemented small-scale projects such as vacant-lot cleanup, community gardens, and youth programming focused on the arts and natural sciences. As Segura and Facio (2007) and Brodtkin (2009) show, Latinas use their transnational networks to expand their focus on the local neighborhood to a more global movement for social equity. This broader scope was evident in La Villita, where Chicana food and environmental justice activists, in particular, connected their work to global movements.

Gabriela Caballero, a political and environmental justice activist who had worked on several campaigns in La Villita, elaborated,

Environmental issues have no boundaries. If we decide to focus on La Villita, there's not really a difference, except in the visual aspect of it – in that somebody in the Gold Coast area [a wealthy neighborhood along the city's lakefront] isn't going to see the effects of the coal plant as somebody who lives right next to it and has to clean up ashes from their car every day. So even though environmental issues have no boundaries, it certainly has different elements and presence in different communities.<sup>11</sup>

As scholars have noted, Latinas/os/xs overwhelmingly bear the brunt of environmental assaults and experience disproportionate health effects. Yet, as Gabriela highlights, the effects of environmental pollution are also far reaching. This deep understanding of polluting industries has framed LVEJO's mission and informs the organization's strategy.

### ***Growing Cultural Roots: Semillas de Justicia Community Garden***

As a multiracial group that attracts a multigenerational following – parents, elders, local youth, young professionals, and middle-aged residents – LVEJO can tap into many resources to accomplish its goals. Using an asset-based model, LVEJO encourages residents to use their skills to improve their neighborhood and claim ownership over public space. These efforts have been particularly effective in the youth volunteer program. Teenagers who are both tech savvy and aware of popular trends have used imagery, storytelling, and mini documentaries both to organize other youth and to outline the effects of environmental racism on Black and Latina/o/x communities. LVEJO also partners with city and national agencies to train youth to lead toxic tours, track diesel pollution, and map brownfield sites across La Villita and the city (Becerra and Scheuerlein 2012). Hands-on training in digital media, mapping technologies, and pollution monitoring expands local knowledge, provides young people with transferrable skills, and increases the community's toolkit to combat environmental racism.



**FIGURE 1.2** LVEJO staff training youth volunteers. Photo credit: Jay Dunn, August 3, 2009.

The Semillas de Justicia garden is a community effort that trains locals about environmental issues, claims access to much-needed green space, and reimagines decayed and neglected areas of the community (Figure 1.2). Unlike other urban farms in Chicago, the Semillas garden is a community space where residents grow and harvest their own produce. The garden operates as a living classroom for local youth to grow food, learn about social justice, and connect with their Mexican culture. During the summer, LVEJO also coordinates weekly potluck dinners, where members of the community bring food prepared with the produce grown at the farm.

LVEJO provides soil, tools, and organic seeds to residents and maintains the site along with NeighborSpace, Chicago's only nonprofit land trust focused on community gardens. Founded in 1996 by the city, the Chicago Parks District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, NeighborSpace emerged from a desire to expand open space and increase greening activities. The land trust assists community groups with troubleshooting; basic liability insurance; and access to tools, water, and project planning. Partnership with NeighborSpace provides groups with permanent protection against potential redevelopment. Claiming ownership of community gardens through land trusts provides residents with a guarantee that the space will not be sold or developed into a nongreen space.

Greening activities, however, can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, in collectively reimagining and maintaining public space residents gain important civic engagement and leadership tools to participate and influence decisions that directly affect them and their communities (DelSesto 2015, Gonzales 2017). On the other hand, these sites can increase a neighborhood's investment potential. Greening activities like community gardens, beautification efforts, and resident-led remediation can signal to redevelopers that an area is up and coming and therefore ripe for increased real estate investment. Land trusts for community gardens may ensure that gardens remain, but the people who have invested their time and energy have no guarantee that they will be able to afford to remain in the neighborhood.

Yet, as both DelSesto (2015) and Baker (2004) highlight, community gardens are a powerful form of everyday politics that can reshape cities, neighborhoods, and civic and political engagement as residents reimagine, build, and maintain the spaces. Community gardens offer opportunities for collaboration, and community building practices, skills at least as important as the garden itself. A garden thus represents more than the space. Vivi Moreno, a local community organizer, emphasized access to fresh food: "There are so many food apartheid zones in Chicago that don't have access to fresh organic produce. So many folks don't have access to their cultural food...When a community doesn't have [that access] that's cultural genocide."<sup>12</sup> Vivi raises an important distinction in any discussion about food scarcity. Access to healthy options is important, but people also need access to "cultural food." Culture is maintained and community built through sharing regional recipes and using particular foods.

To address food scarcity and cultural access, Wanita Sanchez, a community outreach coordinator, has forged links among citywide food pantries, urban agriculture workers, and food justice activists by convening monthly meetings for people to share ideas and resources. Out of this work emerged the garden network. Wanita highlighted two reasons for the network's success: (1) people were coming together to work on something they enjoyed doing and (2) almost everyone in La Villita grows produce or herbs for their own benefit. For Wanita, promoting and supporting this type of work "increases community ownership over space."<sup>13</sup> In a moment of decreased state, federal, and philanthropic funding, Wanita elaborated, tapping into local resources can be a "real game-changer" for groups that lack access to resources. Many of the activists I met made the same point.

Although these are small-scale initiatives, the community garden and the garden network provide access to food, a way to maintain culture, and as bell hooks (2015) would attest, a homeplace within a city with a contentious relationship to its growing Latina/o/x communities. These are spaces for residents to organize, assert cultural identity, and build civic engagement, which is particularly key. With its campaigns, LVEJO and other organizations work continuously to find leadership opportunities for residents. In La Villita, these efforts

led to the remediation of a 26-acre superfund site and 170 contaminated homes, implementation of a bus line, and the development of a new park adjacent to the Cook County Department of Corrections (Gonzales 2017).<sup>14</sup>

LVEJO has used its toxic tours and the Semillas de Justicia classroom to highlight connections, made by some Chicago residents outside La Villita, between the community and the location of the jail. Activists referenced comments they had heard from outsiders, like “the jail is in a good location, because La Villita is a poor neighborhood with high crime rates.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in speaking about the coal plant in La Villita, a senior LVEJO staff member noted, “growing up in a neighborhood like this, your options are looking at a coal plant or looking at the county jail.”<sup>16</sup> In a neighborhood marked by high rates of crime and low rates of education, the jail and the coal plant signify outsiders’ limited views of residents as criminals, physical laborers, and a people who deserve unhealthy conditions.

### *The Cloud Factories*

LVEJO applied the tactics that created the community garden to other initiatives challenging Chicago’s environmental racism. One of the organization’s most notable campaigns was the ten-year fight to shutter the coal plants in La Villita and the neighboring Mexican American community of Pilsen. Within La Villita, the community’s goals included closure of MidWest Generation’s Crawford Station, located on 70 acres near the intersection of Pulaski Road and the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal. Founded in 1925, the Crawford coal plant stored 300,000 tons of coal and, along with the plant in Pilsen, provided energy for almost a million homes.

Growing concerns regarding the plants emerged after high rates of asthma and breathing problems were identified in both communities, where the coal plants were linked to “41 premature deaths, 550 emergency room visits, and 2800 asthma attacks annually” (Levy et al. 2002, Wernau 2012, para 19). Given the cloud of pollution causing these problems, several environmental justice organizations, including LVEJO and the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO), pressured the city to close the plants. As a result, in 2012, MidWest Generation, a subsidiary of Edison Mission Group and a local manager of fossil fuel energy, announced the plants’ retirement, coinciding with other plant closures in Illinois.<sup>17</sup>

In 2016, I asked Olivia Querejazu, a 20-year environmental rights activist in La Villita, who had worked on the coal plant initiative, about her next steps. She responded with strategic questions: “How do we become proactive and not reactive? How do we ensure that land-use practices support our community, not displace our community? To think through these questions we literally had to become planners.”<sup>18</sup> Gabriela similarly emphasized that she, along with other women of color, had to know more than the experts, which she believed was the only way to be taken seriously and ensure governmental accountability

to La Villita residents. In surpassing experts' knowledge, these women could also ensure that they were training residents about processes and policies that affected their daily lives. LVEJO's campaign thus included educating local communities about the importance of resident involvement in advocating for clean energy in Chicago as a whole.

After the closure of the coal plants, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel promised the La Villita community a say in any redevelopment at the plant's site. Operating in good faith that the mayor's pledge of community input would be considered in the site's redesign, Olivia, Gabriela, and other women activists held several visioning and planning sessions, called charrettes, throughout La Villita. In an effort to include residents in redesigning the abandoned site, these meetings included an explanation of the coal plant, the levels and types of pollution present, and large-scale (5' × 3') maps on which residents could draw. Working in small groups, participants in the charrettes were charged with generating ideas for using the land.

At a meeting held in the basement of a local Catholic Church, ten residents, all women, brainstormed the way they would like their community to look. They discussed opportunities for themselves, their children, and their families. They talked about the importance of projects that highlighted local Mexican culture. Given the community's working-class roots, ideas included a much-needed trade school, a labor museum, and a community kitchen for the numerous street vendors in the neighborhood. LVEJO collated these ideas and created an action plan for the site. Ongoing conversations with street vendors placed the commercial kitchen at the top of the agenda.

LVEJO's ideas, however, were quickly put on hold when the city announced the sale of the Crawford site. On December 29, 2017, Hilco Redevelopment Partners purchased the abandoned coal plants in both La Villita and Pilsen.<sup>19</sup> Although the site in La Villita required extensive remediation, Hilco offered plans to build a one-million-square-foot distribution center, named Exchange 55, housing 188 loading berths for diesel semitrucks and including a bike path and rooftop solar panels. To appease residents' concerns regarding increased and ongoing pollution, Hilco established a scholarship program to prepare local youth for careers in skilled trades.

In the wake of this dismissal of the community, LVEJO staged several actions to pressure city hall to honor its promise that residents would be included in redevelopment of the Crawford site. Activists' efforts included staged protests, press releases, videos posted to social media, and conversations with local politicians. Nonetheless, LVEJO was unsuccessful, and Exchange 55 remained slated for completion in 2020. The city's disregard of residents' recommendations indicates the limitations grassroots organizations face when addressing large-scale environmental racism. LVEJO was effective in implementing small-scale, culturally relevant initiatives like the Semillas garden. Larger projects that can generate income for the city, however, took precedence over resident visions for their neighborhoods.



## Conclusion

Chicana environmentalism uses cultural norms and practices to transform blighted spaces, increase resident ownership, and build community in marginalized spaces. This work is accomplished through asset-based models that operate in public locales and disrupt notions of community development supported by existing power structures. In this chapter, I have shown the ways Chicana activists in La Villita empowered residents to reimagine and redefine dirty, polluted, neglected, and abandoned areas in their communities. Small-scale initiatives, like the Semillas de Justicia garden, provide incremental changes to address ongoing environmental issues. In Chicago, however, Chicana environmentalism was less effective in promoting physical redevelopment projects that challenged city hall or disrupted the city's goals for growth. Structural racism thus constrained community-driven environmental change. With both the community garden and coal plant initiatives, however, Chicana environmentalism planted seeds for justice within the local imaginary.

## Notes

- 1 As defined by the Environmental Protection Agency, brownfield sites are places that contain potentially hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants.
- 2 The term “pollution oppression” was raised in my undergraduate urban class by students Dominique Flores and Nicholas Santoianni. They astutely related this notion to environmental racism and the oppressive nature of visible pollution and decay.
- 3 For example, see Blackwell (2011), Cohen, Jones, and Tronto (1997), Cooper, Morris, and Boylorn (2017), Crenshaw (1997), Crunkista (2017), Emejulu (2011), Isoke (2013), Rodriguez (1998), and Vargas (2014).
- 4 Latinas/os/xs are 51% more likely than any other racial group to live in areas with high levels of ozone pollution. Furthermore, the CDC reports that 50% of Latinas/os/xs live in counties that violate ground-level ozone standards. Ground-level ozone is created by chemical pollutants from cars, power plants, chemical plants, and other industries. Ozone levels increase on hot sunny days and are more prevalent in urban areas with higher rates of both polluting industries and vast stretches of asphalt and concrete. Today, 1.78 million Latinas/os/xs live in areas with high rates of air pollution.
- 5 According to Quintero et al. (2011), 39% of Latinas/os/xs live within 30 miles of a coal power plant.
- 6 According to Fleischman et al. (2016), Latina/o/x children suffer from 153,000 asthma attacks a year.
- 7 The data is taken from the 2009 American Community Surveys and the 2010 Census.
- 8 Residents in La Villita have access to 1.4 acres of green space per 1,000 residents, less than the Chicago average of 2.4 acres per 1,000 residents (CMAP 2018).
- 9 The data is taken from Guidestar using data from the organizations' 2017 Form 990.
- 10 Interview with Nancy Jimenez, October 2011.
- 11 Interview with Gabriela Caballero, May 2012.
- 12 Dukmasova (2019, para 24).
- 13 Interview with Wanita Sanchez, November 2011.
- 14 The jail sits on 96 acres of land and houses roughly 9,000 inmates a day.

- 15 Comment made during a site visit in May 2015.  
 16 Interview September 2016.  
 17 <http://midwest-generation.com.yeslab.org/about/index.html>.  
 18 Interview with Olivia Querejazu, September 2016.  
 19 Hilco Redevelopment Partners is a subsidiary of Hilco Global.

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# 2

## BRUJAS IN THE TIME OF TRUMP

### Hexing the Ruling Class

*Norell Martínez*

Public displays of witchcraft rituals around the world have made headlines since Donald Trump's election. Practicing witch, Dakota Bracciale, interviewed by Michelle Goldberg from *The New York Times* asserts, "the calamity of the election accelerated interest in witchcraft" (as cited in Goldberg 2017). Indeed, incantations to bind Donald Trump abound on the Internet today. Michael Hughes's spell below went viral in 2017, one year after Trump was elected:

I call upon you/To bind/Donald J. Trump/So that his malignant works  
may fail utterly/That he may do no harm/To any human soul/Nor any  
tree/ Animal/ Rock/ Stream/or Sea/Bind him so that he shall not break  
our polity/Usurp our liberty/Or fill our minds with hate, confusion, fear,  
or despair...

*(Hughes 2017)*

Many began holding "witch-ins," women gatherings to protest Trump's bigoted policies and especially his sexist, anti-women, misogynist positions. A group called "Feminists Against Trump" called for a "mass hexing" to "cast magical spells of love and feminism to destroy the Great Orange One and the racism, xenophobia and sexism he feeds on" (Dancyger 2017). Another group called Yerbamala Collective published numerous anti-fascist poems online to "destroy fascism with poetic witchcraft" (as cited in Sollée 2017, 141). Queer astrologer and witch, Jaliessa Sipress wrote in an article for *Hoodwitch* about

what it means to practice witchcraft in the age of Trump. His presidency is 'a mere practice in veil- lifting... another opportunity to practice

seeing in the dark, and revealing our political and social climate for what it really is only makes our work that much more important’.

(As cited in Sollée 2017, 141)

Even on an international level, healers gathered to conjure spells against Trump. According to Andrea Gompf (2017), a group of sorcerers and shamans mobilized on the coast near Lima, Peru to conjure spells to help Hillary Clinton win. Many journalists are taking notice of these public spectacles. Kristen J. Sollée in her book, *Witches, Sluts, Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive*, documents this phenomenon stating that the day after Trump’s inauguration,

...women – and witches – gathered in protest. In marches across America and around the world, millions showed up for women’s rights and social justice. Sign after sign alluding to witches and witchcraft were spotted by witch-identified activists and shared on social media. ‘We are the daughters of the witches you failed to burn’ announced one. ‘Brujas against racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, and billionaires with shitty grammar’ proclaimed another.

(2017, 62)

In another article published by *Vox* titled “Each Month, Thousands of Witches Cast a Spell Against Donald Trump” reports on a movement of “resistance witches,” a group of over 13,000 internet “neo-pagans, Wiccans, solo practitioners who self-identify as ‘hedge witches,’ longtime magical practitioners in various traditions, and committed activists” (Burton 2017). The article explains that women come together each month since Trump became president to perform spells on Trump – “equal parts quasi-religious ritual and activist performance...” forming a collective known as #MagicResistance.<sup>1</sup>

Right-wing ideologues are also documenting the witches-hex-Trump protests. The far-right US news website *Breitbart*, published an article warning readers of “Feminist Witches” who are performing hexes on Trump and to beware of occultism as it is becoming more common (Nash 2017). In addition, a report by the *Rolling Stone* titled “How Donald Trump is making Witches and Christians Fight Again” noted that Christian nationalists gathered to pray against “evil” witches using rhetoric that sounded eerily familiar to the inquisitor’s handbook, the *Malleus Maleficarum* (Dancyger 2017). The right-wing group, Christian Nationalist Alliance, exclaimed, “These sorts of perversions and inversions of our faith are common in the Satanic religions which seek to defile the Holy Word of God in their rituals” (Ambrose 2017). They use language reminiscent of the colonizer’s demonization of the non-western, non-Christian other: “devil,” “voodoo,” “spiritual sickness,” and “magical attack” to describe the public bewitchments against Trump.

In this chapter, I focus on what some have coined as “witch feminism,” “witch activism,” or what I call “bruja feminism,” the act of reclaiming la bruja, or witch, for political purposes.<sup>2</sup> I specifically focus on two public bewitchments against Trump — a YouTube video created by a Cuban immigrant and her friends titled, “Brujas Hex Trump,” and e-zines (electronic zines) by Yerbamala Collective, an anonymous group of anti-fascist witches scattered throughout Puerto Rico, Brazil, the United States, and the United Kingdom who publish anti-Trump denouncements. Yeni Sleidi’s video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIdjH4YcEnI>) is one of a few public hexes on Trump that went viral that did not draw on Wiccan rituals and was performed by Latina and Black women. This short one minute and fifty-four seconds video is a Santería-inspired performance that illustrates a montage of images and clips of a Brooklyn resident, writer and activist, Sleidi and her friends, as they perform a series of hexes against Trump during the 2016 presidential election. On the other hand, Yerbamala Collective (YMC) creates written spells using large 60 pt. Arial font letters linked to Google docs about bringing down capitalism and fascism alongside anti-Trump declarations (<https://yerbamalacollective.tumblr.com>). These “spellbooks” are full of protest poems that are circulated on social media, pasted on the walls of subway stations, and held as protest signs. While it is not clear if all members of the collective are Latinas, since they wish to remain anonymous, their name, “Yerbamala” alludes to the saying in Spanish, “hierba mala nunca muere” (a bad weed never dies), and reflects a framework influenced by Latin American culture and Indigenous beliefs. For instance, this expression is a popular dicho (saying) that refers to a bad person that never changes and articulates the idea that bad or evil people live the longest. However, some also interpret this saying as the unwanted and resilient “weed” that regrows despite it being cut down time and time again—meaning that those “unwanted” or marginalized people, such as brujas, do not go away despite their repression.<sup>3</sup>

I draw from Indigenous feminist thought in Abya Yala, a feminist praxis, political ideology and worldview grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing—feminismo comunitario, or community feminism.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, I draw from feminismo comunitario’s notion of memoria to analyze these texts.<sup>5</sup> This circular rather than linear decolonial theory both critiques neoliberal capitalism and connects the history of colonialism to the current neoliberal system that works to oppress women today. Because the following texts illustrate how Caribbean women repurpose la bruja to recover the collective memory of Afro-Caribbean female healers of the past—women who were condemned and persecuted for their medical expertise, their relationship to the natural world and practice of non-Christian religions rooted in Indigenous and African ways of knowing—I consider this a reflection of memoria or memory. Feminista comunitaria, Julieta Paredes, explains that memoria is “la que nos enlaza



con las antepasadas, es esa forma de la vida que se ha dado en estas tierras que es irreplicable...” (2014, 116).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Paredes asserts that memoria “nos habla de dónde venimos, qué problemas, qué luchas se dieron en medio, cómo así las mujeres estamos donde estamos, nos habla de como antes, también, hubieron mujeres rebeldes” (2014, 117).<sup>7</sup> La bruja is the quintessential figure of a rebel woman and her resurgence in cultural texts via the digital world is reflective of the need to remember those women that came before to challenge the violent forms of sexism made worse in the neoliberal moment.

Most importantly, however, and what I wish to highlight in this essay, is that the creators of both the video and the anti-fascist e-zines are examples of young millennial women of color who use digital media to challenge patriarchy, the ruling class and the Trump administration by recuperating, reclaiming and remembering la bruja and disseminating their ideas via the Internet. In Sollée’s words:

While attempting to survive and resist an administration that supports inhumane, discriminatory policies, disregard subjective reality, and promote “alternative facts,” many witches are uniting in the physical and digital realms against the rise of the new Christian theocracy. This fight is on the Internet as much as it is on the ground, against the fake news stories spewing distortions and inflammatory lies meant to instill fears of the demonized Other—much like the *Malleus Maleficarum* and similar tracks did in the early modern era.

(2017, 141)

The digital world now gives those who have been historically disempowered a platform to produce texts that push back against the violence imposed by the ruling class, mirroring a growing trend among teen girls who engage with digital witchcraft. Although not all of them are using it for political reasons, Katie Fustich (2016) found that the online world is integral to the practice of witchcraft for teen girls who use the Internet to cast spells with emojis, creating blogs with incantations and use the digital world as a safe space because they can remain anonymous. Even today many young women feel judged for stepping out of the spiritual “norm” (Fustich 2016).

Also noteworthy is that Christianity is becoming less attractive to young people. Fustich (2016) explains that as Christianity is increasingly dwindling in popularity with young Americans “the occult is offering girls a safe, flexible, and feminist-friendly alternative” and some claim that witchcraft serves as a “safe haven” for LGBTQ youth who do not feel welcome in the Church (Samuel 2018). Indeed, recent studies found that an increasing number of millennials are turning away from religion at rates not seen before revealing that the dominant culture’s religious ideology is weakening (Pew 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Historically, witchcraft has positioned itself as an alternative to patriarchal religions and is a spiritual practice often associated with women and not built

upon the suppression of women, making it attractive to young feminists. The witch-hunts attest to the violence against women who dared to challenge the status quo, a strategy implemented by the ruling class by way of the church and state leading to the annihilation of thousands of women in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe and later in the Americas (Federici 2004, 63).<sup>9</sup> As much as colonizers tried to curtail religious practices in the Americas with the threat of persecution, they consistently failed, and women were at the forefront of this struggle. As Federici claims,

Witch-hunting did not destroy the resistance of the colonized. Due primarily to the struggle of women, the connection of the American Indians with the land, the local religions and nature survived beyond the persecution, providing, for more than five hundred years, a source of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist resistance.

(2004, 220)

Today, young people and particularly young women are turning toward non-western spiritual practices from Africa and Indigenous Latin America partly because they are not tied to a history of colonization and genocide of people in the Americas and because they symbolize resistance to colonization. Young Latina and Black feminists are repurposing the witch to honor this resistance and to remember the women who survived injustice. Thus, the word “bruja” has become associated with resistance to Eurocentric religious and patriarchal ideologies. Johanna Ferreira (2018) echoes this sentiment in *Hip Latina*:

Not only does bruja feminism create a space for Latinas to participate in a larger discussion regarding women’s rights and social and racial injustices, but it also in many ways allows them to be seen. It gives for instance, Afro-Latinas or Latinas of indigenous descent, an opportunity to honor their brown ancestry that has been hidden and erased by so much of our Eurocentric influence. It’s a way to decolonize and find healing.

Similarly, African-American women are trading in church for African spirituality such as Yoruba-based faiths from West Africa brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans. As one Black witch told *The Atlantic*, “The Church is oppressive for a lot of Black women... But these African traditions empower women. They’re empowering you to have a hand in what you’re doing—to create your own magic” (as cited in Samuel 2018).<sup>10</sup> While non-western spiritual practices are nothing new among communities of color, digital technology gives young people new tools to disseminate and share their spiritual practice and/or integrate their spiritual practice with technology.

I argue that these two cultural products draw on the history of women who have been at the bottom of the social hierarchy and use brujería on those who

have historically been on top—wealthy, elite, heterosexual, cisgender white males. It has been widely documented that enslaved women (and men) on the plantation used poison and hexes against their oppressors as a form of vengeance. While the public bewitchments I discuss here differ, I argue that they draw from this history of resistance in their hexes. In other words, women of color are using magic to protest the greedy that build their wealth from the oppression of others. Whether the witchcraft many women are performing against Trump today is metaphorical or real, the aim is to challenge a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal system of rule that does not value the lives of oppressed communities—people of color, women, the poor, queer, and disabled people. La bruja in these texts challenges, mocks and makes vulnerable those in positions of power and critiques the white ruling class and the impunity under which they operate. By centering the focus on la bruja the texts challenge white supremacy and gender violence alongside a history of European colonization in the Caribbean and the imposition of western and Christian worldviews that have negatively impacted women, particularly those branded as brujas.

### **Neoliberalism, Trump, and the Attack on Women’s Rights**

Political commentators argue that Trump’s election represents the culmination of decades living under the neoliberal regime in the United States. Indeed, award-winning journalist Naomi Klein (2017) explains in her book, *No Is Not Enough: Resisting Trump’s Shock Politics and Winning the World We Need*, that neoliberal economic policies led to the far-right president. She contends that white supremacy and fascist movements are far more likely to become more threatening “during periods of sustained economic hardship and national decline,” such as Germany, that she says became “ripe for Nazis” after being devastated by war and economic sanctions (2017, 97). Indeed, Republican and Democrats perpetuated an economic decline by promoting continuous tax cuts to corporations, privatization of public institutions, cuts to social programs, and outsourcing of US jobs to developing countries, creating a dearth in economic growth, resulting in unemployment or underemployment, low wages and high costs of living. David Harvey (2005) refers to this as “accumulation as dispossession,” which he describes as the process of deregulating banks, lack of government intervention into the market, and holding the government hostage by big business if they do not create laws that benefit them, which results in the undermining of the role of government. Likewise, Klein contends that it would have been impossible for Trump to build a political career,

without the degradation of the whole idea of the public sphere, which has been unfolding over decades... And it could never have happened had that message not been followed up with decades of deregulation that

essentially legalized bribery, with outrageous sums of corporate money flowing into politics.

(2017, 41)

Indeed, the pro-business and neoliberal agenda of the Democratic Party and its failure to side with working people and to push back against the Republican status quo agenda disillusioned many voters. As Klein notes, the Democratic Party's strategy was to merely make the current system more inclusive without real distribution of wealth, nor did it challenge the neoliberal playbook (2017, 92). When the self-proclaimed Democratic Socialist, Bernie Sanders, ran against Clinton on an anti-Wall Street platform, the Democratic Party sabotaged his campaign, indicating the Party's interest in demobilizing the Left rather than challenging Trump's agenda of hate.

Although Trump's right-wing politics are certainly not new, critics note that his rhetoric opened a Pandora's box of hate. His overt unapologetic racism, pro-rich, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and pro-war politics combined with his disregard of climate change, is downright dangerous for everyone. The ramping up of violence against immigrants, the child detention centers, and the blocking of asylum-seekers from entering the country, reveal the level of inhumanity of his administration. Furthermore, Trump's support for the alt-right emboldens white supremacists to commit violent acts against vulnerable communities, creating a crisis of domestic terrorism in the United States and abroad.

Aside from this, Trump has revealed his sexist, anti-women, and anti-LGBTQ stance through his policies. He has called for a ban of transgender people serving in the military and his second in command, Mike Pence—a conservative Evangelical Christian—wants to rollback rights women and the LGBTQ community have fought vehemently for, including abortion. With the nomination of conservative judges, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, both having long records opposing abortion, Trump moved the pendulum toward a conservative majority Supreme Court and closer to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, a Supreme Court decision that gives women the constitutional right to abortion. Recently, Alabama passed a near total abortion law, banning abortion at all phases with no exceptions for survivors of rape and incest and currently 27 states are considered “abortion deserts,” forcing people to travel for more than 100 miles to get an abortion. That women are embracing *la bruja* to fight again for reproductive justice is not surprising. As history has shown, the establishment of an unequal economic system is commensurate with patriarchal regimes. Silvia Federici (2004) argues that in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, under the rise of capitalism, a genocidal attack on women occurred via the witch-hunts. She asserts “that the witch-hunt aimed at destroying the control that women have exercised over their reproductive function and served

to pave the way for the development of a more oppressive patriarchal regime” (2004, 14). While these are two vastly different sociopolitical periods, it points to the inextricable link between economic inequality and gender inequality and women of color are especially vulnerable. As Andrea Flynn suggests, “Economic inequality in the United States...is deeply racialized and gendered” (2018).

Women in the United States already fare worse than in other developed countries, as a UN report affirms. Women of color, LGBTQ women, older women, and women with disabilities were reported to be especially vulnerable (Grobe 2015). The Trump administration’s proposed cuts to programs that could affect the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) and cuts to the National Domestic Violence Hotline are just two examples of the lack of value for women’s lives. The gender pay gap is another urgent issue that has worsened in recent years. A study found that “women earned 79 cents for every \$1 earned in 2017, compared with 81 cents in 2015” (Glenza 2018). Of course, this gender wage gap impacts women of color more directly.

Indisputably linked to economic inequality, the attack on women’s rights explains why the rise of mentions of the “witch” is a current phenomenon and is worthy of exploration. Feminist witches challenge the anti-women, ultra-conservative agenda that intensified under Trump.<sup>11</sup> By embracing la bruja, a figure that in the past was demonized by dogmatic right-wing patriarchal demagogues, the so-called brujas today are defying the limitations put on them.

## Brujas Hex Trump

The current trend in reclaiming la bruja illustrates the polarization of the country since the Trump election. The centrist position of many politicians, such as the Democrat’s lukewarm opposition and corporate backing, does not sufficiently push back against the right-wing agenda of hate, corporate power, and state violence. A growing white supremacist movement emboldened by Trump drew a clear line between right and left. The contemporary bruja feminist movement reflects this division by drawing a clear line not between political parties but between good and evil; some would call it life and death. Yet, it is clear that these brujas correlate evil with right-wing, conservative, racist ideals that advocate an inhumane agenda, an agenda of death. As Callie Beusman (2017) states in her article “Is It OK to Hex a Nazi? How Anti-Fascist Witches Are Mobilizing Under Trump,” describing Yerbamala Collective’s ideology, “they see the festering beliefs that ushered Trump to power as a form of dark magic, or at least an obvious symptom of spiritual decay.” As an anonymous witch in the collective states,

The Trump administration operates within an existing colonial-capitalist ideation of ‘freedom,’ as in ‘Make America Great Again’... These were

dark spells that continue to be fed by white supremacy and fermented ignorance. We are pointing to this old curse. Our spells run on these circuits so that they can break these spells.

*(As cited in Beusman 2017)*

Indeed, when young brujas are performing hexes on a white supremacist and bigot like Trump, the aim is to challenge this power with good, in this case “good magic,” which is grounded in left-leaning political ideologies. Brujería is a timely response to this evilness as it puts into the question, who the true evil ones are?

The “Brujas Hex Trump” video is a montage of images and performances whizzing quickly by. It takes the viewer from spell to spell with punk music playing in the background by the self-described “brujacore group,” Shady Hawkins, where conjuring takes place mostly in the domestic sphere and is juxtaposed with religious images related to the Virgen de Guadalupe, Vodou symbols and illustrations of women engaging in “evil act” from the 1600 *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). While the video does not necessarily illustrate Santería rituals, Sleidi, the creator of the video, first got the idea to make the video after talking to her Santera mother.<sup>12</sup> She told *Jezebel* that she was inspired to do the video after having a conversation with her mother, who she often witnessed performing spells for protection for her and her siblings (Lodi 2015). Sleidi told her she wanted to put a curse on Trump as a joke but her mother took it seriously and told her about the Ice Queen spell. She states, “As a joke I asked her how I could curse him and she took that seriously and told me to ask the Ice Queen to freeze him and because she was so serious about it I took it seriously” (Chasing News 2015). Sleidi admits that not everyone who worked on the video necessarily believes in the supernatural; however she notes that what they all have in common is disdain for Trump and the GOP (Lodi 2015).

Santería, or any belief system considered the occult, stands in opposition to hierarchical Christian religions and challenges the power hierarchies and ideals about the non-Christian “Other,” beliefs that marginalize and are intolerant of non-western ways of knowing. Because la bruja signifies a racialized figure in the Americas in particular, where she is associated with being “primitive,” “superstitious,” and “dark,” to identify as a witch is to identify with a non-western belief system that rejects the tenets of white supremacy (Lara 2005, 12). Indeed, engaging in brujería-type acts is a resistance to patriarchy, the dominant religion and white supremacy that reaches back to the colonial era, pointing the notion of memoria, remembering both the violence imposed upon supposed “heretics” as well as their resilience.

Today, more than ever, the hypocrisy of the Church is more obvious as the country experiences increased economic insecurity and a growing wealth gap. All the while evangelical Christians and other conservative religious groups continue to vote for and endorse candidates that perpetuate inequality, such as Vice President Pence, who is a conservative Christian and an advocate for

tax cuts for the wealthy. Consequently, the youth are turning to their ancestral traditions and drawing on their community's historical memory rather than worshipping the same god of their oppressors.

Rather than support inequality, brujas advocate for social justice. One reason why Sleidi produced the video was to be in solidarity with Mexicans who Trump targeted during his campaign through derogatory comments that extend to all Latina/os. She said that because her family members are also immigrants from Cuba, Trump's "misguided attack on Mexican immigrants hit close to home" (as cited in Lodi 2015). Sleidi explains, "Even if the hexes don't work, the video shows Mexicans that they've got plenty of good people on their side" (as cited in Lodi 2015). Attacking Trump via Santería-inspired witchcraft is one way to challenge his racist rhetoric and that of the Christian Right that endorses him. In this context, *brujería* is more accessible to the masses and more democratic, as it allows people to participate in politics outside of the realm of official institutions. No voting booths are necessary, no identification card is needed, and citizenship is not required.

Aside from this, the "Brujas" video disrupts the status quo by reversing the historical silencing of under-represented women and transferring this silencing on to the oppressor with spells—a major theme throughout the video. For instance, the video displays a number of spells performed on Trump to silence him. We hear the word like "silencio" or "speak no evil" throughout, alongside images of Trump's face with his mouth taped closed. In fact, the video opens with this spell, also known as the "name-in-the-freezer" spell, where a series of steps are taken to "freeze" Trump's actions. The women in the video write Trump's name on a piece of paper, crumble it and put into a glass that is filled with water, and put into the freezer. A hand over the closed freezer door invoking the Ice Queen presides over the freezer, and we hear a female voice speak the words, "Ice queen, freeze this evil man." In the next scene, we see the glass cup with the frozen liquid taken out of the freezer, a woman looks at the camera and says, "Adios Trump," while another woman standing behind her bursts into the classic "evil laugh." It is not clear whether the Ice Queen spell is used amongst Santería practitioners or not, but it is certainly common in African-African conjure tradition to freeze someone's words or activities or to get someone out of your life. In another scene, a Latina dressed in black smashes a piece of fruit on a table with a number of *veladoras* around her (tall votive candles with religious motifs). She brings down a knife several times on the fruit. Then the camera closes in on her hands as she holds the fruit; she looks at the camera and says, "Let no evil words be spoken." The next scene is the same woman standing in front of the camera holding a piece of black yarn with a knot tied in the middle, she pulls it violently and yells "silencio!" These silencing scenes exhibit what Performance Studies scholar Richard Schechner (2002), calls "make belief" versus "make believe." "Make believe," he says, makes a clear distinction between what is real and what is pretending, while

“make belief” intentionally blurs the boundary between “the world of performance and everyday reality” (2002, 35). The Trump-hexing brujas perform spells to enact what they want viewers to accept as real, in this case, that these spells will actually prevent Trump from winning. The lines are blurred to make viewers believe that perhaps there is a possibility that these spells will work. In fact, one can argue that the ritual did work. If it were not for the Electoral College, Trump would have certainly lost the election to Clinton, who received 2.8 million more votes.

Ultimately, the video shows that young women who belong to a historically underrepresented group use technology to bring visibility to their outrage and their opposition to a more intense level of silencing by the ruling class and its institutions. It is a digital answer to Paredes’ call to recuperate the knowledge of our female ancestors but also create new knowledge for the betterment of our people (2014, 118). A public video of this anti-Trump hexing ritual brings new voices out of the margins and remembers the marginalized bruja, forced into hiding historically, out into the public sphere. In fact, the “Brujas” video is an in-your-face unapologetic performance that subverts power relations by expressing a “what-are-you-gonna-do-about-it” attitude, a declaration that says, “I’m a bruja, y que? (or what?)”; an overt shunning of the hegemonic Christian norms that demonize non-Western religions. Furthermore, the YouTube video conveys Paredes’ concept of *memoria* by paying homage to those women who could not openly practice their ceremonies and rituals, as it takes the viewer from spell to spell conjured mostly in the domestic sphere, not in an institutional religious space like a church. The domestic sphere is a space where many women performed rituals and ceremonies in private, prepared herbal concoctions and helped women give birth behind closed doors to prevent persecution. By contrast, posting the video in a public domain like YouTube where hundreds if not thousands can access it, it is as if these young brujas were sticking their tongues out at all the institutions such as the church and colonial powers that oppressed their female ancestors and forced them underground because practicing their healing craft posed great danger. As Sollée asserts, “In Europe and America during the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries, even a whisper of the word ‘witch’ spelled trouble” (2017, 79). The video reminds us that despite the efforts to annihilate witches, they never went away.

### **Yerbamala Collective: The Anti-Fascist Brujas**

Brujas in the Yerbamala Collective use the written word as a form of hexing and disseminate their work online anonymously. Their “Statement on Anonymity” expresses that they wish to remain anonymous to avoid being targeted by fascists: “The purpose of the anonymity for YMC has been to protect the identity of those who might get targeted under fascism” but add that they leave it up to the individual to decide whether or not they want to remain anonymous



since it is important to have names attached to the work of marginalized groups (“YMC Coloring Book,” n.d.). These millennial brujas are staunchly anti-fascist, anti-capitalist, feminists who speak out against Trump and the rise of the Right. Beusman (2017), who was able to get an interview with them via email describes them as “a group of occult-leaning queer theorists and activists, interested in creating art that interrogates and subverts the crushing logic of capitalism, colonialism, racism, and heteropatriarchy.” Their short slogans written in large font could be interpreted as spells, poems, motivational memes, or political propaganda. Though they resist clear-cut definitions of their work, spells, or even witchcraft, they state in an interview, “We want a contagious art project against fascism,” revealing that they view their work as artistic expression (as cited in Beusman 2017). Furthermore, at the end of each e-zine/spellbook they urge others to join the resistance by crafting Antifa (anti-fascists) poems.<sup>13</sup> They state, “FORGET EVERYTHING YOU’VE LEARNED ABT POETRY//YOU’VE GOT REAMS OF BEAUTIFUL WORDS IN YOU THAT LIVE TO DESTROY YOUR OWN CHAINS//WRITE WTH ONE GOAL: DESTROY FASCISM WITH POETIC WITCHCRAFT” (“Our Vendetta,” n.d.).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Yerbamala brujas relate anti-fascist resistance with witchcraft, as they proclaim in their interview with Beusman: “The history of fascism is not just the history of fascist repression. It is also the history of resistance. Witchcraft is the practice of building that resistance” (2017). Hence, their project is a creative and timely response to the growth of the Right under the Trump regime.

On their Tumblr page, they have posted four e-zines thus far: “Our Vendetta: Witches vs. Fascists,” “Burn it All Down: An Antifascist Spellbook,” “The Yerbamala Coloring Book,” and “Sanctuary Summoning Spellbook.” The e-zines are disjointed and reflect multiple themes throughout. The tone of many spell/poems is strong, non-apologetic, and angry accompanied by a constant denouncement against Trump (which they refer to as DT), the far right, capitalism, and colonialism. However, there are moments in between these denouncements where they speak words of love and positivity toward marginalized groups such as queer, disabled, and trans-gender people, and display sympathy toward Antifa. For instance, in the following spell they ask for the protection of Antifa: “WE CAST A SPELL TO PROTECT THE IDENTITY OF ANTIFA / MAY OUR SPELL BE YR MASK” (“Sanctuary Summoning,” n.d.). Furthermore, they evoke Paredes’ conception of memoria by summoning social justice advocates of the past, such as trans-gender activists, Silvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, and anti-fascists historical figures such as Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez who was opposed to the Franco regime in Spain: “WE CALL UPON THE ANCESTORS, MARSHA P. JOHNSON, WE INVOKE THEE/ WE CALL UPON THE ANCESTORS, SYLVIA RIVERA, WE INVOKE THEE...,” they write (“Burn it All,” n.d.). They bring these figures to “life” in their spell books to remember their work and their resistance against injustice, but it also makes these figures relevant today

to a younger generation who may not know of them, since they are erased from history books and their work is not valued in hegemonic societies like ours. As Paredes asserts, *memoria* speaks to the struggles that took place in the past and connects our conditions as women today to those struggles (2014, 117).

Aside from this, the YMC's spells are at once an expression of disdain and anger toward capitalism and the right-wing ruling class, and protection from it. In their "Anti-Fascist Spellbook," they write, "WE BIND YOU FROM THE HARM YOU WILL CAUSE WE BIND YOUR LIES & PROMISE TO BREAK THEM," speaking to Donald Trump. There are many instances of this sentiment throughout the e-zines. In "Our Vendetta," they exclaim, "CONFLICT IS PROGRESS/RESISTANCE IS WITCHCRAFT/SHOW UP FOR THE END OF CAPITALISM/YOUR ANGER IS RIGHT" ("Our Vendetta," n.d.). In another instance, they declare resistance against Trump, who they refer to here as "the Cheeto" but also conflate him to neoliberalism and colonialism. The statement reads, "RESIST THE CHEETO BUT RESIST THE CAPITALIST 2 RESIST NEOLIBERALISM/ RESIST COLONIALISM" ("YMC Coloring Book," n.d.). While "Brujas Hex Trump" focuses solely on Trump as the culprit, the YMC views Trump as a symptom of structural problems linked with capitalism.

Also important is that Puerto Rican women make their presence felt in each e-zine, even while contributors remain anonymous, demonstrating the ability of digital *brujería* to transcend borders. Their bilingual spell-poems speak strongly against the neoliberal and colonial project in Puerto Rico and against the economic austerity measures imposed on the island; they call on protecting the island and its people in their struggle. In one e-zine, they speak in support for the student and teacher strike in the University of Puerto Rico and write spells to give strength to that movement. They exclaim, "BRUJXS SOLIDARIXS CON LXS ESTUDIANTES EN PIE DE LUCHA EN LA UPR ¡CANDELA!"<sup>15</sup> Another one says,

WE SUPPORT THE STUDENTS WORKERS & PROFESSORS  
ON STRIKE IN PUERTO RICO/MAY YOUR STRIKE BREAK  
ALL OUR CHAINS/MAY YOU BREAK THE WILL OF STRIKE  
BREAKERS/MAY YOU END THE REIGN OF THE CONTROL  
BOARD & ALL THE VULTURE CAPITALIST BACKED BY DT.

*("YMC Coloring Book," n.d.)*

Here they are referring to the student and teacher strikes in Puerto Rico and the protests against the looting of public education on the island, a catastrophe that occurred before hurricane Maria but only worsened in the aftermath of the storm. In 2017, the government drafted a plan to increase tuition for University of Puerto Rico students in an attempt to cut costs— a neoliberal strategy to deal with Puerto Rico's perpetual economic debt crisis and recession since 2006. The students responded with a protest that shut down the school

for two months. More recently, the police responded violently to protestors in a 2018 May Day Teachers Strike that took place against austerity measures that proposed to close several hundred schools, lay off several thousand teachers, cut pensions and convert public schools into privatized charters. One of YMC's spell-poems strongly denounces the PROMESA bill by attributing it to fascism. They declare, "FASHTRASH CRAFTED THE PROMESA BILL/ FASHTRASH CALL FASCISM 'SURVIVAL'" ("Sanctuary Summoning Spellbook," n.d.). The Puerto Rican Oversight, Management and Economic Stability Act, or PROMESA, is a legislative plan to restructure Puerto Rico's massive debt by implementing budget cuts, impacting the public education sectors severely. These cuts to education are only one of many violent neoliberal policies imposed on the island by the United States. The oversight board, locally known as "la Junta" is made up of seven voting members appointed by Obama. These non-democratically elected members have the power to decide how to solve the island's fiscal and financial problems by promoting austerity. The seven board members, three Democrats and four Republicans, consist of people with business ties and conservative political ideologies who promote austerity measures and make a whopping \$625,000 in salaries paid for by Puerto Rican tax payers (Lopez-Santana 2017). It is no wonder that YMC Brujas ask for protection and healing of the island against this evil. They state in the same spell-poem, "YOKAHU, PROTEGE A PUERTO RICO Y A TODAS LAS ISLAS DEL CARIBE" and "AYUDANOS A SANAR CON SOLIDARIDAD" ("Sanctuary Summoning Spellbook," n.d.). Yokahu is the masculine spirit of fertility in Taíno mythology who lives in the sky watching over the Taíno people. Taínos are the original peoples of the island, which they call Borinquen. Indeed, these young Brujas do not call on a Christian god for protection of the Puerto Rican people. For why would the god of the colonizers save the island if the colonizers have brought so much harm to it? They call instead on the gods of the island's first peoples to protect them from the harm of the neoliberal vulture capitalists. Invoking Yokahu for the collective good illustrates memoria by calling on the deities of the original inhabitants of the land, as Paredes states, "la que nos enlaza con las antepasadas, es esa forma de la vida que se ha dado en estas tierras que es irrepitible..." (2014, 116).<sup>16</sup>

The Trump-hexing women who perform spells against him and the right-wing capitalist class is a symbolic attempt to stop or return the evil to the evil-doers; an attempt at stopping a great imbalance from occurring by disrupting the powers that have caused great harm.

### **Poisoning and White Fear: Hexing the Ruling Class**

Whether the Trump-hexing bruja projects are examples of witch-as-metaphor, activist performance or real spiritual practice, their work points to a history of poisoning and hexing the ruling class that is particularly linked to the plantation system of the Caribbean. The use of plant medicine to hex, harm, and

poison whites was not uncommon throughout the Americas and is widely documented. For instance, Karol K. Weaver's (2006) work on enslaved healers in Haiti demonstrates the vast methods enslaved people resisted using their knowledge of plants. She asserts, "Just like the machetes that slaves used for both labor and as weapons against other slaves and white slaveholders, herbal remedies sometimes were transformed from means of curing to ways of killing" (2006, 62). Indeed, this was one way to have control over one's life in an unpredictable and violent world full of risks; poison and sorcery was the secret weapons against slavery (Bush 1990, 76). Similarly, Diana Paton notes in her work on enslaved Africans in Jamaica, that the enslaved

were likely to use whatever means were available to protect themselves spiritually in a terrifying world. Such means drew on techniques of spiritual protection developed in Africa, gradually incorporating analogous techniques learned from Europeans, indigenous Americans, and other Africans in the Americas.

*(2012, 249)*

In addition, poisoning was a tool to revolt without the state intervening and repressing a rebellion. In Bush's words, "planters arguably feared secret poisoning more than collective revolt as they could not be protected from it by the militia" (1990, 52). In islands like Puerto Rico, for example, that had a small fraction of enslaved Blacks, never exceeding 11% of the islands population, poisoning campaigns were more effective because they lacked the numbers for a successful revolt (Fernández Olmos y Parivisini-Gerbert 2003, 21). Planters generally believed that old women were more capable of poisoning because of their knowledge of herbs and plants, demonstrating the often-held belief of the witch as an old "hag" (Bush 1990, 75).

While the YMC and the "Brujas Hex Trump" women are not using poison or potions to physically harm their oppressors, there is a correlation between poisoning and magic. Paton (2012) explains that for enslaved African people, there was a connection between the material and magical aspect of poisoning. She states, "Substances referred to as 'poisons' were often described in terms that suggest that they were thought to work through magical means as well as through material toxicity" (2012, 240). She argues that poison was not looked at as simply having physiological affects but "intimately related to the spiritual world" (2012, 248).

The YMC and "Brujas Hex Trump" women are working in vastly different worlds and under different conditions than their enslaved counterparts, nor are they faced with the same realities that enslaved women faced. Also, their work does not have the same material consequences as poisoning campaigns had on the plantation. They will not weaken the capitalist system or stop the violence that the ruling class implements via policies, rules, and laws. Nonetheless, their project suggests something similar—that the images and words they produce

can influence the way we imagine a better and just world. Even while their project is a performance, it reflects what Schechner (2002) calls a ritual. Rituals, he says,

are used to manage potential conflicts regarding status, power, space, and sex. Performing rituals help people get through difficult periods of transition. Ritual is also a way for people to connect to a collective, even mythic past, to build social solidarity, to form a community.

*(2002, 72)*

Indeed, for both groups of brujas, the intention of their spells is not for individual gain, but for the good of all, it is an act of solidarity so that all people may live free of oppression. It is also a defiance of the status quo. Like the community ceremonies and hexing ritual performed by enslaved people to feel free, these millennial brujas also want to imagine a better world for themselves and their people.

What is most fascinating and, dare I say amusing, about the performance of religious rituals on the plantation, was that whites lived in constant fear of them. African religious ceremonies throughout the Caribbean were prohibited precisely because these practices made them feel empowered and gave enslaved people the courage to rise up. Rebellion and resistance were linked to these religious practices and thus a threat to the plantation system. As Paton asserts, “White authorities were particularly frightened by Africans’ use of esoteric spiritual knowledge. In the middle years of the century these white fears crystallized in each society when heightened activity by enslaved people seemed to threaten the slave system” (2012, 235). Indeed, many priests and priestesses performed ceremonies before rebellions to prepare people for warfare to instill fearlessness and confidence.<sup>17</sup> That this provoked white fear is reminiscent of a current revelation about Trump—he eats McDonald’s fast food often because he is afraid of being poisoned (Miller 2018).<sup>18</sup>

Overall, enslaved women played a major role in rebelling against the master class and it must be acknowledged that it was the retention of African cultural knowledge that gave them the courage and strength to take such risks. The work of YMC and “Brujas Hex Trump” aims to remember the rebellious spirit of the female ancestors who stood up to their oppressors, held on to the traditions of their ancestors and passed them on to the next generations. Most importantly, their intention is to bring back balance to a world that is desperately unbalanced.

### **Digital Brujería: Politicizing Magic**

“Brujas Hex Trump” and Yerbamala Collective’s spellbooks/poems engage with similar themes as literary works by women of color, but reflect a contemporary

form of expression that engages young women today. I do not wish to create binaries between the written and the digital or to privilege one medium over the other, nor do I claim that one form of expression has more value. My assertion here is that parallels between the politics expressed through digital *brujería* and the work of women of color writers who draw on non-western spirituality in their literary work can be drawn as both politicized magic and creating a fictional world where there is power in the spiritual belief systems of the oppressed whose knowledge was ripped from them by the oppressor. Channette Romero suggests that in literature “contemporary writers of color fuses oral stories within the novel form to encourage and empower readers to imagine themselves as ‘free’ by demonstrating their ability to actively produce, rather than to merely consume, knowledge” (2012, 33). One way to do this, Romero states, is through “utilizing spirits and other beliefs held by people of color to envision spiritually inspired ‘relations,’ political alliances that collectively resist injustice” (Romero 2012, 6).

While the digital texts analyzed here fall outside of the literary genre, the YMC e-zines and the “Brujas Hex Trump” attempt to enact a similar phenomenon but in the contemporary moment and through the Internet. Their aim is to put a stop to the violence imposed by the ruling class system, albeit symbolically, that perpetuates the oppression of marginalized groups partly by reclaiming old traditions that have been violently repressed. Whether it is performance, a spell, or a playful way to make a feminist statement, the YMC and “Brujas Hex Trump” also seek to inspire resistance against the current evils of injustice unfolding under the Trump administration. At the core, they create critical debate and discussion about the links between women’s experiences and their struggle against colonialism, capitalism, imperialism, and neoliberalism and allow women of color to assert their presence as knowledge producers in a world that constantly devalues them by democratizing the ability to tell and disseminate perspectives that are often left out of the dominant narrative. Digital *brujería* against the ruling class also reaches a younger generation of women more directly, it is more accessible, can be disseminated more rapidly, operates across borders, and is free in most cases. The digital realm serves as a democratizing space that allows young women to be defiant, unapologetic about their beliefs, and engage in feminist resistance. Studies suggest that youth are creating media at much higher rates today than ever before and are finding a space to build community, be creative and express their values and beliefs. As the Jenkins et al. study confirms, “more than one-half of all teens have created media content, and roughly one-third of teens who use the Internet have shared content they produced” (2009, 3). Aside from this, the current generation of young people find that social media platforms influence their political behavior and civic engagement more than traditional institutions such as government representatives, trade unions, and other forms of politics (Loader, Vromen & Xenos 2014, 145). Although there can be disadvantages to this, especially in

the era of austerity, privatization and the attack on unions, the digital realm facilitates the process of organizing to challenge backwards policies, neoliberal attacks, or at least spreads ideas, information, and raise consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

While still highly contested, some commentators argue that the Internet has facilitated a shift from the third wave to fourth wave feminism, and digital brujería may be a manifestation of this (Munro 2013). While the usage of the Internet does not necessarily define a new era nor does it always translate to creating real change for women, Ealasaid Murno states it is becoming “increasingly clear that the Internet has facilitated the creation of a global community of feminists who use the Internet both for discussion and activism” (2013). Research shows that the number of women using digital spaces is increasing on a global level (Munro 2013). According to Sollée, a Pew demographics research study found that women “were found to outnumber men on nearly every social media platform but Twitter” (2017, 138). She points out that women are driving the discussion on issues like rape culture, body positivity, gender bias, toxic masculinity, and other feminist issues online, and explains that “Online spaces continue to foster feminist community and provide an invaluable platform for feminist politics” (2017, 139). The collective spellcasting that took place alongside direct action activism after Trump was elected, for instance, was highly visible on social media and not necessarily on mainstream news sites. Sollée notes that while activists organized online in response to the Trump election in the name of social justice “thousands of self-identified witches, mystics, occultists, and intuitives simultaneously connected through social media to hex and heal, as they set their sights on fighting racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia through any means necessary” (2017, 141). There are certainly limitations to this as these acts are symbolic, yet they are a form of protest and the visibility that public hexings against Trump got on the Internet sent a clear message that a significant number of women were going to push back and rebel against the status quo and everything that the Trump administration and the ruling class represents.

## Notes

- 1 In feudal Europe, peasants would also perform spells against the feudal lords. According to the Center for Tactical Magic, “the peasant class had no easy avenue of representation through which they could air grievances against their feudal lords. So... curses became a tactic of dissent...” (Babcock 2008). Similarly, during World War II, a group of anti-fascist sorcerers held a “hex party” in Maryland “to kill Adolf Hitler by voodoo incantation” (Cosgrove 2014).
- 2 Because I focus specifically on Latinas and spiritual traditions that originated in countries colonized by the Spanish, I will be using the Spanish word “bruja”

- (witch), “la bruja” (the witch), or “brujería” (witchcraft) throughout this dissertation, but at times I will use the “witch” and “bruja” interchangeably.
- 3 While it is important to highlight an exclusively Latina project, Yerbamala Collective makes interesting interventions that I think are important to emphasize in this chapter even if I cannot verify that they are made up exclusively of Latinas. The international nature of their work illustrates that it is not driven by identity politics but rather a global movement of solidarity, one that is becoming increasingly important as the growth of right-wing, fascist governments grow on a global scale and impact people on an international level.
  - 4 In the Kuna language, *Abya Yala*, sometimes spelled Abiyala, refers to the American continent since before the arrival of Columbus. Indigenous communities assert that using this term instead of “America” or “New World” is a step toward epistemic decolonization and the establishment of indigenous peoples’ autonomy and self-determination.
  - 5 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
  - 6 “that which connects us to the ancestors, it is that form of life that manifests in these lands that is unrepeatable...”
  - 7 “it speaks of where we come from, what problems, what struggles took place in the between, why women are where we are, it tells us that before there were also rebellious women.”
  - 8 According to a Pew Research Study, there has been a drop in Christian affiliation among adults of all ages but is particularly more pronounced among young adults (Pew 2015). This trend is seen across gender, race/ethnicity and among college graduates and adults with only a high school education (Pew 2015).
  - 9 The importation of the Christian notion of the devil made practitioners of the old religion targets, mainly women. Consequently, midwives, herbalists, medics, diviners, and religious female leaders were charged with witchcraft.
  - 10 This is not to overlook the role the Christian church played in supporting liberation movements in the United States and in Latin America. It is simply to point out the trend in looking outside the Christian church for liberation.
  - 11 It is important to note that the issues I discuss above are structural, they did not begin with Trump, nor will they go away after Trump leaves office. I merely point out the intensification of the infrastructure that was already in place that Trump took to a new level.
  - 12 Santería is the creolized manifestation of the Yoruba religion, which comes primarily from the southwest region of Nigeria and from Dahomey, Togo, and Benin. The people from this region who were kidnapped and sent to the Caribbean islands played a dominant role in the creation of Santería — Cuba’s most popular Afro-Cuban religion (also known as Regla de Ocha) where the Yoruba deities, or orishas, are syncretized with Catholic saints called “santos.”
  - 13 Antifa is a left-wing militant movement that uses direct action to fight against right-wing, fascist, white supremacist groups.
  - 14 Because Yerbamala Collective writes in all capital letters in their work, I will cite their work using all capital letters when quoting directly from their e-zine to represent their writings accurately. Also, because they use shorthand at times that mirrors the shorthand used in text messages, it can be difficult to quote correctly in lower case letters.
  - 15 “Brujas in solidarity with the students in the struggle at UPR! Fire!”
  - 16 “that which connects us to the ancestors, it is that form of life that manifests in these lands that is unrepeatable...”
  - 17 Tacky’s rebellion in Jamaica is a notable example of this. Similarly, Cécile Fatiman, a Haitian Mambo (vodou priestess) along with Dutty Boukman, a hougan (vodou priest) performed the well-known ceremony at Bois Caiman before a slave rebellion



that served as a catalyst to the 1791 slave revolt in Haiti. Queen Nanny in Jamaica was a spiritual leader in the Windward maroon community and guided the maroons through a period of intense resistance against the British in the 19th century.

- 18 This information was revealed by journalist, Michael Wolff, in his book *Fire and Fury* (2018).
- 19 For example, a 2018 Pew Research study found that around half of Americans have been civically active on social media in the past year and that Blacks and Latinos were most likely than whites to value social media platforms to express their political views or get involved in issues that are important to them (Anderson et al. 2018).

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# 3

## INTERSECTIONAL SYNTHESIS

### A Case Study of the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción

*Fernando Tormos-Aponte and Shariana Ferrer-Núñez*

Intersectionality emerged as a political project that targeted the intellectual erasure and exclusion of Black and Latina feminists in civil rights and second wave feminist leadership and movement agendas (Combahee River Collective [1977] 1995). Now, more than 30 years since its emergence, intersectionality is an increasingly popular mobilizing approach. In Puerto Rico, Colectiva Feminista en Construcción organizers arrived at an intersectional organizing approach through experiences of exclusion and marginalization within the Puerto Rican Left. From this positionality, they saw their experiences and identities reflected in texts of Black and decolonial feminist political theory. Since its founding, the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción has worked to build popular resistance to multiple axes of oppression, including patriarchy, racism, neoliberalism, and imperialism. Combining grassroots movement-building work with advocacy and direct action tactics, the emergent Colectiva has already scored important victories in Puerto Rico. These include the resignation and prosecution of a powerful mayor in Puerto Rico for sexual assault, mobilizing hundreds for feminist marches and assemblies, training new cohorts of feminist organizers through workshops and political schools that combine teachings of theory and practice, and most recently, leading efforts calling on the former Puerto Rico governor Ricardo Rosselló to resign. Despite the organization's success, challenges remain to gain recognition and power within the Puerto Rican Left and to addressing systemic forms of oppression as Puerto Rico's descent into autocracy, economic strife, and the Hurricane María disaster in 2017 laid obstacles for political influence. Colectiva organizers are routinely subject to bodily harm at the hands of the state and patriarchal aggressors. This chapter adopts the case of the Colectiva Feminista en Construcción to theorize about the challenges that intersectionally led social movement organizations face in

contexts of heightened repression, eroding democratic institutions, and patriarchal violence. Further, the authors detail the elements of an intersectional and decolonial praxis and the pathways by which intersectional organizing enables the formation of new ways of life, new solidarity ties, and the emergence of critical hope (Freire [1992] 2004) for social and political change.

## Intersectionality and Social Movements

Intersectionality is a collective project that emerged for and from social movements of marginalized groups. The notion that conditions of disadvantage produced by multiple interacting systems of oppression must be addressed concurrently emerges from the activism of women of color in the 19th century, including the work of Maria Stewart, Savitribai Phule, and Sojourner Truth, and more recently from the work of the organizers of the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Cathy Cohen, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others. The term intersectionality gained popularity in academe as a result of the work of black and mestiza feminist scholars and activists that resisted policy and advocacy silences and the subjugation of non-dominant forms of knowledge production (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Cohen 1999; Collins 1990; Combahee River Collective [1977] 1995; Crenshaw 1989; Hancock 2011; Hooks 1981; Strolovitch 2007). In its indictment of second wave feminism, intersectionality's intellectual intervention sought to break with essentialist views of social groups by avoiding biological, static, and additive notions of identity (Hancock 2007; Weldon 2006a).

Intersectionality has now gone global (Tormos 2017). A growing contingent of scholars within the field of political science have adopted intersectional lenses in comparative research (e.g. Townsend-Bell 2011), further developed the term theoretically (e.g. Hancock 2007), and clarified its methodological implications (Weldon 2006a). It has been used for the analysis of issues of social justice and human rights (Davis 2008; Yuval-Davis 2006) and employed in the analysis of global phenomena and agency (Blackwell and Naber 2002; Chan-Tiberghien 2004; Collins and Bilge 2016; Perry 2016; Townsend-Bell 2011).

Yet, despite its popularity and recurrent adoption within social movements, intersectionality has been pushed to the margins within the study of social movements (Irvine et al. 2019). Intersectionality's relegation to the margins of social movement research evidences the critiques raised by intersectionality scholars that pointed to the subjugation of Black feminist political thought (Collins 1990). Similarly, Bracey (2016) and Liu (2017) point to social movement research's history of examining Black liberation struggles while ignoring race and Black theory. Further, as intersectionality is increasingly mainstreamed in social movement research, it has been moved away from the Black and Mestiza feminist tradition of centering experience (Beaman and Brown 2019) and the intellectual labor of Black intellectuals dismissed (Alexander-Floyd 2018).

Intersectionality scholars, however, have developed insights into transversal forms of enacting solidarity and about the political environment in which movements operate. Feminist scholars refer to the forms of collective agency that intersectionality inspires as political intersectionality (Cho et al. 2013), intersectional conceptual approach to coalition-building (Collins and Chepp 2013), intersectional praxis (Townsend-Bell 2011), intersectional solidarity (Hancock 2011), and deep political solidarity (Hancock 2011).

Intersectional solidarity refers to “an ongoing process of creating ties and coalitions across social group differences by negotiating power asymmetries” (Tormos 2017). Movements can enact an intersectionally conscious political praxis by recognizing intersectional forms of oppression, representing intersectionally marginalized social groups in movement leadership, and prioritizing the issues of intersectionally marginalized groups in movement agendas (Strolovitch 2007; Tormos-Aponte 2019; Weldon 2006b). The adoption and enactment of these norms are not static outcomes, but rather are ongoing processes marked by internal social movement negotiations of power.

Intersectionality’s increased prominence within social movement theory, methods, and practice is marked by the growth in studies on the implications of intersectionality for social movements, disciplinary efforts to center intersectional scholarship and scholars from historically underrepresented groups, and the recognition of intersectionality’s emergence within minority women’s social movement spaces. Various studies document intersectional forms of coalition politics (Adam 2017; Chun et al. 2013; Cole 2008; Laperrière and Lépinard 2016; Luna 2016; Roberts and Jesudason 2013; Tungohan 2016; Verloo 2013), the presence or absence of an intersectional organizing approach and movement agenda (Smooth and Tucker 1999; Strolovitch 2007; Tormos-Aponte 2019), the extent to which intersectional issues drive movement participation (Fisher et al. 2018), and the usage of intersectionality as part of movement discourse (Fisher et al. 2017; Heaney 2019). In turn, Liu (2017) developed an intersectionality and critical race theory paradigm for the study of movements and revealed how social movement scholarship has yet to recognize intersectionality as a significant contribution to the field.

## Intersectional Synthesis

An intersectional synthesis refers to the dialectical relationship between an intersectional consciousness and an intersectional praxis. Intersectional consciousness is an awareness of the dynamic interactions between social structures and their government of social group power relations. It is an understanding of inequality through the lens of inequality (Tormos-Aponte 2019). This awareness may arise individually and collectively, as movements can develop collective sensibilities to inter-group power relations and asymmetries (Cole 2008; Curtin et al. 2015; Greenwood 2008; Irvine et al. 2019; Tormos-Aponte

2019). The collective development of an intersectional consciousness within movements allows movements to enact an intersectional praxis. An intersectional praxis refers to organizing approaches that movements adopt to negotiate inter-group power asymmetries and steps that movements and organizers take to transform intersectional forms of oppression (Tormos-Aponte 2019).

Enacting a praxis informed by an intersectional consciousness entails recognizing, representing, and opening opportunities for the leadership and agency of intersectionally marginalized groups within social movements (Tormos-Aponte 2019). Movements and movement organizations may develop an intersectional synthesis by prioritizing the issues of intersectionally marginalized groups and allocating resources for programs and campaigns that attend to these issues, developing an inclusive decision-making structure and leadership, and creating spaces for and supporting the autonomous organization of social groups (Laperrière and Lépinard 2016; Roberts and Jesudason 2013; Strolovitch 2007; Tormos-Aponte 2019; Weldon 2006b). Movement participants arrive at collective action with a priori and implicit understandings of oppression that evolve in the process of engaging in agency (Townsend-Bell 2011). Working toward developing this synthesis is not a static outcome, but rather an ongoing process, as movements develop understandings of oppression in practice and their practices inform their understandings of oppression (Cho et al. 2013; Tormos-Aponte 2019).

## Data and Methods

Our contribution to this volume continues intersectionality's tradition of activist scholarship and insurgent knowledge that emerged from the collective action and theorizing of queer and minority feminists (Bilge 2014; May 2015). We do so through a case study that draws from the experiences of the political and intellectual work of the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*, a collectively identified intersectional feminist political project developed in Puerto Rico. In doing so, we use our voices and energies to further the epistemological demand of making visible and audible "the experiences that are obscured by single-axis conceptualizations of power" (Carastathis 2008; Irvine et al. 2019). We argue that an intersectional lens is vital to understanding both social movements (Liu 2017) and the inequality that anti-oppressive groups counter (Yuval-Davis 2015).

We do so by drawing from Shariana Ferrer-Núñez's autoethnography of the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*, her collaborative ethnography with Fernando Tormos-Aponte, and the analyses that emerged within the organization amongst *Colectiva* organizers. To this end, we draw from texts, including news articles, *Colectiva* bulletins and organizing documents, *Colectiva* media appearances, public speeches, photographs, video recordings, and the *Colectiva*'s social media interactions. Ferrer-Núñez is one of the founders and

organizers of the *Colectiva*. Ferrer-Núñez did not partake in the creation and organizing of the *Colectiva* with the purpose of writing about this experience, but rather, writing about this experience and developing political analysis is part of the interventions that the *Colectiva* aims to provide both within the realms of political practice and political thought.

While still marginal within political science, autoethnographies are increasingly used to provide nuance on the adoption of intersectional organizing approaches (see for example Tungohan 2019). Autoethnography blends “the personal and the scholarly” to strengthen theory building by drawing on researchers’ lived experiences (Burnier 2006, 412; Tungohan 2019). It is a “practice of critical reflection on the embodied experience of knowledge making” whose goal is to disrupt the “subject—object separation by placing the researcher’s experience at the center of the phenomenon under investigation” (Behl 2017, 584). This study also uses collaborative ethnography as it draws from dialogues amongst the coauthors designed to both provide thick descriptions of activist culture within the Puerto Rican Left and feminism as well as engage with existing literatures that speak to the experience of the *Colectiva*.

## A Brief History of La *Colectiva*

The *Colectiva* was founded in 2014. Initially, it emerged in response to immediate needs to develop self-defense efforts, defend sexual and reproductive rights, avoid deportations and anti-migrant violence, and develop animal rights work. Various news outlets reported that a serial rapist was attacking women in the communities of Río Piedras, Loíza, and Santurce. *Colectiva* founders organized to produce a counter-hegemonic narrative to challenge the dominant discourse of women as victims projected in news coverage and the patriarchal prescription for women to avoid going out alone at night as the solution to the problem of sexual assault.

One of the first actions that the organization took was to organize a feminist self-defense camp. This camp was inspired by the organization’s anti-capitalist and feminist orientation and the writings of scholars like Sharon Smith (2015) who place the phenomenon of sexual assault in the broader structural context of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> For *La Colectiva*, the idea of a self-defense camp was first to empower themselves, feel comfortable again walking alone and claiming the right to dress the way they wanted, and to interact with others the way they want. This camp also aimed to portray the workings of economic and political systems that govern them as predatory, sexist, racist, exploitative, and homophobic.

Beyond this immediate need, *Colectiva* founders were also driven to create an organization after realizing that the Puerto Rican socialist organizations in which they were active were not invested in doing intersectional work. Instead, feminism was perceived as women’s jobs or an auxiliary of women’s caucuses



in those organizations. For several months, Colectiva founders had to divide their time to engage in political work in separate spaces. During this time, they organized a campaign to oust the mayor of the municipality of Cidra, Wiso Malavé, who had been accused of sexual harassment. After various months of performing this work, organizers engaged in conversations about their lived experiences, about the issues that they wanted to confront as socialists and feminists, and the kind of political work that they wanted to do.

Members of Colectiva did not feel comfortable in long-standing feminist groups because these spaces did not address their class struggle. Moreover, they grew tired of arguing within their organizations for not incorporating an analysis of gender-based oppression in all their struggles. Like Combahee River Collective organizers, they were “not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that [was] not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution [would] guarantee [their] liberation” (Combahee River Collective 1977 [1995]). After realizing that their respective organizations were not prepared to listen to their claims and to work inside the organization to eradicate sexism, it became evident that they needed to organize autonomously and intersectionally. Initially, Colectiva founders held meetings to develop a structure and political orientation that went beyond denouncing the sexism that women, and especially working class women of color, suffer in Puerto Rico. They had two goals: (1) to break with all the patriarchal structures that they witnessed in their political organizations and (2) to fight all forms of oppressions simultaneously. As a result of those initial discussions, meetings, and actions, the Colectiva developed an organizing document and political statement titled *La Manifiesta*.<sup>2</sup> What came to define the Colectiva as a political project was the commitment to addressing issues of class, gender, and race.

### ***Enacting an Intersectional Synthesis for Popular Struggle***

La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción co-founders arrived at an intersectional organizing approach through experiences of exclusion and marginalization in the Left in Puerto Rico. From this position and experience, the Colectiva arrived and embraced Black feminist political theory and decolonial methodologies. These decolonial methodologies included efforts to build transnational solidarity and to develop analyses that contextualized the issues that marginalized groups face in relation to broader systems of oppression. Traditionally, feminist initiatives in Puerto Rico had been centered in legal and non-profit struggles that relegated grassroots organizing and movement-building mobilizing to the margins. The Colectiva endeavored to change that by building popular resistance and radical democracy.

Black and queer women who had been doing the political work within different socialist and pro-independence organizations in Puerto Rico made a political rupture and decided to create an autonomous organization that

centered and prioritized anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and decolonial struggles with a feminist perspective. This move created some tensions between male activists that wanted feminists to work within leftist organizations but failed, with some exceptions, to address gender and sexuality issues.

Intersectionality has been the Colectiva's guiding framework for its actions and discussions as it works to build and sustain movements that will eradicate multiple co-constitutive systems of oppression simultaneously. This intersectional consciousness has been the basis for their interest in collaborating with different groups and coalitions, so as to deepen and broaden their political impact. When organizers decided to leave the spaces where they were doing their political work they knew that La Colectiva was going to have to adopt an "intersectional feminism that recognizes that the different manifestations of oppression, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and capitalism interrelate" (La Manifiesta, 3).

### ***A Situated Intersectionality***

Situated intersectionality analysis is highly sensitive to the geographical, social, and temporal locations of the actors examined by it (Yuval-Davis 2015). The Colectiva engaged in a geographically, spatially, and temporally grounded political analysis that placed particular attention to the movements and political organizations that emerge in Puerto Rico and the kind of intersectionality that reaches those spaces. Organizers were intentional about avoiding the erasure of the Black feminist tradition of intersectionality and adopting limited notions of intersectionality associated with white liberalism. They recognized that intersectionality had been co-opted by various intellectual sectors and, during its travels, the term has been stripped of its radicalism and Black liberation tradition. Organizers affirm that it took years to develop organizational understandings of intersectionality and develop intersectional practices informed by these understandings. Adopting these intersectional practices, they argued, was not as simple as using inclusive language. They insisted, for instance, that acting and speaking intersectionally had to place racist violence as a focus of their political work.

Consonant with this commitment to developing a situated intersectional consciousness and praxis, organizers began to examine the relationships between colonialism and racialization of social groups in Puerto Rico. Organizers decried the tendency within the Puerto Rican Left, including the pro-independence movement, to ignore how colonialism uses racialization to mark bodies and perpetuate racial hierarchies. Ignoring race, they argued, was deemed advantageous by certain leftist sectors. Organizers problematized the notion that Puerto Ricans are white while recognizing that there are numerous privileges that exist within colonial contexts. They asked: who is the national subject? Traditionally, discourses of miscegenation or "mestizaje" have been

used to define the national subject, and thereby, to exclude Black people in Puerto Rico. These race relations are reproduced within social movements who ignore how racism is co-constitutive of colonialism.

Developing these analyses is in itself a subversive act under a colonial rule that obstructs critical thought. Under colonialism, activists face the challenge of developing understandings of the complexity of the systemic arrangements that produce forms of oppression. Leftists groups tend to adopt unidimensional and single axis approaches in their struggles. They may even develop diverse groups that, even in contexts of social group diversity, reproduce practices of exclusion within their organizations. These practices have led to a distancing between leftist organizers, grassroots groups, and frontline communities, as organizations remain predominantly white and organizers are unable to speak from a consciousness of lived experiences in these spaces. Consequently, notions of representation within movements and in electoral politics are based on a homogenous understanding of Puerto Rican ethnic and racial identity as mestizo. Given the absence of an intersectional and critical race lens, representational practices in Puerto Rico fail to upend practices of exclusion and domination.

### **La Colectiva's Political Impact: Building Popular and Radical Democracy**

The Colectiva has challenged actors pushing for the descent into technocracy, as private actors are effectively overtaking an array of public administration infrastructures. Challenges to this form of governance include the Colectiva's Plantón Feminista. The Plantón Feminista was both a direct action and policy advocacy campaign whereby Colectiva organizers put out a call for occupying the main entrance to the governor's mansion with the aim of getting him to sign an executive order declaring a state of emergency in response to the wave of gender-based violence that inflicted Puerto Rico. Through the Plantón Feminista, the Colectiva publicly held government and state agencies accountable for their inaction in the face of the increased precarity of life in Puerto Rico, and specifically, the crisis of gender-based violence. Recognizing government's deferment of its responsibility to address social problems, such as the crisis of gender-based violence, and the lack of public participation in efforts to address societal problems, the Colectiva drafted an executive order that declared a state of emergency in response to the crisis of gender-based violence. Within days of the Colectiva's publication of their draft Executive Order, the campaign had taken a life of its own. Thousands have taken to social media in support of the Order. News coverage of gender-based violence spiked and media outlets had adopted the frames that the Colectiva had fashioned. Celebrities and civil society leaders called on the governor to address the issue.

The Colectiva was largely alone in creating momentum around addressing gender-based violence. Beyond pushing the government to assume its responsibility to address this issue, the Colectiva wanted to create an intersectional model for resistance that resonated with the diversity of lived experiences in Puerto Rico and an imaginary of a better livelihood that they thought was possible to achieve through struggle. In their *Plantón Feminista* and their calls for a women's strike, they wanted to challenge the notion that groups must wait for opportune conditions for a struggle to arise. As other leftist groups questioned whether the conditions were set for broader nationwide mobilizations, the Colectiva found guidance in the words of June Jordan: "We are the ones we've been waiting for." Further, readings from the Feminist School resonated in these moments that the Colectiva was told that the conditions were not there for nation-wide disruptive actions, including Stuart Hall's (1986) call for a Marxism without guarantees. Rather than assume that emancipatory possibilities were already closed, the Colectiva enacted a praxis that sought to create political opportunities, a phenomenon that Aldon Morris (1986) identified in his study of the Civil Rights Movement. The Colectiva drew inspiration from reading the biography of radical black Caribbean activist Claudia Jones by Carole Boyce Davies. In this text, Boyce Davies explains how Jones was able to address the decolonization struggles, imperialism, racism, gender subordination, and class exploitation simultaneously, including cultural work. This intersectional synthesis built the basis for subsequent popular mobilizations in Puerto Rico. It did so through various means.

Whether people were in favor of or against the Colectiva's agenda and political work, the national narrative had shifted. News outlets went from deploying a discourse that rendered women as victims to discussing the role that police and the state had in the violence that Puerto Ricans experienced, popularizing the image of the protest, and showing that the people were willing to engage in agency through various means to achieve an emancipatory future.

During the *Plantón Feminista* and later, during the efforts to oust Governor Ricardo Rosselló, the Colectiva juxtaposed state narratives accusing activists of violence with the violence that the state inflicts upon society by perpetuating inequality and ignoring the claims of marginalized groups. In doing so, activists sought to disrupt hegemonic understandings of violence and replace them with narratives that assign responsibility to the state for the violence that it inflicts on the governed through neglect and its reification of inequality. The state inflicts this violence through various means, directly and indirectly, intentionally and unintentionally. They argued that gender-based violence is not only perpetrated through domestic and relationship violence but rather, it is the reflection of courses of action and inaction taken by government officials and the institutional arrangements that serve as their technologies of governance. Eventually, this chat became public. By then, the balance of forces had shifted

and various activist groups had prepared an intricate organizational infrastructure that supported the kind of popular resistance that the *Colectiva* sought to build. The *Colectiva* had developed a playbook for ousting political leaders, which it had deployed in its successful efforts to force Guaynabo Mayor Héctor O'Neill to resign.

In the midst of these popular struggles, commentators and news outlets were unable to identify who had organized actions. Puerto Rico became subsumed by a cascade of agency in the archipelago and in diasporic communities that was marked by tactical innovation, broad cross-sectoral coordination, and the politicization of previously non-political people, groups, and organizations.

## Conclusion

This chapter details the process by which feminist organizations can develop an intersectional synthesis for popular resistance. It draws from the experience and theorization of the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*. The *Colectiva* developed autonomous organizing so as to articulate an intersectional consciousness and praxis while doing coalition work with fellow leftist organizations. This praxis and coalition work set the basis for building a popular resistance to systemic forms of oppression and an imaginary for a just and emancipatory future. The *Colectiva* faced various challenges in its efforts to develop an intersectional consciousness and praxis. Some leftist groups resented their push for autonomous organizing and disagreed with their approach to organizing that aimed to build the conditions for struggle as opposed to waiting for them to arise.

The organization's arrival at an intersectional synthesis is an ongoing process that does not aim to reach a static political outcome or understanding of oppression. Rather, enacting an intersectional synthesis entailed recurrent analytical and agentic processes whereby organizers continuously reflected on their positionality, spatiality, and temporality. The development of intersectional consciousness diffused across various political organizations in the Puerto Rican Left, shifted public discourse around societal issues, and strengthened a broad organizational infrastructure that was able to coordinate subsequent mass mobilizations.

## Notes

- 1 Smith (2015) calls for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the economic system and sexism:

[r]esearchers are beginning to understand more fully the ways in which sexual assault is a more comprehensive product of capitalist social relations than most activists realized before. Capitalism relies not only on the alienation of labor and not only on explicit discrimination: it also produces personal alienation and the suppression of sexuality. In the absence of class and social struggle on a mass basis, individual people develop themselves in the “dog eat dog” mentality that

the system produces. Some people—not all, but some—of those in a position to physically overpower, intimidate, or coerce others into sex sometimes do so, at the expense of those who are overpowered, intimidated, or coerced into sex.

## 2 The Colectiva's Manifiesta states:

We are a Colectiva of Feminists from different walks of life, ages, and social groups who converged in the diverse manifestations of the resistance: The student struggle, socialist militance, anticolonialism, syndicalism, the struggle for LGBTIQ rights, students, workers, unemployed, and activists. We are people with a common focus: we are tired, jaded, and weary from racist and patriarchal colonialism. We are fed up with machista street harassment, we cannot take one more feminicide nor one more hate crime. We are people who walk with the deep wounds caused by intrafamilial patriarchy. We are tired of the overshadowing of gender equality issues in our own spaces of struggle; tired of a bourgeoisie feminism that does not represent us. From this exhaustion and tiredness, our group emerges with the will to fight machismo and motivated to build a front focused on overthrowing patriarchy, a patriarchy that will be overthrown if we too fight its allies, capitalism, eurocentrism, and imperialism (translated by authors).

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# 4

## PLACE, SPACE, AND THE ESPERANZA PEACE AND JUSTICE CENTER<sup>1</sup>

*Sara DeTurk*

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is a Latina-led organization that (among other things) challenges the use and control of urban spaces in San Antonio, Texas. It was created in 1987 when its Chicana lesbian founders were returning to the city of their childhoods after having been away for college. They sought to carve out a safe space to which they could bring their whole selves, within an urban context that marginalized them based on their gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and social class. “I was in transition,” said Gloria Ramírez, “and seeking to find a place for myself, particularly in expressing all of the parts of myself that I am, which is a Latina, a woman, a lesbian, an activist, an educator, working class.” “The idea,” said Graciela Sánchez, Esperanza’s executive director, “was to have people recognize that this is their home. And that we would come in whole to this space.”

As a multi-issue organization, Esperanza has, over the years, agitated against sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, Islamophobia, colonization, gentrification, and environmental destruction. It does so through protest and other forms of direct political activism, but also through cultural arts programming, historical preservation, and community organizing.

Its vision statement reads as follows:

The people of Esperanza dream of a world where everyone has civil rights and economic justice, where the environment is cared for, where cultures are honored and communities are safe. The Esperanza advocates for those wounded by domination and inequality — women, people of color, lesbians and gay men, the working class and poor. We believe in creating bridges between people by exchanging ideas and educating and empowering each other. We believe it is vital to share our visions of hope... we are esperanza.

.... We believe that by having a place with resources available we can come together to facilitate and provoke discussions and interactions among diverse groups of people who believe that together we can bring positive social change to our world and address the inherent interconnection of issues and oppressions across racial, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, health, physical and cultural boundaries.

*(Esperanza Peace and Justice Center 2019)*

This chapter will focus on three projects that illustrate how Esperanza has applied Chicana feminist praxis to promote social justice regarding the use and control of public spaces. One is a campaign to protect the public's right to march in the street. The second consists of efforts to protect public land from corporate takeover. The third comprises advocacy of historic preservation for historically Mexican American buildings and neighborhoods.

## Methodology

This study was originally conceived as an ethnography of the organization, focusing on Esperanza's social justice activist tactics and its alliances and coalitions with other organizations and individuals (DeTurk 2015). I proposed the study to Esperanza's leadership as participatory action research (PAR), which implied that it would be collaborative in terms of its framing, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. PAR is characterized by "shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action" (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000, 568). With the help of some of Esperanza's leaders, I immersed myself in 90 hours of organizational activities over the course of a year and conducted 22 formal interviews with people familiar with the organization. These included staff members, people who attended organization-affiliated events, leaders of ally organizations, and people who worked for local government and media.

My own standpoint was as a white, heterosexual woman who identified with the organization's political aims and whose research was focused on allyship. I was aware of Chicana feminist scholarship in this area, but it was only once I was deep into the study that I realized Chicana feminism constituted a theoretical tradition, and one which guided Esperanza's work. It is this tradition—which is deeply praxical in nature—that I describe here.

## Chicana Feminist Underpinnings of Organizing Tactics

In many respects, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is an exemplar of Chicana feminist approaches to social change. Whether because of its leaders' formal study of such approaches, their personal connections to movement leaders, or the examples of their mothers and grandmothers—all of which are affirmed by the Center's director—Esperanza's activist efforts reflect

(1) a Mestiza consciousness; (2) alliances and coalitions within multi-issue organizing; (3) a relational approach that favors behind-the-scenes leadership; and (4) an emphasis on cultural work that includes history, storytelling, and artistic programming. These Chicana feminist foundations have informed Esperanza's organizational tactics in (among other things) defending land for public use; ensuring access by women, Latinas, and other marginalized communities; and protecting Mexican American working-class neighborhoods.

### ***Mestiza Consciousness***

Integral to Esperanza's intellectual and political praxis was the work of queer Chicana feminist-scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa. In her edited volume, *Making Face, Making Soul: Hacienda Caras*, Anzaldúa (1990) introduced the concept of "La Conciencia de la Mestiza" in terms of the hybridity, multiplicity, complexity, and ambiguity characteristic of border dwelling:

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of 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 to the planet....

(380)

Mestiza consciousness is an awareness of oppressive social dynamics to which it responds with both overt and covert resistance (Lugones 2003; Sandoval 1991). It is also polyvocal, reflecting Sandoval's (1991) concept of "differential consciousness," which she describes in terms of the ability to shift between languages, communication styles, attitudes and identities according to political contingencies. This is evidenced not only by Esperanza staff's fluid interweaving of English with Spanish, but also through code-switching among emotional registers and between prose and song. In terms of identity labels, too, Graciela Sánchez told me that she embraces "lesbian" as well as "queer," and refers to herself alternately as "Chicana," "Latina," and "Mexicana" depending on her audience.

### ***Intersectionality, Alliance Building, and Multi-Issue Organizing***

As Chicana feminist scholars (e.g. Blackwell 2011; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981) have documented, women of color—especially those who are lesbian and/or poor or working class—have been subjected to multiple, interlocking

oppressions. Blackwell observed “that their experience of economic exploitation was both racial and gendered and noted how racial hatred and discrimination were constructed along class, gender, and sexual dimensions” (189). Scholar-activists such as Sandoval (1991), moreover, articulated how this marginalization permeated both the civil rights and second-wave feminist movements in the United States. Such exclusions led to the emergence of new strands of feminism such as U.S. Third World feminism, women of color feminism, womanism, and Chicana feminism. Activism under these mantles has been characterized by intersectionality, multi-issue organizing, and alliance building (Blackwell 2011; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981).

As for the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, Graciela Sánchez reflected on her vision of “programming that allows people to really think about the integration of issues, how we’re all interconnected, [and] we can’t look at issues as single issues.” Marisol Cortez was another staff member who saw Esperanza’s role as one in which the organization could “further the work of social movements that connect a broad variety of oppressions, including race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability, but also colonialism and exploitation of the earth.” She observed that “so much of what we do is all about the same sort of root conditions, namely capitalist land use decisions and a colonialist relationship to the land.” Her preservation work with Esperanza, she said, helped her to see connections between environmental protection, the preservation of local traditions and knowledge (especially that of San Antonio’s Westside), and ethnic pride.

Reflective of this intersectional, holistic view of social issues and social change, Esperanza’s work is deeply embedded in alliances and coalitions with others. The Center works closely with scores of other civil rights, peace, labor, environmental, and arts organizations, as well as thousands of individual supporters. These relationships are often challenging, since few of the other organizations share the same, broad set of values and priorities, and coalitions are often subject to sexist, heterosexist, and racist dynamics. They are also, though, a rich source of support. Esperanza’s network includes people with wide varieties of skills, personal contacts, and political power, and can be quickly mobilized to engage in issue advocacy.

### ***Relational, Behind-the Scenes Leadership***

Numerous writers including Blackwell (2011), Castañeda (2012), Méndez-Negrete (1995), and Rosales (2000) have characterized Chicana and Latina leaders in terms of collectivism, interdependence, empowerment, consensus, lack of hierarchy, and prioritization of principles over personal advancement. Latina leadership, in particular, emphasizes connections, dialogue, and relationships. “These connections,” according to Navarro (2008), “might involve connections between people, connections between private troubles and public issues, and connections that lead to political awareness and action” (32).

In ways that will be illustrated below, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has consistently enacted this relational approach to leadership within its activism. Community members that include Esperanza's frequent opponents as well as their allies affirm that the organization is never ego-driven, and is quick to nurture younger organizations by giving them the spotlight.

### ***Storytelling/Historicity***

Another pillar of Esperanza's activism is an epistemological approach which I call "historicity." By this I point not only to the importance of stories, but also the significance of lived experience more generally, respect for the wisdom of elders, and the historical contextualization of power relations. Personal narratives, according to de Certeau (1988), "perform the 'everyday' acts of resistance that are often characteristic of groups with limited access to traditional forms of power" (691). For Chicanas in particular, storytelling is a means to assert identity and to share, demonstrate, and exert power. As Flores (2000) states:

Narratives contain in them a dimension of oppositionality, in that through stories, communities create discourses about themselves. Through stories, told in the vernacular of the people, the marginalized and disenfranchised select those portraits of themselves that they want in circulation; their stories can at least compete with if not replace dominant representations with which they do not agree.... Both the act of story telling itself as well as the story as a text that becomes available to others are resistive strategies in that the stories prevent the forgetting of history.

(691)

Chicana testimonio, therefore, "is rooted in oppositional consciousness and resistance to racial, gender, sexual, and other forms of institutionalized violence that permeate the fabric of life in the United States" (Castañeda 2012), and is "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure" (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 17).

Testimonio is central to the work of Esperanza. The historical consciousness of working-class Mexican American communities is fostered through photographic displays, oral history collection, historic neighborhood tours, and Dia de los Muertos celebrations. Moreover, Esperanza organizes monthly activities that include concerts, art exhibits, folk art and craft fairs, film screenings, readings, community pláticas, and other cultural programming. This programming is intended for audiences who come to the Center to reflect, learn, and engage in dialogue, as well as to be entertained. Other programming is more explicitly interventionist, and Esperanza occasionally takes it to the street. One memorable campaign was a series of skits that the organization staged around the city

when their existence was being threatened by the elimination of public arts funding. These folkloric performances, consisting of satirical representations of the actions of local politicians, took over public spaces (including the city's Main Plaza in front of the cathedral) in order to mobilize the citizenry to action (Rivera-Servera 2012). Whether as consciousness-raising, community building, or public protest, Esperanza's work as a Chicana feminist organization has relied centrally on storytelling.

## San Antonio's Spatial-Political Context

San Antonio is arguably the birthplace of the Chicano movement and is a Latinx<sup>2</sup> majority city (63%, according to the San Antonio Department of Planning and Community Development (2012)). Since the independence of Texas from Mexico in 1836, though—and its eventual takeover by the United States—political power in the city has been largely controlled by an Anglo minority that commodifies Mexican culture for the benefit of the tourist economy (de Oliver 2004). This has led to a spatial arrangement in which the downtown core—the original home of the city's Mexican American population—has been largely emptied of actual Latinx residents in favor of an artificial “villita,” and separated from the newer minority neighborhoods by a network of highways (Rivera-Servera 2012). Development continues to be controlled by a business establishment which prioritizes the interests of the city's white neighborhoods and promotes gentrification of those populated by people of color.

As a multi-issue social change organization, Esperanza engages in a broad diversity of political causes and activities ranging from organizing a women's march to programming concerts and art exhibits to sponsoring a ceramics cooperative for low-income women. Increasingly, though, their recent efforts have emphasized the control and use of urban spaces.

## Importance of Space

For the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, the importance of space is three-fold. First, as noted above, the Center serves as a “safe space” for members of marginalized communities to feel welcome and whole. It is a place invested with shared meaning and value, and has an identity which reflects the social relations that exist both within and outside their building at 922 San Pedro Avenue. In this way, it can be seen as what Licona (2012) calls a “third space”—a space both “of shared understanding and meaning making” (13) and of struggle and contestation. It is a place with interstitial, intersectional, and contradictory ways of knowing and being in the world reflective of mestiza consciousness. These ways of knowing and being are mutually constitutive with borderlands rhetorical practices which “work to consciously reimagine

and reconfigure community and community agendas that are attentive to difference” (Licona, 132).

Since Esperanza’s acquisition of its building in 1993, secondly, their ownership of it has also constituted significant social, political, and economic power. They are assured a proverbial place at the table when they host political coalition meetings, and are able to earn income by occasionally renting out space to others. Perhaps most importantly, they can host subversive and sometimes controversial programs without fear of being evicted, which they had suffered in 1993 when they were renting space from a Catholic organization.

The third way in which Esperanza recognizes the importance of space is in its campaigns to reclaim urban areas on behalf of the public, especially marginalized communities such as women, people of color, and the working class. Increasingly, the organization has oriented its efforts toward this reclamation, advocating for historical and communal interests rather than individualism, consumerism, and gentrification. Their work resonates with David Harvey’s (2008) article, “The Right to the City,” in which he writes:

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is... one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.

(23)

Over the past 30 years, the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has committed itself to the defense of public spaces, especially in ways that seek to restore, protect, or enhance communities that have been oppressed. They have done so in ways that reflect the principles of Chicana feminist organizing.

This chapter highlights three examples of Esperanza’s work concerning public space. The first, in conjunction with the “Free Speech Coalition,” is a campaign to protect the public’s right to march in the street. The second, in support of the “Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group” is resistance to the corporate takeover of city-owned land that had been designated for a park. The third, as a central player in the “Westside Preservation Alliance,” is marking of the cultural significance and advocacy of the historic preservation of Mexican American buildings and working-class neighborhoods. The following section, using a Chicana feminist lens, examines ways in which the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center works to claim and protect public spaces through these historic preservation and cultural organizing projects.



## Application of Chicana Feminist Praxis to Spatial Social Justice Advocacy

### *The Free Speech Coalition*

Since 1990, Esperanza has taken the lead in organizing an International Women's Day march in San Antonio (Figure 4.1). In 2007, though, the city government enacted an ordinance requiring organizers of marches to pay thousands of dollars for police oversight. The city made exceptions for some events, but the International Women's Day march was not among these. This was an especially sensitive issue for many Latinas, whose experiences had taught them that to be in the street (or to be in public at all) was shameful, and put them at risk of being harassed or suspected of prostitution. At the same time, noted one Center staff member, "Esperanza's power is only the power of people to place our bodies into those spaces of power."

As observed by queer Chicana feminist author Cherríe Moraga (1993):

Land remains the common ground for all radical action. But land is more than ... territory.... For immigrant and native alike, land is also the factories where we work, the water our children drink, and the housing project where we live. For women, lesbians, and gay men, land is that physical mass called our bodies. Throughout "las Americas," all these "lands" remain under occupation by an Anglo-centric, patriarchal, imperialist United States.

(173)

In response to the "parade ordinance," therefore, Esperanza organized a "Free Speech Coalition" and launched a campaign to overturn the ordinance (Esperanza Peace and Justice Center 2019).

When the organization first raised its objections to the ordinance, city council members offered to include the International Women's Day march among events that were sponsored by the city (which meant that fees would be waived). Esperanza was adamant, though, that the issue was one of principle, and filed a lawsuit to stop enforcement of the ordinance. As they proclaimed on the Esperanza website and a Free Speech Coalition Facebook page (San Antonio Free Speech Coalition 2006), "the Free Speech Coalition and International Women's Day March Committee believe that NO ONE should have to pay to march. We should ALL have access to the streets!" They explained:

Traditionally, the streets have been a "public forum" for communal speech, with entire communities coming out to demand better wages, healthcare, education, and peace, and to express our views. With over

90% of mainstream media owned by only five or six wealthy, right-wing corporations, marches are the only way for poor people, people of color, women, queer people, immigrants, politically progressive people, and other disenfranchised groups to get our messages out.

*(San Antonio Free Speech Coalition 2006)*

Esperanza's efforts against the parade ordinance took various forms. First, they gathered hundreds of individual allies and over 25 organizations—including labor, environmental, ethnic, religious, and cultural arts organizations—to form the Free Speech Coalition, and held monthly meetings over the course of many years. (One staff member described a four-hour-long meeting in which participants strategized to come up with a name for the campaign that would highlight connections among various social justice issues.) By invoking dual meanings of the word “free,” the name of the coalition not only challenged the monetary fee, but framed control of urban space in terms of freedom of speech. The coalition, moreover, adopted a slogan, “Las calles no se callan” (“Our streets will not be silenced”) which drew attention to the traditional silencing of women—especially Latinas—in the public sphere, and asserted the need for women to have a public voice. Buttons, bumper stickers, and lawn signs were produced in three different languages, and can still be seen around town more than ten years later. Articles were published in *La Voz*, Esperanza's monthly newsjournal (e.g., Esperanza Peace and Justice Center 2008; Kastely 2008), and the Facebook page was created.

As for the lawsuit, Esperanza enlisted a historian and other women from various communities to testify about the ordinance's effects on workers, immigrants, Muslims, and people with disabilities (Kastely 2008). Although the ordinance was upheld initially and upon appeal to the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, in 2018 the City Council overturned the ordinance under continued pressure by the Coalition (Baugh 2018).

The International Women's Day march, in the meantime, persisted. Its leadership, which rotated among Esperanza staff and its coalition partners, settled into an unspoken agreement with the city government such that the marchers would not pay the fee required by the ordinance, and the city would not seek to collect it.

The Free Speech Coalition exemplified Chicana feminist praxis in a number of ways. First, it embraced a holistic, long-term approach to organizing that emphasized connections across issues such as public space, freedom of speech, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. It further promoted and embodied intersectional alliance building by bringing together different organizations and constituencies, and its decision-making was characterized by collectivism, interdependence, consensus, lack of hierarchy, and elevation of the less powerful. Its messaging relied on the amplification of women's personal



**FIGURE 4.1** International Women’s Day march. Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center.

stories and educating the public about the issues’ historical contexts. Reflective of Mestiza consciousness, the campaign embraced both playfulness in its slog-  
aning and multivocality by distributing materials in three different languages.

### ***Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group***

Another coalition in which Esperanza has been instrumental is the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group, which is committed to claiming urban space for public use. The Hays Street Bridge is a historically and architecturally significant structure on the city’s historically African American Eastside. It offers a beautiful view of the city’s downtown, and sits adjacent to a large plot of land that was municipally owned and had been promised to an Eastside community group as future park land. When the land was instead sold for development as a brewery, the Restoration Group leapt into action with a political campaign alternately entitled “Private Hands Off Public Lands” and “Puente Para La Gente” (“Bridge for the People”).

Nettie Hinton, one of the original leaders of the group, described to me the origins of Esperanza’s involvement. Graciela Sánchez, she said, had reached out to her to include more African Americans in some of Esperanza’s programming,

and once this relationship was established, Esperanza took the initiative to offer legal assistance to the bridge preservation effort. They played a pivotal role in organizing protests and press releases, packing meetings of the City Council and the Zoning Commission, and providing legal representation for a lawsuit. They were careful, though, to keep the Eastside residents at the forefront of the campaign, according to Gary Houston, another Restoration Group principal. Houston marveled at the fact that Esperanza's leadership was "totally devoid of vanity," and told me "I don't know where we'd be" without them.

One event they helped to organize was a "performative action" in 2012. In accordance with Esperanza's community orientation and Chicana feminist emphasis on storytelling through performance and the arts, they invited neighborhood residents and allies to offer expressions of the bridge's significance. Community members responded with offerings of poetry, song, dance, and testimonio about the bridge's importance to the community as a public space (Figure 4.2). This two-hour-long event served to draw public attention to their central argument that the bridge and the land around it should be preserved as public land. It inspired a short film that was made and later shown at a City Council meeting, and was probably instrumental in a notable uptick in recreational use of the bridge.



**FIGURE 4.2** Performative action on the Hays Street Bridge. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Sara DeTurk.

Long after most observers had accepted the inevitability of the land eventually becoming home to a microbrewery—and later an apartment complex—Esperanza and the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group continue to fight, and in March of 2019 they prevailed at the Texas Supreme Court (Dimmick 2019a). By the end of 2019, plans to establish a park were being implemented. At the City Council meeting at which they were finalized, council member Rey Saldaña was quoted as praising the final agreement. He “credited the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group and Esperanza Center for taking their fight to City Hall and to the courts. ‘We’re here because of you,’” he said (Dimmick 2019b). Esperanza’s involvement with the fight to preserve the land around the Hays Street Bridge as public space has been reflective of Chicana feminism in several ways. Like the Free Speech Coalition campaign, the Hays Street Bridge efforts constitute a commitment to establish and maintain an interracial coalition, to thwart gentrification on behalf of the common good, and to speak truth to power in the interest of social justice. In terms of communication, Esperanza’s approach embodies relational, behind-the-scenes leadership; they offered their experience, knowledge, and other resources to a less established group while insisting that the neighborhood residents be front and center. Their rhetorical tactics, finally, epitomize Mestiza consciousness and storytelling through the creative use of song, dance, poetry, prose, and testimonio.

### **Westside Preservation Alliance**

The neighborhood which has most consistently retained San Antonio’s Mexican and Mexican American history is the city’s Westside. As a poor neighborhood, though, it has struggled against efforts to raze historic structures in the interest of economic development. Esperanza, in the interest of historic preservation and celebration and protection of Latinx cultural spaces, has engaged in campaigns to protect historic buildings and to educate the community about the neighborhood’s past, and has—through the purchase of real estate and creation of a cultural center—established an important presence in the neighborhood.

One component of these efforts has consisted of public awareness raising campaigns and pressure on city government. In collaboration with other groups, Esperanza protested the demolition of “La Gloria,” a historic Westside dance hall; “Casa Maldonado,” a house whose owner had been an important Latino community leader (Figure 4.3); and Lerma’s dance hall, considered to be “the oldest conjunto music venue in the country,” according to staff member Susana Segura (see Bennett 2014). Another target (though not on the Westside) was the building housing the San Antonio headquarters of Univision, known as the nation’s “birthplace of Spanish-language broadcasting” (Olivo 2013). Esperanza deployed a combination of technical research, civil disobedience, tenacity in the face of city government, and mobilization of allies in their persuasive efforts on behalf of these structures. In the case of Lerma’s, they bought the property.



**FIGURE 4.3** Activists protesting the proposed demolition of the Casa Maldonado. Photo Credit: Courtesy of Esperanza Peace and Justice Center.

While not all of these efforts were successful, the loss of La Gloria led to the establishment of the Westside Preservation Alliance, “a consortium of community activists, scholars and residents who realize that San Antonio’s future is built upon San Antonio’s past and history should not be erased based on decisions made without the input or concern for those whose lives are effected by change” (Esperanza Peace and Justice Center 2019). The Alliance (led by Esperanza) defines “El Westside de San Antonio” as “both a defined geographic place and a state of mind.” Today, in response to the displacement of working-class Mexican American residents through gentrification, the Alliance has launched a campaign entitled “Mi Barrio No Se Vende.” Among its efforts are resistance to the destruction of the city’s first public housing complex and protection of the open nature of the neighborhood’s main plaza.

Also under the auspices of preservation of the Westside (though independent from the Preservation Alliance), Esperanza now owns a plot of land at the corner of Colorado and Guadalupe Streets. Called “El Rinconcito de Esperanza” or “the little corner of hope,” it contains a “Casa de Cuentos” (House of Stories) for oral history gatherings, a second small building used as a mini-museum, a third building for Esperanza’s MujerArtes ceramics cooperative, and a courtyard for other cultural programming. In front of the casa is a “little free library” where community members are encouraged to exchange books, and along the streets outside of the rinconcito, early 20th Century photos of the neighborhood’s residents are hung as large banners. Each November, the rinconcito hosts a Dia de los Muertos celebration, and in April they hold a “Paseo por el Westside” which includes historic neighborhood tours as well as workshops, music, and food. All of these activities serve to strengthen and

celebrate the culture and history of the neighborhood. The organization's website describes the photo and oral history project as follows:

*En Aquellos Tiempos... Fotohistorias del Westside* is an ongoing celebration of the traditions and strength of the gente del Westside of San Antonio, Tejas. Through community pláticas in which elders share photos and stories about the Westside, musica, comida, and an outdoor historic photo installation, this project honors and reclaims the history and culture of the Westside.

(*Esperanza Peace and Justice Center 2019*)

It was during these community pláticas that the inspiration for the campaign to protect the Casa Maldonado emerged.

Former staff member Marisol Cortez explained the importance of these activities for activism:

Testimonio, the use of personal narrative, I see as really central to what happens here.... One of the chief functions of Esperanza as an organization is to give voice to what has been excluded from the historical record, what has been silenced, erased, marginalized... and to create a space where people feel able to articulate those experiences as valuable. Like when folks meet at the Casa de Cuentos, it's a kind of story-centered organizing. Because then we call on all of those people who share their stories to come before City Council, and talk about why they don't want a building to be torn down, or why it's important to preserve cultural memory, or, cultural spaces. But the work of it is actually the sharing of stories, and empowering people through getting them to see that their history is valuable. ... People can't do those sort of traditional organizing things, like going before power and contesting it, if they don't have a sense that that their history is meaningful, that their culture, or identities are valuable, and precious, and that they've been put down. So if that work doesn't take place first, in those circles where people are sharing stories, then how can you do the other stuff?

Together, Esperanza's Rinconcito and their leadership within the Westside Preservation Alliance demonstrate the organization's leadership in preserving cultural memory in the spaces of San Antonio's historically Mexican and Mexican American Westside neighborhood. Again, they exemplify Chicana feminist praxis in their polyvocality (leveraging a diverse toolbox of activist practices), alliance building, and story-centered organizing. Story-centered organizing, here, has multiple connotations. On the one hand (and connected with polyvocality), it reflects multimodal artistic expression through ceramics,



photography, music, and oral storytelling. Importantly, though, it also emphasizes history and culture in ways that strengthen residents' identification with their neighborhood and ethnic identity. These activities, together, contribute powerfully to the Westside's sense of community and empowerment.

## Conclusion

Esperanza's efforts on behalf of urban spaces in general, and San Antonio's historic Latinx Westside in particular, comprise a combination of real estate purchases, political campaigns, and community education. As exemplified by their work with the Free Speech Coalition, the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Project, and the Westside Preservation Alliance, they also reflect approaches to organizing that are characteristic of Chicana feminist praxis. These include story-centered organizing; relational, behind-the-scenes leadership; and alliance-building within multi-issue organizing—all of which are informed by a mestiza consciousness. Esperanza's work is deployed in—and on behalf of—San Antonio's urban spaces, to celebrate and protect Latinx heritage, to contest the gentrifying effects of neoliberal capitalism, and to affirm the ownership of public space by the people, for the people.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter is adapted from DeTurk, Sara. 2015. *Activism, Alliance Building, and the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- 2 Following Ballysingh, Zerquera, Turner, and Sáenz (2017), I use the term "Latinx" in line with contemporary gender-inclusive language.

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# 5

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

### Amigas Latinas' Pláticas as a Site of Transformative Knowledge Production

*Lourdes Torres*

The power of pláticas is clear from the following statement by a Chicago-based Latina lesbian who discovered Amigas Latina in the mid-1990s:

Most of the things I attended were pláticas. And so I was like, 'I'll go there because it's close to the house.' But I had already by that time, told a small circle of my girlfriends. Straight girlfriends. One kept saying, 'just go, just go.' And I was telling her, 'I wish I could take you.' I was scared. I was scared. And then when I showed up, everybody was nice. But there were a couple of women that were like, 'oh, fresh meat' kinda look. So it was a little scary. But I saw all different ages. It was about self-esteem. And Norma was leading the plática, so she had a board and started writing stuff. And there was a room...it was bigger than this one. And it was packed! There were women on the floor, women on chairs, women on sofas. And they had food. It's like when you came in, booom! There's the food. And everybody was bringing something. Whether it was something to drink, or dessert...And that was it. I loved it!

*(Aurora Pineda 2013)<sup>1</sup>*

Amigas Latinas was a Chicago-based Latina lesbian and bisexual organization that ran from 1995 to 2015. It provided community, advocacy, and education for Chicago queer Latinas. Over its 20-year life span, Amigas Latinas evolved from a small support group to a multifaceted 501(c)(3) nonprofit that offered advocacy, a wide range of programs, and support services for Latina LGBTQ women.<sup>2</sup> Arguably, one of the reasons for the long and successful run of the

organization was the centrality of its popular pláticas. As one of the founders, Evette Cardona explains, regardless of how big the organization grew, pláticas was the bread and butter activity that held the group together over its long trajectory.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I provide a history and analysis of pláticas across the existence of *Amigas Latinas*. I argue that pláticas represented a queer transformative praxis that provided women community, fellowship, intellectual growth, empowerment, and healing.

Juan Carlos Gonzalez and Eduardo Portillos (2011) offer a generative definition of the plática, “We define plática as intimate conversations” (Godinez, 2006), and intellectual dialogue (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2006; Moreno, 2003). The underlying contention of these authors is that the plática is useful and necessary to unbury and advance Chicana/o intellectual knowledge on theory and methods, cultural knowledge, civic participation, and the effects of the schooling process” (p. 19). Chicano and Chicana scholars have long written about the importance of pláticas in Chicano culture. Two bodies of literature explore the relevance of pláticas as pedagogy and method. Gonzalez and Portillos (2011) describe how pláticas have been taken up by Chicano/Latino teachers in the classroom setting to create a space within predominantly white classrooms where marginalized students can use their cultural capital as a means to engage in critical thinking about their place in the world. Meanwhile, Cindy Fierros and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2016) review the genealogy of pláticas as a sociological research method and methodology within Chicano/Latino scholarship. This stream of research foregrounds how cultural practice can be used in research with Latina/o populations to learn about a community while respecting and validating cultural norms and practices.

Fierros and Bernal (2016) identify five principles of Chicana/Latina feminist methodology that centers on pláticas, which is constructive for my analysis. They argue that such a methodology is grounded in Chicana/Latina feminist theory and recognizes participants in pláticas as co-constructing knowledge producers. Additionally, they posit that such a methodology is grounded in everyday lived realities which values women’s experiences and the interconnectedness of such experiences. Through the sharing of embodied knowledge pláticas can then become a potential place of healing. Finally, they suggest plática methodology is grounded in reciprocal relationships among participants and a commitment to reflexivity. In the context of health, Angie Chabram-Dernersesian and Adela de la Torre (2008) similarly argue that pláticas have a restorative function, “When we speak and are listened to, we are able to begin healing the wounds created by our past and present lives. Pláticas open the door to healing in ways that a simple medical encounter cannot” (p. 164).

In the following chapter, I provide the context for Amigas Latinas' pláticas, explain how they began, discuss their process, and introduce some of their main themes. I then discuss how Amigas Latinas' pláticas exemplify the principles identified by Fierros and Bernal (2016) as a methodology for community building in a specifically queer context. These principles suggest that pláticas are informed by Latina feminist theory, are co-constructed by women as knowledge producers, are grounded in the women's everyday lived realities, and are potential places of healing through the sharing of embodied knowledge. Pláticas are also grounded in reciprocal relationships among participants and reflexivity. I argue that Amigas Latinas queered the plática model and created a space for women loving women in Chicago. They provided a site where Latinas could challenge heteronormative norms, and investigate and construct an intersectional queer identity. I use the term queer not only as a noun or adjective to signal an identity or same-sex orientation but also as a verb to suggest a disrupting of homonormativity writ large. Queering means examining assumptions and disrupting expectations of all types (Acosta 2018).

This chapter is based on interviews with Amigas Latinas that I conducted over the last ten years to write about the history of the organization, as well as a rich archive of flyers and newsletters gathered by Evette Cardona, one of the founding members of the organization.<sup>4</sup> I also engage participant observation as I was an Amigas Latinas member for 15 years; I served on the board from 2006 to 2010 in various capacities such as programming chair, secretary, and president.

## How Amigas Latinas' Pláticas Developed

Amigas Latinas' tradition of pláticas was modeled after an activity organized by queer women of color. According to Cardona, women of color in Chicago had been hosting brunches since 2004 so that queer women of different nationalities and races could come together and meet. Women of All Colors Together (WACT) was created to give these women an opportunity to socialize outside of bars, which were often the only spaces where they could meet other lesbians. Cardona, a founding member of WACT, was inspired to organize a similar group exclusively for Latinas. She along with other Latinas who attended WACT meetings decided to form their own brunch group specifically for Latinas.

Amigas Latinas was born in July 1995. An invitation in *Nightlines*, published by *Windy City Times*, billed the first gathering as an opportunity to meet other women and explore what it meant to be Latina and lesbian or bisexual. From its beginning, women were invited not only to enjoy a potluck and informally chat, which was the WACT model, but also to share in a structured

conversation among Latinas. This pattern was set from the beginning and persisted throughout the 20 years Amigas Latinas existed. According to Amigas Latinas' first newsletter, thirteen women showed up to the first meeting where they discussed what they wanted to see in a Latina lesbian group. The newsletter indicated that

There was a general consensus that besides wanting and needing to socialize with other Latinas, there was a strong need for a discussion/support group in our community and that we should try to maintain a balance of structure and spontaneity within it – no easy task but one that the women present seemed very committed to working toward.

*(Undated Amigas Latinas Newsletter from Evette Cardona's Archive)*

The women agreed to discuss the same topic again at the next meeting. The third meeting in August 1995 was organized around the topic, "Latinas (and Latinos) supporting each other – Do we and how/ Why don't we and why not? How can we if we want to?" The flyer announcing this meeting reminded participants that "...there are no right and wrong answers, only opinions and thoughts shared in a safe environment and hopefully some good ideas generated to get beyond the why's and why not's" (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona's Archive).

Amigas Latinas' pláticas became popular very quickly, as was evident in a July 1996 newsletter reporting that in just one year the number of women receiving newsletters and plática invitations rose from the teens to more than fifty. It should be noted that it was from a plática that the group decided to develop into a more formal organization that went beyond the monthly potluck discussion group. In other words, the evolution of the organization from a small potluck support group to a multidimensional nonprofit advocacy organization was theorized within these pláticas. In November 1998, Amigas convened a plática to discuss what they learned in "EL Sexto Encuentro," an annual conference held in Chicago sponsored by The National Latino/a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Organization (LLEGO).<sup>5</sup> Many Amigas Latinas helped organize this regional meeting. The plans for establishing the first Amigas Latinas Steering Committee which helped the organization develop into a nonprofit in 2003 emerged from this plática.

## **The Pláticas' Structure**

The basic structure of the pláticas remained consistent across the organization's 20 years. Meetings were held on Sunday afternoons for three hours, from two to five, in the home of participants who volunteered to host. The women first enjoyed a potluck lunch and chatted in small groups and were

then called together for a shared conversation. It was especially helpful in the early years, as the organization was finding its footing, that two of the main organizers, Evette Cardona and Juanita Crespo had a background in social work. They were experienced conversation facilitators and created a robust structure for pláticas. Right from the beginning, they set ground rules of mutual respect and helped defuse conflicts as they arose. As Mona Noriega noted about Cardona,

She was really good about providing a safe space. So she's the one that to me the reason—the success of it was the warmth that she was able to invite and offer safety. But also setting up ground rules And that was really good it was — that really offered safety around difficult topics and even if you didn't have — even if you had conflicting views there was safety in exploring where that view originated from and how you might change or and so it was really um it was really — very enriching I felt.<sup>6</sup>

When uncomfortable topics or comments emerged in pláticas, they were addressed with openness and sensitivity. In the early years, as each plática came to an end, participants were asked to suggest topics for subsequent meetings as well as volunteer to host. Each month, flyers were sent to all members identifying the topic for the forthcoming plática, along with the address of the host. Participants were encouraged to come and actively participate or just listen. Diversity of opinion was always encouraged and promoted.

### **Plática Themes**

A review of the newsletters and flyers gathered over 20 years reveals a rich and varied range of topics discussed during pláticas. Topics can be grouped according to the following categories: pláticas on identity which included coming out, dealing with race and class, passing as heterosexual, lesbian parenting, etc. Recurring pláticas on relationships focused on challenges and rewards of dating and sex. Pláticas on health included topics such as curbing smoking and drinking addiction, confronting domestic violence, and strengthening mental health. Holiday-themed pláticas occurred yearly to celebrate special days such as Christmas, Three Kings' Day, Mother's Day, and Valentine's Day. At times, pláticas were centered on a shared viewing and discussion of Latina/o focused films or documentaries. There were also pláticas whose subjects were not fixed ahead of time, but rather were billed as open-ended or surprise topics. (See Table 5.1 for a list of topics with some representative examples of the pláticas over the years.)

**TABLE 5.1** List of Topics with Some Representative Examples of the Pláticas over the Years

<i>Date</i>	<i>Plática Topics</i>
<i>Identity</i>	
September 1996	“La familia” meanings, the different feelings it generates, “familia by birth” versus “familia by choice”
March 1997	How does “passing” affect Latina lesbian and bisexual women?
October 2006	The power of being transgender and Latino,
July 2007	Cuando sea mayor y Sabia voy a.....
<i>Sex</i>	
March 1996	Let’s talk about sex
October 1996	Juguetes sexuales in the house
September 1998	Amigas’ sex clinic and consumer report
September 2005	Hablemos de sexo: Let’s talk about sex
June 2009	Loving yourself, loving your body
<i>Health</i>	
July 1998	Issues on mental health & acculturation with Hispanic lesbians
March 1999	Alcohol and substance abuse issues and Latinas.
October 2000	Domestic violence and Latinas
March 2001	Nuestra salad; Breaking barriers, save sex and Latina lesbians
April 2009	Linking spiritual and emotional health
<i>Relationships</i>	
February 1996	Romancing the Latina
September 1997	Dating 101 Latina style
September 1999	From “just friends” to “dating” and all that gray area in between
November 2001	Smart dating & improving relationships
<i>Holidays</i>	
December 1996	Do the salsa in Christmas: Free salsa lesson
May 1996	Lesbian parenting – what makes a mom successful, what is it like to date a mom, challenges and experiences of parenting.
November 1997	Día de Los Muertos” what it means to folks
December 2005	The holidays – all I want for Xmas is.....

*(Continued)*



<i>Date</i>	<i>Plática Topics</i>
<i>Coming out</i>	
July 1996	How out is out?— the good, the bad & the ugly
July 1997	Coming out – a lifelong process: Does it ever get easier?
<i>Open</i>	
June 1997	¿En qué estás pensando?
January 1998	¿Adónde vamos, Amigas Latinas in the year 1998 and beyond?
January 2000	Looking back and moving ahead
September 2006	New member plática
<i>Films and discussion</i>	
February 1999	Palante! Young Lords
June 2000	If these walls could talk
Oct. 2005	Desi's looking for a new girl
July 2007	A girl like me: The Gwen Araujo story
<i>Workshops</i>	
April 1999	Parenting & custody workshop (Lambda Legal Defense)
April 2000	Free legal workshop: Planning for yourself, your partner, and your children
April 2001	Sex & real estate: Love at first sight: A buyer and sellers seminar

## Pláticas and Queer Latina Feminist Theory

Many plática topics, particularly those that centered on identity, created spaces where women came together to understand the complexities of the intersections of their racial, gender, class, and sexual identities. Amigas engaged with topics such as the challenges of being lesbian in a Latina/o community, aging as Latina lesbians, and dealing with racism, classism, and homophobia. In the company of other Latina lesbians, participants developed theories using their own experiences, and crafted a new language to discuss these ideas. In this sense, pláticas embodied the idea of 'theory of the flesh'. According to lesbian theorists Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (1981):

A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic born of necessity. Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions of our experience:

We are the colored in a white feminist movement.  
 We are the feminists among the people of our culture.  
 We are often the lesbians among the straight.  
 We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in  
 our own words.

(p. 23).

The women who participated in these discussions were often conversing about their sexual and racial/ethnic identities for the first time with others who shared similar aspects of these experiences. This was no small feat especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s when such spaces did not exist in Chicago. As Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) describes, theory is “a set of knowledges,” she adds,

because we are not allowed to enter discourse, because we are often disqualified and excluded from it, because what passes for theory these days is forbidden territory for us, it is vital that we occupy theorizing space, that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it. By bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space.

(p. xxv)

I argue that within these pláticas, lesbian and bisexual Latinas in Chicago created a queer theory-making space to educate, support, and inspire each other. Participants in these pláticas were imagining and innovating a language to discuss what being lesbian/bisexual and Latina meant. This consisted of engaging with and queering ideas that circulated in their Latina and lesbian community, as well as trying to articulate what these notions meant within their lives. For example, a plática in June 1996 was organized around the title “What’s Your Real Sexual Identity” (see Figure 5.1<sup>7</sup>).

The flyer listed a series of possible identifications circulating in lesbian spaces during the late 1990s: “butch, femme, butchy femme, womyn, dyke, mommy/daddy, unique, nothing even comes close,” and asked “Does it matter? Or are these just another stereotype about us?” The plática flyer invited Latinas to discuss what those identifying terms meant to them. The invitation suggests that a consensus around such terms does not exist and words don’t necessarily have inherent signification which can’t be contested; rather, words acquire meaning within specific communities. The flyer also suggests that together through dialogue, the participants could theorize what those words meant in their lives and how it impacted their identities: “Bring your ideas, reasons, and arguments to our next discussion. Let’s challenge each other about a topic that is treated as negative and taboo and learn (hopefully) new ways about exploring who we are” (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). This invitation, similar to the invitations of most pláticas, queers meaning and communicates

## *amigas latinas lesbianas/bisexuales*

invite you to celebrate Pride month at our next discussion

**So you've come out proud,  
Maybe you're lesbian or bisexual, but**

### **What's Your Real Sexual Identity?**

Are you: (please check all that apply)

- a. femme
- b. butch
- c. femmey butch
- d. butchy femme
- e. womyn
- f. dyke
- g. mommy/daddy
- h. unique
- i. nothing even comes close!
- j. does it matter?

Do you cringe when you hear the words "femme" and "butch"? Are they just another stereotype about us? Does role-playing fit the Latina lesbian/bisexuals' way of life? How do we, as Latina lesbians/bisexuals, define these terms?

Bring your ideas, reasons and arguments to our next discussion. Let's challenge each other about a topic that is treated as negative and taboo and learn (hopefully) new ways about exploring who we are!

Don't forget to bring a delicious dish to share with your hungry hermanas.

**Sunday, June 16th**

2:00 - 5:00 p.m. at the home of

**FIGURE 5.1** Flyer promoting Amigas Latinas' Plática on Sexual Identity.

that women construct meaning based on their own lives; Amigas pláticas reject static scripts or monolithic visions,] rather difference was expected and welcomed.

### **Grounded in the Women's Everyday Lived Realities**

Pláticas dealt with various issues and challenges that queer Latinas had to confront. Pláticas have mostly been discussed in a Chicana heteronormative context, but Amigas Latinas queered the plática model in new ways. Amigas Latinas created a space to recognize and understand the diverse of identities contained in Chicago's multinational queer Latina community. Women who participated in pláticas were not a heterogeneous group. While most identified as Mexican and Puerto Rican, a range of Latin American nationalities were represented in the group. Participants had diverse migration histories, some women were recent arrivals while others were born and raised in the United States. Some only spoke English, others only Spanish, and most were bilingual. Young and older women were Amigas. Most were working class but middle-class professional women also participated. Amigas Latinas worked hard to facilitate

discussions that honored this diversity and all the intersectional and shifting identities represented in the always evolving and changing community. Many of pláticas addressed questions women had which they were unable to share with those outside the Amigas Latinas community. Crucial for these women, as for many Latina lesbians, were the ramifications of being lesbian or bisexual within a Latina/o context. Grappling with these identities is still a challenge today, however, it was arguably more fraught two decades ago when lesbian and bisexual identities were more heavily stigmatized in the Latina/o community than they are today (Acosta 2008, 2013; Torres and Pertusa 2003). These women met and worked out identity issues among themselves, with the best possible experts – other Latinas – at various stages of comfort with their identities. Pláticas on coming out were held yearly as this was a topic that continued to impact women’s lives across their years and new members were always joining the group. As a July 2002 plática announcement implied, coming out was not a one-time event but rather an ongoing process, “Coming Out – a Lifelong process,” “Does it ever get easier...when do you stop telling people? Can you stop? Does being Latina make it harder? Easier?” Below the plática’s topic, other questions hinted at the complications of living as a lesbian or bisexual in a Latina/o community. “Ever feel like going back in the closet? What if you were married before? Is another man ‘the solution’ according to your familia?” This flyer’s text alludes to the complexity of the coming out process. Another flyer announcing a variation on this topic: “How Out is Out? – The Good, The Bad & The Ugly” (see Figure 5.2<sup>8</sup>), humorously hints at the reality that not only must one come out again and again, but responses to such disclosures are mixed and could be cause for both celebration and pain.

Racial, ethnic, and class identities are important aspects of Latina experience and thus were recurring topics that were covered in a variety of ways at different points. A February 1999 plática titled “Culture, Racism, and Classism” encouraged participants to consider the diversity of Latinas in Chicago, including immigrants and long-term citizens. Participants discussed how classism and racism impacted the Latina community. Especially relevant was the discussion of these ‘-isms’ within the community itself. As Evette Cardona noted,

That was a really powerful plática. A black Puerto Rican woman talked about her experiences. And Mona talked about when she dated a black woman, what that meant to be in the community and the sh\*t she heard. So again I felt like the pláticas were really good for just putting that sh\*t out on the table. You need to pay attention to that but it wasn’t like pointing fingers or anything but I like to think that women walked out thinking - hmm, you know – thinking about stuff.<sup>9</sup>

Another plática topic (March 1997), engaged Latinas in a discussion on the concealment or revelation of their queer identities, “How does ‘passing’ affect

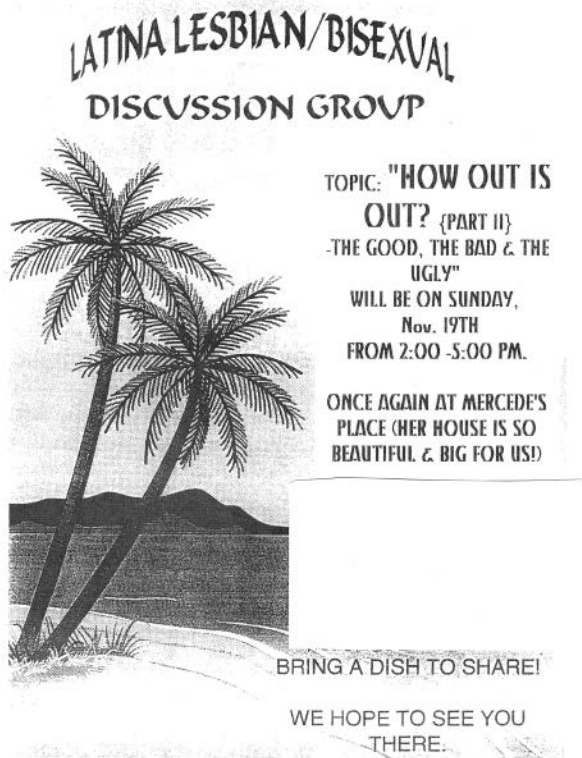


FIGURE 5.2 Flyer promoting Amigas Latinas' Plática on Being Out.

Latina lesbian and bisexual women?" This plática addressed passing both in terms of ethnoracial and sexual identity, "How are we supposed to look and act? How does this feel? Is it about surviving in a straight world, surviving at your job, surviving in your family?" (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona's Archive). Given their complex identities, these pláticas always approached the topic from an intersectional vector. They provided a comfortable space for Latinas to figure out how to navigate conflicting expectations and normative demands from family, work, school, and other spaces that forced Latina lesbians to leave out or hide various aspects of their identities.

Sex is an important part of lesbian and bisexual identity and Amigas enjoyed getting together to discuss multiple aspects of this theme. The pláticas queered discussions of sexuality by disrupting both heteronormative and homonormative expectations of women's sexual life. Women who came to these pláticas were urged to loosen their inhibitions when discussing the role sex had on their

lives. These pláticas were often advertised in humorous and sassy ways while promoting education and safe sex. One plática (March 1997) on this topic, “Let’s talk about Sex” was framed as “everything you always wanted to know about the Latina lover but were afraid to ask” (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). This framing plays on stereotypes of Latino men as Latin lovers and extends it to women. Participants were asked to consider stereotypes about Latinas that asserted them as being more passionate and sensuous than other women. The flyer assured that the discussion would be open-ended and participatory rather than prescriptive, “Come and join us to share and discuss your questions, thoughts, and opinions about Latinas and sex safely, sensitively and wisely” (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). A frequent topic of pláticas focusing on sex dealt with the use of sex toys. An October 1996 plática was billed as “Juguetes Sexuales in the House,” while a September 1998 plática was promoted as “Amigas’ Sex Clinic and Consumer Report: What keeps you in the bedroom?” Women were encouraged to bring their sex toys, including those that worked well and those that did not in order to “...help each other to be better shoppers and very satisfied customers” (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). Women were treated to discussions and demonstrations on how to wear a harness and dildo (April 2001 newsletter from Evette Cardona’s Archive). Another plática billed as “Hablemos de Sexo: Let’s talk about sex” encouraged Amigas to meet at a Chicago-based sex shop, “Early to Bed” for a plática about sexuality. Pláticas also tackled controversial topics such as a September 2002 plática, “Dispelling the Myths of SM,” which was led by women who engaged in sadomasochism and Ms. Juicy, a guest model. This plática offered an introduction to SM culture and practices as well as a discussion on safe ways to take part in SM. While a few women who were not members of Amigas were invited to these discussions as a means of providing information on the topic, it was mostly the Latina lesbians and bisexual participants who shared their life experiences and everyday realities.

As might be expected, Amigas Latinas queered normative ideas about family and invited their members to develop their own ideas about familia based on their experiences. Themes surrounding family and children were common across the years, as working out all types of family dynamics from coming out to navigating the end of relationships and fighting for custody of children could be especially vexing for queers of color. The meaning of familia is not the same across heterosexual and queer contexts and amigas were invited to discuss how they constructed familia in a September 1996 plática billed as “‘La Familia’ meanings, the different feelings it generates, ‘familia by birth’ versus ‘familia by choice’” (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). The organizers of Amigas’ pláticas sometimes sought connections with other Chicago-based activists and organizations that could enrich the pláticas with necessary resources. For example, Amigas Latinas partnered with PFLAG (Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays), to offer pláticas centered on coming out to

children and family.<sup>10</sup> At one plática (June 2001), two invited mothers shared how their lives were affected when their children came out to them; women shared stories of pain rejection and acceptance. When this plática was advertised, amigas were encouraged to bring family members, although they were advised that the plática might be inappropriate for small children. Maria, a Mexican–American guest mother, shared that her daughter had come out to her two years prior and that the family had rejected both daughter and supportive mother. The poignant discussion centered on how coming out affected both straight and gay family members (February–June 2001 Amigas Latinas Newsletter from Evette Cardona’s Archive).

Amigas Latinas definitely queered normative ideas about being in relationships or navigating complex relationships with men and women. The August 2001 newsletter reported on a plática organized to discuss the tribulations of women who had been married to men or still were. The flyer advertising that plática welcomed women who were going through the experience of being involved with a married woman as well as those who had lived that reality in the past and could “share your experiences to support your sisters who are confused, scared, and angry.” Fourteen women attended this plática, and those who were in such relationships spoke for over four hours regarding their experience of fear, excitement, and anxiety. Women discussed various experiences including staying in a relationship with a married person; one such person had been in such a relationship for 20 years. Getting out of a long-term marriage to be with a woman was also discussed during these pláticas, as was the aggression and violence some suffered from ex-husbands once they had left their marriages. Given compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia, the newsletter cautioned against being overly judgmental toward women who were navigating being in a lesbian relationship while married to a man. Some women do not realize or take long time to come to terms with their lesbian sexuality, yet others risked financial ruin or the loss of their children if they were to abandon their heterosexual marriage.

Today, it is still a challenge for lesbians and gay men to gain custody of their children when they seek divorce from a heterosexual union (Haney-Caron and Heilbrun 2014; Rivers 2010; Watkins 2011). Two decades ago such cases were even more contentious and perplexing for Latina lesbian mothers who very often had limited access to enlightened legal support. For those with limited English-language abilities, it was even more difficult to gain legal recognition of their parental rights. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, some Latina lesbian mothers in Chicago who participated with Amigas Latinas were threatened with the loss of their children during contentious divorces. Across the years, others contemplating divorce, worried about the repercussions that leaving their husbands would have on their access to their children. It is not surprising then that there were numerous pláticas around separation and divorce, child custody fights, dealing with (ex)spouses, and disclosing

lesbian identity to children. One of the major challenges for divorced women or women seeking a divorce was the issue of children as well as dealing with ex-husbands.

As an extension of pláticas on marriage dissolution, Amigas Latinas offered a “Parenting & Custody Workshop” organized in conjunction with Lambda Legal Defense. Mona Noriega, an Amigas Latinas steering committee member who took on a leadership position at Lambda Legal Defense, facilitated this workshop. Attending women had access to legal advice concerning questions about custody, fears of children being removed due to mothers being gay, as well as questions regarding adoption. Another such workshop run in April 2000, was promoted as a “Free Legal Workshop: Planning for yourself, your partner, and your children. Losing children is a major fear” (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). The workshop helped participants learn about living wills, power of attorney, along with custody and adoption issues. These recurring workshops continued throughout Amigas Latinas’ 20-year history.

### **Co-Constructed by Women as Knowledge Producers**

Amigas Latinas recognized the queer knowledge-base acquired from living and experiencing the world as a lesbian and bisexual woman. Developing a theory in the flesh meant trusting that participating amigas were capable of defining the content and direction of the pláticas. From the beginning, Amigas Latinas’ members themselves suggested topics to be explored at subsequent pláticas, however, as the years went on and membership grew leaders of the organization began polling members more formally when selecting themes. These polls captured emerging topics that the organization’s leaders gauged from feedback were important to the group. Particularly popular were topics that could be led by amigas with a specific expertise relevant to the group. For example, Elba Cruz, an Amigas Latinas member was invited to present her academic work at a plática. Cruz had interviewed Amigas Latinas members for her dissertation on Latinas and acculturation and shared her findings at a July 1998 plática titled “Issues on Mental Health & Acculturation with Hispanic Lesbians.” The plática considered whether Latinas who were acculturated were more comfortable with their lesbian identity than those who were grounded in a more traditional Latina identity. Cruz also discussed the impact of religious beliefs on Latina lesbians’ acceptance of sexuality.

“Bring the Best ‘Me’ Possible” was a plática/workshop (March 2000) advertised as focusing on creating strong leaders. This session was led by Norma Seledon an amiga who at the time was in a leadership role at the nonprofit, *Mujeres Latinas en Acción*. In this capacity, she created a Latina leadership Program and shared a version of that workshop for Latina lesbians and bisexuals. The flyer for this plática announced,



Come learn why we think the way we do and what makes us hold back. Learn what we can do to accept changes and challenges and stop being afraid to try. Come share your stories of how you overcame challenges you thought you could never triumph over. Your hermanas want to learn from you and share their stories, too.

*(Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona's Archive)*

Queering the pláticas meant dealing with topics that Amigas were uncomfortable with around the essence and meaning of their organization. Pláticas created a space where participants could unpack and discuss challenging issues that emerged within their communities. At times these efforts exposed problems within the community that had not been adequately resolved. For example, while Amigas Latinas included lesbians and bisexuals, bisexual women never felt totally accepted.<sup>11</sup> An Amiga noted that other Amigas were not always accepting of bisexual women,

...and this person was like well that's because you're bisexual and that's because you know you could hook up with men if you wanted to and you know lesbians have a harder time than bisexual women and blah blah blah!<sup>12</sup>

In response, a few pláticas on bisexuality were held and an attempt was made to run a bisexuality support group but this never took off. The Summer 2004 newsletter reported that some Amigas participated in a national conference to learn more about supporting Latina bisexuals. The article attests to the difficulty of the topic,

last year Amigas attempted to bring together Latina bisexual women in response to our focus group in 2002 but did not have much success. Bisexuality is very misunderstood in our community and bi women often hesitate to declare their identity for fear of being rejected.

*(Summer 2004 Amigas Latinas newsletter from Evette Cardona's Archive)*

Another debate surfaced in the early and mid-2000s around understandings of gender fluidity and transgender inclusion. In 2003 Sebastián Colón, a “Boricua transgender activist, poet, performer, and social worker,” affiliated with the Austin Latino/a LGBT organization (ALLGO) in Texas, cofacilitated a weekend workshop with Yamissette Westerland on gender identity. The workshop titled “De Tacones a Corbatas” (from Heels to Ties) invited amigas to play with and explore gender. Forty Latinas participated in discussions and interactive activities that delved into stereotypes and assumptions about gender, gender as performance, and the connections between gender expressions and intimate partner violence (Amigas Latinas Newsletter Oct./Nov.

2003). Colón returned in October 2006 and met with Amigas Latinas to discuss his transgender identity. The program was titled “The power of being transgender and Latino,” and discussed the subject of gender construction and transidentity. Colon discussed his transformation from radical lesbian and community organizer to coming out as transgender in 1998. According to the flyer advertising the plática, “He identifies as FTS – female to something else” (see Figure 5.3<sup>13</sup>). For many amigas, this was the first time they discussed the meaning of transgender identity with a transgender activist. Colón was very willing to engage with curious amigas and welcomed all questions about his life and transition, even baring his chest so women could see the scars resulting from his top surgery.

Another plática included the viewing and discussion of the film “A Girl Like Me the Gwen Araujo story.”<sup>14</sup> Sebastián Colón and Alejandra Aranda, a transgender woman born in Mexico and living in Chicago, led the discussion (2006 Summer/Fall Amigas Latinas Newsletter from Evette Cardona’s Archive). In these pláticas, complex questions like the following were posed, Did Amigas Latinas advocate for and include transgender people? What did this mean for an organization founded to serve lesbian and bisexual women? As issues of transgender rights and visibility emerged in Chicago and the nation, the Amigas Latinas’ board began to seriously consider their relationship with

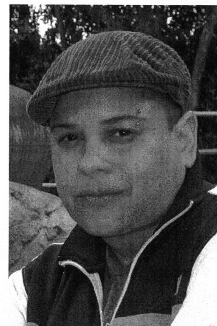
## El Poder de Ser Transgenero y Latino!

Te gustaría aprender mas sobre la dinamica y el poder de la identificacion y construccion de ser transgenero y Latino?

Amigas Latinas Grupo Juventud te invita a un presentacion y taller con Sebastián Colón, un transgenero Boricua radical, poeta, artista y luchador por los derechos humanos. Hijo de madre soltera y católica. Sebastián es hoy día estudiante graduado en la Universidad de Michigan. El nació y creció en Puerto Rico, donde trabajó como activista lesbiana radical y organizador comunitario por alrededor de 10 años. Despues de salir del closet como transgenero en el 1999, Sebastián se mudó a Austin, Texas donde continuó su trabajo como activista y su lucha por la justicia social. Sebastián se identifica como FTS – “female to something else!”

Do you want to learn more about the dynamics and power of Latino transgender identity?

Amigas Latinas Youth Group invites you to a presentation and workshop with Sebastián Colón, a radical Boricua transgender activist, poet, performer and social warrior. He is the son/daughter of a single catholic mother and a graduate student at the University of Michigan. Sebastián grew up in Puerto Rico, where he was out as a radical lesbian and community organizer for more than 10 years. After coming out as a transgender person in 1998, he moved to Austin, Texas where he continued his work as an activist and his constant fight for social justice. He identifies as FTS – female to something else!



*Ven a escuchar, aprender y comparte tus historias y experiencias con otras jóvenes LBTQ. Come learn, listen and share your stories & experiences with other LBTQ youth!*

Center on Halsted | 2855 N. Lincoln | Octubre/October 6, 2006 | 6:00pm – 8:00pm  
Para mas informacion/For more info llame/call  
312-409-5697 or [info@amigaslatinas.org](mailto:info@amigaslatinas.org)



FIGURE 5.3 Flyer promoting Amigas Latinas’ Plática on Transgender Issues.

and responsibility toward the transgender community. In 2007, the Amigas Latinas' leadership board voted to extend the mission of the organization to include the advocacy for transgender individuals and those who identified as queer. A heated *plática* was held in the Spring of 2007 to discuss expanding the mission of Amigas Latinas.<sup>15</sup> Some members felt Amigas Latinas should have already developed programming and education aimed toward transgender identity. They also believed the organization needed to provide strong advocacy for the trans community. However, others felt that Amigas needed to take it slow and more fully engage the membership around the meaning of transgender and its connection to lesbian and bisexual identity. They wanted to know – would Amigas Latinas advocate for transgender men? How would that impact Amigas Latinas' group identity? A few women strongly argued that the group should maintain its focus on lesbians and bisexuals. In these *pláticas* differences were aired and Latinas tried to make the case for their respective opinions. Not all were satisfied with the board's decision to go with a more inclusive mission, and advocate for a “Latina lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer and questioning community” (2007 Summer Amigas Latinas Newsletter from Evette Cardona's Archive). The organization's leadership was convinced that this was the right way to go; however, some members were still in the process of figuring out what that meant. Ongoing *pláticas* provided a space for Latinas to verbalize their feelings and work together through these difficult dialogues.

### **Potential Places of Healing through the Sharing of Embodied Knowledge**

The practice of sharing stories is healing. For queer Latina women who have few places to discuss how their sexual identities intersect with other aspects of their physical and mental health, the *pláticas* were life-changing. This was the case with all *pláticas* particularly those about wellness issues such as developing a positive self-esteem in a racist, sexist, and homophobic society, and coping with reactive destructive behaviors such as smoking addiction, excess drinking, and intimate partner violence. The sharing of stories along with successful and unsuccessful strategies with other queer women was restorative in and of itself. Also useful was the sharing of resources that perhaps women were not aware of or were afraid to access. Amigas Latinas was committed to sponsoring health-oriented *pláticas* throughout its 20-year history. Although the issues varied, the practice of sharing experiences to heal did not change. In the early 2000s, while there were minimal research studies conducted on queer women populations, some studies emerged, suggesting lesbian women experienced a high rate of cancer (Grindel et al., 2007; Matthews et al., 2004; Tracy et al., 2010). In the late 1990s, Amigas Latinas were already offering

pláticas focused on alarming cancer rates and women of color. In April 1998 Vicky, Di Prova, executive director of the Lesbian Community Cancer Project (LCCP),<sup>16</sup> was invited to participate in a plática on this matter. At the time, the Chicago-based LCCP was very much interested in learning about the health issues Latinas were dealing with. LCCP was opening new offices in Chicago and hoped to create sites which would be welcoming to Latinas. Pláticas encouraged women to take control of their health. Juanita Crespo, a leader of Amigas and employee of LCCP, ran a plática for women specifically on breast cancer. When some expressed a reluctance to self-touch, she shared that finding lumps saved lives and modeled how to engage in breast self-examinations. She addressed Latinas' alarming cancer rates and underutilization of health services.

"Nuestra Salud; Breaking Barriers, Save Sex and Latina Lesbians" was a plática series run in March 2001 to discuss the spread of HIV in the Latina community. The flyer advertising this plática asked "What does safe sex look like?" (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona's Archive). Participants were invited to learn about sexually transmitted diseases via watching and discussing, "Nuestra Salud: Safe Sex and Latina lesbians" a video on Latina lesbian health. This bilingual video was part of an education series developed by Teresa Cuadra and Suzanne Newman for the national Latino/a Gay and Lesbian organization (LLEGO). Thirty women attended according to an April 2001 newsletter, which reported that women had learned about latex gloves, dental dams, lube, dildos, and vibrators.

As dealing with physical and mental health issues can sometimes led to unhealthy coping mechanisms, Amigas pláticas approached these themes from various angles. The April 2000 Amigas Latinas newsletter reported that twenty women showed up to a plática to learn about the "Self-Concept Cycle." This plática discussed the relationship between how we felt and thought about ourselves and how society felt about us. Participants were able to share stories about how they dealt with self-esteem issues, and discussed resources such as books, articles, and local mental health services. Other mental health-related pláticas included one held in March 1999 on the topic "Alcohol and Substance Abuse Issues and Latinas" (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona's Archive). Amigas and their partners were invited to discuss how alcohol and drugs impacted lives as well as discuss the struggles dealt with as a result of drug and alcohol abuse.

As Amigas Latinas developed into a more structured organization, they were able to apply for grants to address community health issues. Pláticas were always a central part of these grants, for example, in 1999 Amigas Latinas received a grant from a program run by LLEGO called Project VOLAR (Vision, Organization, leadership, Action & Resolution). This project was dedicated to creating leadership within the Latina lesbian community, fighting homophobia, and

building supportive networks. *En La Vida*<sup>17</sup> (August 1999, p. 6), discussed the grant explaining that the first phase involved creating a series of pláticas to identify the needs of Latina lesbian/bisexual women. Discussion also involved how to locate the resources to meet these needs. Among the programs sponsored by this grant was a Latina conference focusing on health, and a series of coming-out pláticas.

Pláticas developed organically following the time and needs of the community, for example, as more monolingual women sought support, Amigas Latinas began to offer pláticas and support groups in Spanish. One plática held in February 2001, was advertised as “La menopausia y el envejecimiento: Avances en la salud y bienestar de la mujer Latina (Amigas Latinas flyer from Evette Cardona’s Archive). This plática was an opportunity to share information on cancer in aging woman and was facilitated by an amiga who worked with the LCCP.

In 2007, Amigas Latinas surveyed 305 queer Latina women in Chicago about their lives, their unique experiences as Latina queer women, and the challenges they faced in Chicago. The Proyecto Latina: Descubriéndonos project (Perez and Torres 2011), was an extensive survey of 299 questions that gathered information on demographics, issues related to sexual and gender identity, parenting, physical and mental health, and respondents’ satisfaction with the services available to them, including Amigas Latinas. Amigas Latinas mobilized to respond to what they learned from the results. One alarming result of the study indicated that domestic violence was a serious problem within the Latina queer community. Almost 50% experienced some sort of violence against them and 45% admitted they had been violent against a partner. In order to help the organization deal with this issue, Amigas sought the expertise of Dayi Peguera, a member of Amigas Latinas, and Lu Rocha, a heterosexual ally. Both women were feminist social workers and had experience dealing with domestic violence issues; they were then able to work alongside Amigas Latinas’ leadership to develop a plan addressing this problem within the community. One aspect of their approach was to create a plática series to confront intimate partner violence and provide women with the skills and networks that would allow them to address violence within their communities. These pláticas created a space for Latinas to strategize innovative responses that did not rely on law enforcement solutions. In this sense, they were queering normative responses to violence. Peguera and Rocha introduced a range of transformative justice and community accountability tools to the group over several months. Especially at a time when spaces to confront these issues were not readily available to Latinas, these monthly pláticas were a transformative site that allowed for growth, testing of new ideas, and healing from difficult situations. In this way, Amigas Latinas was committed to use pláticas as a cultural tool to address intimate partner violence through community engagement.

## Grounded in Reciprocal Relationships among Participants and Reflexivity

A noteworthy feature of pláticas and Amigas Latinas in general was the commitment of organizers to communicate with their members to ensure that they were addressing community priorities and concerns. Queering the plática structure meant giving ownership to the participants to continually critique and reconstruct their process. Amigas Latinas engaged in constant evaluation processes to assess how activities, including the pláticas, were functioning and if they required modifications or changes as they evolved. Already in the third plática (August 1995), the leadership engaged the group in reflection on how Latinas were treating and supporting each other. Surveys were also regularly conducted to gauge community interests. For example, a survey was sent to the 75 women on the 1998 Amigas Latinas mailing list, to hear about their experiences with the organization. Approximately one-third, or 23, of the 75 surveys sent out were returned and a survey report noted that participants really appreciated the opportunity to come together and share their experiences in pláticas. They reported that the most popular topics were the ones that dealt with relationship issues such as dating, defining oneself outside of relationships, and dealing with break-ups. Also popular were pláticas on coming out and dealing with family issues. Responses indicated that participants found pláticas particularly useful for navigating life issues surrounding sexual identity and family life. One woman commented, “I enjoy the comradery, the empowerment, the sense of community. I joined the group because it fostered a safe environment to be accepted as who and what we are. Proud and beautiful” (1998 survey from Evette Cardona’s Archive). Commenting on what she liked about the pláticas, an amiga wrote in the 1988 survey,

The diversity of the group. The issues are in my face and I have to deal with them, The beautiful women that attend (in all ways). The great leadership of the group. The fact that I can offer my knowledge and expertise on women’s issues but learn a great deal as well.

*(1998 survey from Evette Cardona’s Archive)*

Another commented, that she found the group “Welcoming, friendly. It is a forum to meet and share with other Latinas lesbian women which makes it very special. I also enjoy the fact that different and important topics are discussed at the brunches” (1998 survey). Another shared, “Me gusta porque podemos discutir nuestros problemas y entender más sobre cómo me siento” (1998 survey). Not all responses were unqualified affirmations as one person noted,

I think the group tries to cover too much under one title. It wants to be political, informative to those coming into the lifestyle, informative on

social issues, educational in the arts, active in all areas of the gay world, and a bridge for all women in need. Because the topics are so varied there is no consistency in the attendance of an average Latina. I really sought a social group. Women I could relate to, to share life experiences and spend time within social activities outside of the bars atmosphere. I want to make real friendships.

*(1998 survey from Evette Cardona's Archive)*

In 2002, the Amigas Latinas Steering Committee commissioned a study of the organization. They hired Sylvia Puente of the Institute for Latino Studies to conduct the study which included one-on-one interviews with Amigas and two focus groups. The final report, "Amigas Latinas, Interview and Focus Group Summary, Vision, Purpose, Mission," was completed in July 2002. Similarly to the 1998 survey, this report included quotes from Latinas who participated in the pláticas and attested to their power. One woman noted, "It is where a lot of us have found comfort, understanding, and acceptance to look at ourselves as valuable people" (p. 8). Another appreciated the structured interaction, "There were real facilitation skills at the table, the idea that the organizer was a social worker really made all the difference. The whole idea of 'safety' was important, establishing a safe space" (p. 5). One amiga noted the difference it made that pláticas were not held in an institutional setting, "It was in someone's house, that made it more warm" (p. 5). Many Latinas voiced that Amigas Latinas provided one of the few spaces where Latina lesbians could feel complete, "There was no place you could be in totality with your lesbian and Latina identity. In the gay community my Latina lesbian identity felt left out, in the Latino community, my lesbian identity felt left out" and "It was like going back home, that cultural uniqueness" (p. 6). The number of women who expressed how Amigas Latinas helped them develop new skills and strengths was also noteworthy. One amiga noted, "It has helped me grow in many areas, I am eager to be a voice" (p. 7). Another remarked, "I have gotten a sense of liberation, a sense of belonging beyond my job" (p. 7). A third stated, "I had to be true to myself, my life had been a lie," while another summarized, "Amigas Latinas is an organization that has knowledge and power" (p. 8).

Of course, some Latinas felt that Amigas still had work to do to ensure that all women felt included. One woman noted, "I need a group more like me de mujeres humildes, mujeres madres" (p. 7). Another, addressing a problem I mentioned earlier, stated, "We say that bisexual is bi-convenience, we are not always as accepting of bisexual women as we should be" (p. 17). The report stresses that there was a strong sentiment across the participants that the issues of bisexual women were not being met in the organization, and that some women did not accept bisexual women.

The contentious question of opening the pláticas to non-Latina partners repeatedly surfaced over the years. Occasionally, Latinas would bring their



non-Latina partners to the pláticas since most invitation flyers did not specifically address this issue. While some participants did not mind the participation of non-Latinas, others believed pláticas should be reserved exclusively for Latinas. The 1998 survey captured the diversity of opinions on this issue. Some women indicated Amigas Latinas should be open to all women as a way to bridge differences and foster understanding. However, they noted this should be done only occasionally, perhaps every two or three months and/or with special social events so that an affinity space for Latinas could be maintained. Others indicated that pláticas should be exclusively for Latinas since there were few safe spaces for Latinas, especially for Spanish monolingual women. (1998 Survey results from Evette Cardona's Archive). Several participants on both sides of the issue were emphatic in their opinions. One woman stated, "Yes, it is imperative to share and expose a non-Latina to other Latinas' perspectives, cultures, traditions, so they are not limited to a single perspective. It is also divisive among partners who cannot or are not permitted to participate" (1998 Survey results). Unequivocally presenting the other side, an amiga wrote, "No!!! Then what's the point?! Send them to the WACT brunch! It's the focus that the group is for Latinas that makes us unique" (1998 Survey results from Evette Cardona's Archive). The organizers decided to keep most discussion groups open only to Latinas with some select discussions and all social activities open to all partners. This decision did not please everyone but seemed like a reasonable compromise. Pláticas open to both Latinas and non-Latina partners were those where it was believed having partners present, regardless of their background, would enhance the discussion. For example, the flyer announcing a plática in October 2000 promoted as "Domestic Violence and Latinas" made clear that "you and a guest" are invited. This plática promised to discuss signs of domestic violence in lesbian relations, the difficulty of finding support as a lesbian, reasons why women matter, and what women could do if it happened to them.

Throughout the years, another strategy to gauge interests and engage reflection were open-ended pláticas or those billed as surprise topics. At these pláticas organizers and participants would share their feelings about improving pláticas and offer suggestions about future topics. For example, an open topic plática in January 1998 was billed as "¿Adónde vamos, Amigas Latinas in the year 1998 and beyond?" Likewise, the millennium plática in January 2000 was dedicated to "looking back and moving ahead." In these sessions, women voiced their concerns and hopes for the future of their organization.

As I have indicated across this essay, the organizers of Amigas Latinas were committed to addressing the needs of its constituency throughout its two-decade history, and this constant attention to reflexivity in no small measure accounted for its longevity. While not every issue was resolved according to everyone's liking, this constant checking in with members was born out of respect for all women involved in the organization, as well as a keen awareness



that the group did not belong only to the leaders, but rather to each and every one of the participants.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the Pláticas**

While pláticas were important for the fellowship, education, and personal growth opportunities they offered to Latina queer women over the years, it is important to highlight a few of the many offshoots or spinoffs birthed from these discussions. The most significant of these was Amigas Latinas' first steering committee developed in 1998<sup>18</sup> and its evolution as a 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization in 2003.<sup>19</sup> The steering committee helped the organization diversify its services and move toward different directions, including the eventual development as a multifaceted nonprofit organization.<sup>20</sup> This growth was testimony to the power of pláticas. They provided a space for Latina lesbians and bisexuals, and later transgender folks, to meet with one another, explore their lives, and recognize the power they held when creating the structures required to support and sustain themselves.

Smaller spinoffs also had a significant impact on queer Latinas' quality of life. One such offshoot of monthly pláticas was a more formal support group that met regularly for a fixed period around specific topics. These peer-run groups were formed around topics such as living with chronic illness, coming out, and other issues that often required extensive examination and discussion. Separate groups were formed for Latinas who were either primarily Spanish-speaking or English-speaking. One peer support group that ran over several months in 2002 focused on helping women develop a positive self-image. Amigas were invited to participate in this eight week peer group to, "exchange ideas, ask questions, share thoughts, give support to help us feel good about ourselves, who we are, who we can be as women who love women, as women of Latina heritage, as women who are like you" (Amigas Latinas flyer). Another outgrowth of the pláticas in the early 2000s was themed pláticas which occurred over four weeks on Friday evenings (so-called "Real Deal Fridays"). These Friday evening pláticas were developed because amigas voiced a desire for weekend events that would be an alternative to the bar scene, one of the only social outlets for Latina lesbians and bisexuals at the time. One series promised to explore "Challenges of being a Latina lesbian/Bisexual, explore myths and beliefs" (Amigas Latinas flyer). These conversations were guided by a Latina lesbian in the counseling field.

Another offshoot included a Spanish language prayer group led by Mary Torres which formed in the early 2000s at a time when many Spanish-speaking monolingual Latinas joined Amigas Latinas. A group interested in exploring spiritually later evolved from this. 2004 saw the beginning of PFLAG in Spanish. As I previously mentioned, this group evolved out of a plática discussing

family issues and was organized to support Spanish-speaking Latina families and friends coming to terms with gay and lesbian family members.

For 20 years, Chicago-based queer women could count on Amigias Latinas to provide a brave space for women to come together and discuss varied aspects of their lives and experiences – the good, the bad, and the ugly. As I have demonstrated, their queer plática model not only offered Latina lesbians a site for fellowship and friendship, but just as crucially served as a space for women to gain knowledge and challenge and empower one another through authentic intellectual dialogues, intimate conversations, and ongoing reflection with others within their community.

## Notes

- 1 Interview with Aurora Pineda, May 2013.
- 2 See Torres (2014) for a history of the organization.
- 3 Interview with Evette Cardona, September 2019.
- 4 Evette Cardona donated her rich archive to the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives in Chicago.
- 5 The National Latino/a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Organization (LLEGO) provided advocacy, leadership, and technical assistance to regional queer organizations. It ran from 1987 to 2004.
- 6 Interview with Mona Noriega, September 2019.
- 7 Courtesy of Evette Cardona's Archive now housed at Gerber/Hart Library and Archives.
- 8 Courtesy of Evette Cardona's Archive now housed at Gerber/Hart Library and Archives.
- 9 Interview with Evette Cardona, September 2019.
- 10 PFLAG en Español became a stand-alone plática series co-facilitated by Amigas Latina, Aurora Pineda.
- 11 According to founder Evette Cardona, when Amigas Latinas began, its official name was Amigas Latinas Lesbianas y Bisexuales and then they dropped Lesbianas y Bisexuales because it was too long. Interview with Evette Cardona, September 2019.
- 12 Interview with Karen Rothstein, May 2013.
- 13 Courtesy of Evette Cardona's Archive now housed at Gerber/Hart Library and Archives.
- 14 Based on a true story, this 2006 film directed by Agnieszka Holland tells the story of 17-year-old Gwen Araujo who was murdered by four men who discovered she was transgender.
- 15 I was a board member in 2007 and participated in many of the pláticas and discussions around transgender issues at this crucial time.
- 16 The Lesbian Community Cancer Project was established in Chicago in 1990 and ran for many years. It was the first such organization in the Midwest to provide support and direct services for women with cancer and their families.
- 17 *En La Vida* was a Spanish-language newspaper published by *Windy City Times*.
- 18 Among the members of the first steering committee were Alicia Amador, Evette Cardona, Aixa Diaz, Mary Torres, Mona Noriega, and Rose Paredes.
- 19 The first board of directors consisted of Evette Cardona, Karen Rothstein, Norma Seledon Uzueta Uzua, Marina Vasquez, and Lydia Vega.
- 20 See Torres (2014) for more information on this evolution.

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# 6

## CONCLUSION

*Sharon A. Navarro and Lilliana Patricia Saldaña*

This edited collection is a recalibration of Latinas as feminist subjects who embody various subaltern subjectivities in an ever-changing political urban space. Latina women have had a long history of politically organizing in urban cities around the country and yet their political narratives have gone unwritten until now. These chapters allow us to view the Latina as a political actor meandering within, across, and around multiple boundaries shaped by the political space (digitally and on land) they occupy and transform. These contributing authors place the role of Latina grassroots leadership at the center of urban politics and redevelopment and dignify their intellectual, creative, spiritual, and organizing labor as they put their bodies on the frontlines of social movements to create change. Too often, the struggle against political change in the urban cities is devoid of intersectional analysis and the ways in which gender, sexual orientation, and political philosophies like Chicana/Latina thought, Indigenous feminism, decoloniality, and queer politics play in shaping and influencing urbanization and politics. The authors provide a glimpse of the conditions under which Latinas organize and challenge the changing landscape of urbanization to include them as actors and stakeholders.

This book builds on a modest growing collection of work focused on Latinas and urban city concerns in the United States and its territories. Since 2000, scholars have sought to understand how socioeconomic and political changes affect the nature and functioning of cities with large Latina/o population over time.<sup>1</sup> This collection of interdisciplinary essays provides us with a snap shot of the way Latinas *choose* to organize and redefine their space and place in urban cities that are majority-minority Latino. Specifically, this body of work is concerned with understanding the extent that Latina urban living, work, and experiences are tied to political activism on the ground and digitally. While the

urban planning literature has historically ignored Latinos<sup>2</sup> attempt to renegotiate their space, Latino urbanist scholars such as Valle and Torres,<sup>3</sup> Davis,<sup>4</sup> and Diaz<sup>5</sup> have produced a collection of books and addressed urban areas predominated by Latinos and Mexican immigrants in the Southwest. This book makes explicit the political efforts of Latinas to negotiate and redefine what it means to be a Latina, working class, lesbian or queer woman in a majority minority Latino urban city center. This is the first book to highlight the work of lesbian Latina women and Latina women politically organizing digitally for space and a voice in shaping their urban cities as they challenge repression, political exclusion, oppression, and the silencing of their voices in these spaces.

This edited volume began with an examination of Chicana environmentalists in Chicago. Similar to the Chicano movements of the 1960s and 1970s, Teresa explains how Chicanas activists empowered their community to reimagine their urban areas. Utilize cultural norms and practices to remodel blighted spaces, increase ownership, and build community in marginalized spaces. The author provides a behind the scenes view of how a community came together to fight environmental racism in one neighborhood. For this particular community, community gardens became a powerful way to assert cultural identity and to reclaim political space.

Chapter 2, by Norell Martínez, reminds us that spirituality is increasingly inseparable from social justice advocacy. Witchcraft is no longer the fringe spiritual practice it once was but a political marker of resistance.<sup>6</sup> Martínez's chapter reminds us that Bruja feminism may be used to seek justice—or accountability, or plain influence—when the mainstream has failed or marginalized the practitioner. This chapter provides us with a rich understanding of why practicing witchcraft digitally functions as a political act for two reasons. First, it is a very political use of magic and second, the telling of a story is a very political use of magic. The political narrative that Yerbamala Collective engages in by rechanneling their sense of powerlessness about the Trump administration by casting spells—viewed as a form of political protest—allows the participants to take back their power.

Chapter 3, by Sara DeTurk, on the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, focuses on organization primarily led by queer Chicanas in San Antonio. DeTurk provides a critical lens onto a community space and gives us more than a snapshot of the intricate negotiations behind the work of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas. These women address racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, environmental justice, and peace. DeTurk illustrated the way in which this organization blended artistic process with a social justice agenda that preserves their space and identity. This was embodied in the analysis of the Hays Street Bridge Restoration Group, the Free Speech Coalition, and the Westside Preservation Alliance.

In Chapter 4, Fernando Tormos-Aponte and Shariana Ferrer-Núñez's analysis models intersectionality to account for historical narratives, cultural

representation, and legal discrimination to show how race/ethnicity and gender operate in tandem to influence how Puerto Rican women, particularly black Puerto Rican queer women, participate in politics. As a social movement strategy, intersectionality has been used to foster the inclusion and representation of minority groups. Tormos-Aponte and Ferrer-Núñez's chapter calls attention to the fact that the study of intersectionality has not been mainstreamed in social movement scholarship. Their chapter sheds light on the political reality how the *Colectiva Feminista en Construcción* adopted intersectionality as a practice that encouraged them to include political demands specifically for disadvantage constituents (i.e., the Puerto Rican Left) into their political platform. This chapter contributes significantly to the understanding of what an intersectional lens can bring to the study of social movements. In this case, adopting intersectionality means recognizing and addressing power relations among women in a public space.

Finally, in Lourdes Torres's chapter, we return back to the Midwest to examine a Chicago queer Latina organization called *Amigas Latinas*. Her ground-breaking epistemology of queering *pláticas* speaks to a queer conscious approach to intellectual dialogue and community. The *pláticas* presented an opportunity for learning that does not often present itself in heterosexual community or space. These *pláticas* provided *Amigas Latinas* with a safe space with which to discuss their experiences in a highly diverse, heterosexualized urban city which is typically devoid of a close knit community.

This is the first edited volume to provide a critical introduction to the main theoretical debates and key issues related to Latina/x urbanization in majority minority cities. It is also the first book to examine the ways in which Latina feminists utilized mobilizing tactics in their fight for public space.

## Notes

- 1 Diaz and Torrez, *Latino Urbanism: The Politics of Planning, Policy and Redevelopment*, 2012.
- 2 Gonzalez and Irazabal, "Emerging Issues in Planning: Ethno-Racial Intersections," 2015.
- 3 Valle and Torres, *Latino Metropolis*, 2000.
- 4 Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US City*, 2000.
- 5 Diaz, *Barrio Urbanism: Chicanos, Planning, and American Cities*, 2005.
- 6 Mohdin, "Waking Up to Our Power: Witchcraft Gets Political," 2019.

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