

Chicanas/Latinas Building Bridges

An Introduction

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This book is a bridging of Chicana/Latina feminist perspectives with education—a connection of/to Chicana feminist/cultural studies innovations laid across rivers of teaching, learning, and ways of knowing. The authors of these chapters are building bridges linking Chicanas/Latinas’ “living” theories to discussions about children, youth, families, communities, and education. Moreover, having too often served as bridges to other people’s “diversity” experiences (Rushin, 1983), these authors also reclaim the bridge as one taking us to our own self-power as educators, policymakers, and critical cultural theorists.

Like Chicana feminists before us, we ask questions concerning the particular conditions of oppression suffered by women (see Moraga, 1983; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). How their children have suffered. How these needs have been ignored by mainstream institutions, white feminists, internationalist solidarity groups, and often by Chicano/Latino males in our communities. We also pay attention to how Chicanas/Latinas are divided by class, cultural, and sexuality differences. We are concerned with how Chicanas/Latinas and other women of color have organized their psyches and bodies to survive, find wholeness, move past resistance, and “leave behind the defeated images” (Anzaldúa, 1983, p. v). Finally, we are concerned with how the knowledge and worldviews emerging from Chicana/Latinas’ unique experiences of oppression and survival form a theory, method, and praxis for building solidarities across diverse peoples in order to transform our world for the better (see Sandoval, 2000).

How and in what ways can these Chicana/Latina feminist perspectives inform education? First, specifically translating them to a concern with education, this book articulates the unique schooling experiences of Chicana/Latina young and adult women in high school and colleges—how they experience educational institutions as brown people between nations in a racialized society,

as young women, as undocumented or third generation-born, as bilingual and bicultural. We seek to uncover the methods these high school- and college-age Chicanas/Latinas have developed for “survival” and beyond by deriving strength through the interconnection of the spirit, mind, and body, and by drawing from the cultural resources and power of women kin in their own families (see parts I and II).

Second, this book is concerned with redefining Chicana/Latinas’ everyday experiences and practices of teaching, learning, and communal “knowing” as *education*. That is, we pay attention to mature women and mothers in our families and communities who are central to their children’s socialization and to community processes of empowerment. In this regard, we are interested in the worldviews, theories, and “critical” pedagogies that these women have developed in their survival/subversion of patriarchy, poverty, and discrimination and in their interactions with often insensitive institutions such as schools, hospitals, and social service agencies. Again, we look for the living theories that have emerged as mature women strive for individual and communal wholeness (see part III).

Last and most important, we insist that these chapters are not merely “descriptions” of educational contexts and processes, but that they also constitute theories and methods with vital significance to the field of education and to feminist thought. Chicana feminists and other women of color have often talked about the historical slighting and lack of reconciliation or response to U.S. third-world feminist theoretical challenges on the part of Western or hegemonic feminisms of the 1980s (Sandoval, 2000). As Chela Sandoval explains, the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* made these challenges hard to ignore even when they were characterized as mere description (see Sandoval, 2000, p. 46). The qualitative studies and essays in this book are not mere anecdotes, quaint knowledge, or “artifacts” outside the “real” purview of educational research and dominant feminist perspectives but rather, they speak to *mujer-* or woman-centered definitions of teaching, learning and ways of knowing rooted in Chicana/Latina theories and visions of life, family, community, and world. Although all the parts show how Chicana/Latina feminist thought is utilized to examine Chicana/Latina education, part IV specifically addresses how Chicana feminist conceptualizations have informed the development of educational borderland scholarship. For example, part IV considers how Chicana feminist theories, including Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) mestiza consciousness, Chela Sandoval’s (1998, 2000) oppositional consciousness, and Emma Pérez’s (1999) decolonial third space feminism contribute to conceptualizing diverse spaces of teaching and learning and diverse forms of pedagogy (see Elenes’ part IV introduction in this volume). Moreover, it highlights Chicana/Latina cultural production and agency as educators, teachers, students, and youth engage different “education” contexts.

This book also walks on bridges of multidisciplinary scholarship—bridges that often remain unconnected. Chicana and Chicano literary and cultural studies theorists, for example, have been excavating epistemology and cultural production. Yet there has not been a systematic link of this outstanding work to the field of education, and in particular to discussions around pedagogy and epistemology. Most important, while Chicanas/Latinas find themselves in the field of education but not divorced from the theories that have inspired and uplifted their lives—and indeed have utilized Chicana feminist perspectives in their research—there has not been an explicit and systematic articulation of the connections between Chicana feminist thought and the field of education.

On the other hand, while there is much excellent work in the field of education on critical pedagogy and feminist critical pedagogy, these have failed to include in meaningful ways the lives of Chicanas/Latinas and specifically Chicana/Latina feminist perspectives as theoretical tools. Equipped with the tools of Chicana/Latina and Women of Color feminist thought, we seek to connect Latina/o Education, Chicana feminism, and Chicana/o Cultural Studies. We do so by reenvisioning the sites of pedagogy to include women's brown bodies and their agency articulated on the church steps, the university cafeteria, and in the intimate spaces where *mujer-to-mujer* conversations are whispered. We look to these different yet ordinary sites of knowledge construction with the hope of proposing different possibilities and theories of pedagogy, epistemology, and education—indeed *mujer*-centered articulations of teaching and learning, along with ways of knowing—rooted in the diverse and everyday living of Chicanas/Latinas as members of families, communities, and a global society. In the following section, we expand on the specific bridge project and contributions of this volume.

BRIDGES: NEW BEGINNINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Often when we think of educational scholarship, whether it concerns youth, adults, or girls and women, a middle class Euro-American norm comes to mind from which “adolescence” or the experience of “girl” or “mother” is drawn. Scholars often struggle against this yardstick to examine the experiences of youth of color, African American girls, white working-class and rural girls, or Latina immigrant mothers. With a few notable exceptions, Latina youth, young adults, and mothers continue to suffer from a lack of attention about their experiences in educational settings. Even areas of study such as critical pedagogy or critical literacy do not often mean to signify what is going on in Chicana/Latina-controlled spaces of teaching and learning, whether in college classrooms, on the street, or at the kitchen table (see Hernández, 1997, for one of a few notable exceptions).

On the other hand, there are some categories of study that do indeed index or “signify” Latina young women and mothers, among other people of color. The terms “at-risk,” teen pregnancy, and (lack of) parental involvement, for example, readily signal attention to Latinas as having “problems” requiring intervention. Very little research, however, paints nuanced and complex portraits of Chicana/Latina lives from which we can consider their cultural/gendered perspectives, resources, and resilience in interaction with institutions of power (i.e., schools, universities, adult education programs, hospitals, social service agencies). In this book, we ask how we can shift the terms by which we approach Latina/Chicana schooling and education from one of deficit to one of complexity, strength, and hope? By foregrounding culture throughout, we dismiss cultural deficit models and instead give meaning to cultural ways of knowing and linguistic expressions.

It is also our vision to reengage educational scholarship itself—that is, to draw from the outstanding areas of research to date but also to challenge the starting points and the theoretical lens against which Chicana/Latina lives and ways of knowing are measured. For example, we wonder what might happen if theory emerging from Chicanas/Latinas’ and other women of color’s lives were not merely added on to existing frameworks in such areas as Critical Pedagogy, Gender and Higher Education, or Youth Studies, to name a few. But rather, beyond the “incorporation” of gender, sexuality, race, or class differences into already existing frameworks, why not transform the conceptual beginning points themselves?

In this respect, we take our cue from Chicana feminists Emma Pérez and Chela Sandoval who challenge normative history and postmodernity, respectively, in order to provide alternatives to Euro-American- and male-centered systems of thought. Pérez takes apart both Euro-American and Chicano male historical bias, while Sandoval (2000) challenges the “discovery” of the postmodern moment. Both Pérez and Sandoval suggest that if we begin from different starting points, we can reimagine history or postmodernity (or education) the *mestiza/indígena* way and transform conceptual frameworks as the starting point for envisioning a future way of being—a way that allows coalition building across differences to address societal inequalities.

How do we transform the conceptual beginning points themselves with Chicana feminist thought in education? In merely scratching the surface of this reimagination, this book honors the conceptual terms born of Chicana/Latina lives and articulated in Chicana feminisms. We build from words that have signaled education, teaching, and learning, and ways of being and knowing, in our diverse Latino communities. These include *educación* (holistic and moral education), *la facultad* (knowing through experience and intuition), *pensadoras* (creative thinkers), *consejos* (narrative storytelling), *testimonios* (testimonials), borderlands (the literal geographic but also symbolic spaces between

countries and differences), *sobrevivir* (survival and beyond), *convivir* (the praxis of living together in community), *valerse por si misma* (to be self-reliant), and finally Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, Pérez's decolonial imaginary space, and Sandoval's oppositional consciousness that all point to the spaces of "beyond survival," creativity, agency, movement, and coalition building.

If we ask questions and address education and schooling from these conceptual terms, this book can be of use to educators in all contexts specifically to understand (1) the sensibilities that children and youth bring to school from their mothers and other family members; (2) how to work with adult women in their roles as parents, educators, social services recipients, and/or community organizers; (3) how these conceptual starting points inform the pedagogical spaces of university classrooms and women's grassroots organizing; and, finally, (4) how to create high school and college experiences for Latinas that capitalize on their cultural resources and "mestiza consciousness" sensibility. For example, if teachers and administrators learn to value mothers' life experiences, their will to *sobrevivir* and orientation to knowledge (*la facultad*) that is transmitted to children as *consejos*, *historias* (stories), and *testimonios* as well as through the physical body, then the very notion of parental involvement may also be transformed. That is, if we center both Latina womanist-oriented knowledge about the world and a pedagogy of *convivencia* (a praxis of relating and living together), we can create school and home partnerships that truly respect and work from the power of relationships, commitment, wisdom, and sensibilities born of a life's work of straddling fragmented realities.

In transforming classrooms and educational programs, how might we view children differently when we understand their mothers' living pedagogies? Or how can we design bridge programs and support services that capitalize on Chicana college students' resilience and their will to *valerse por si mismas* learned in great part through the powerful pedagogical experiences with the women (mothers, aunts, grandmothers, sisters, cousins) in their lives? How can we enact pedagogies centered on wholeness rather than a mind/body split when seeking to work with Chicana/Latina teens? Likewise, in considering the university classroom and other institutional spaces of higher learning, what might it mean to utilize a pedagogy that draws from a borderlands sensibility (with a small "b") to address the many borderlands that exist across generations, genders, sexualities, cultures, languages, and spiritualities (Keating, 2000). The possibilities for a relational praxis of teaching and learning are powerful.

Furthermore, we believe that an understanding of, sensitivity to, and privileging of Latinas/Chicanas' knowledge is important in all public work and relationships, including those involving social services, adult education, and community organizing. For example, a Latina leader of a small-budget non-profit organization in central Texas devoted to addressing the needs of Latina

mothers informed Sofia that it gets referrals from well-funded health and social service agencies who say they simply do not know how to relate to Latina immigrant mothers. “And they get all the money, and that’s their job,” she exclaimed. So why are social service agencies not able to communicate and form respectful relationships with their Latina clientele? Of course, the context of these interactions are unequal because non-English-speaking Latina immigrants, as well as working-class Chicanas, are disadvantaged in their roles as client or patient through markers of race, class, gender, language, and citizenship status. These women are subjected to control through long “waiting” times and the dismissal of their cultural and linguistic capital (Urciuoli, 1998). And yet, if these spaces of service provision are to be transformed, as they are in the Latina-centered nonprofit organization mentioned earlier, then Latina/Chicanas’ diverse modes of loving, living, teaching, and learning, and of adapting through continuity and change must be at the center of this transformation.

These are just some of the ways in which different conceptual beginning points rooted in Chicana/Latina sensibilities can reinvigorate old inquiries and shape new questions and imaginings. Throughout this collection, the voices presented through empirical research and creative writing help rethink female “development” and the vast array of spaces in which teaching and learning take place. In centering women’s transformation of creative energy and intelligence as it evolves through youthfulness, womanhood, college life, motherhood, and leadership, it is our hope that this book offers a holistic understanding of education that challenges mainstream conceptions of knowledge, power, pedagogy, and epistemology. The chapters are not prescriptive but they lend themselves to imagining the possibilities described in terms of family/community-school relationships and pedagogy in all contexts including the postsecondary classroom and the gendered spaces of community gathering and organizing. Because this book is dedicated to the uplift of Latinas/Chicanas and all communities in struggle, we hope its research and voices can invigorate policy formation both in education and in the social service sector. Certainly, the bridges we aspire to construct, extend, and connect beyond this *pedacito de libro* (little thing of a book) are ambitious, but they are the dreams we strive for.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

While we walk on bridges built before us, and those that are continuously constructed in the very process of “walking,” this building involves old, new, and hybrid language as we move across the rivers of our bicultural realities. Indeed, some of the language used by the authors throughout this book may sound harsh to the Spanish language ear, while other words may sound nonsensical to

the English language ear. Hybrid Chicana words like “mujerista” (Latina womanist) are not proper in the Spanish language. At the same time, our Spanish and Chicana Spanish words may not be understood by monolingual English speakers in all their complexities since it is difficult to translate world-views embedded in the distinctiveness of different languages.

The conceptual beginnings embodied in the words described earlier (i.e., *consejos*, borderlands, Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness) are explained and elaborated on in different chapters throughout the book. However, we call attention here to a few other pivotal terms and their distinctive and eclectic use throughout this book. First, we use both *feminista* and *mujerista* often in the same breath across the chapters. *Feminista* refers to a Latin American and/or Greater Mexican/Chicana feminist movement, while *mujerista* refers to a Latina-oriented “womanist” sensibility or approach to power, knowledge, and relationships rooted in convictions for community uplift. Often we use the former to signify the mobilized and historical base for Chicana feminist thought. We use the latter to call attention to a sensibility and orientation to everyday Latina communal relationships and issues—especially because *el feminismo* as a concept often does not have meaning for ordinary women as they go about their everyday lives.

Two other important identity terms, Chicana and Latina, are used throughout this book. Chicana is often used to refer to U.S.-born women of Mexican or Latin American descent who identify with a collective history of oppression and pride connected to a political consciousness with its origins in *El Movimiento* or the Mexican American civil rights movement. Latina is used in varying ways. Authors may employ it as an umbrella term to encompass the diversity of women in their studies, including immigrant and U.S.-born women from different Latin American countries. The research participants of the studies in these chapters may or may not have identified with the term Latina. For example, they may have identified as Hispanic, Hispana, or call themselves by their various nationalities. In some cases, Latina does serve as a self-identified term for all the parties involved.

ORGANIZATION AND CONNECTIONS

The four parts of this book follow the lifespan of youth and emerging womanhood (part I), young adult college-age life (part II) and maturity and motherhood (part III). As we’ve mentioned, part IV is devoted to a theoretical consideration of a *feminista* expression of borderlands educational theory. Since a separate editor introduces each section and its chapters, the purpose here will not be to introduce the chapters but rather to describe the connections across the four parts in terms of Chicana *feminista/mujerista* theory and practice in education.

First, through these chapters flow the sensibilities and feelings of “fromness” and “towardness” (Götz, 2004). That is, we take the perspective that we are an *amasamiento* and that we throw nothing away; we consider the good, the bad, and the ugly (Anzaldúa, 1987). In addressing high school youth and college-age women, for example, the authors collectively note that there is no romanticism of going back to an essentialized past or an essentialized culture. Rather, in constructing contemporary identities and processes of teaching and learning, these authors emphasize the movement with, from, and toward different cultural practices and strategies that may, for example, include the family but also a rejection of its patriarchy.

Second, as so many women of color before us have insisted, these chapters together highlight how race, class, gender, ethnicity, language, sexuality, and other differences are intertwined and how oppression occurs simultaneously and along various axes of difference. These intersections are consistently highlighted across the parts both in the methodology and the conceptual frameworks as we consider the lives of women on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border confronting, for instance, female bashing in the form of hurtful humor, or social disenfranchisement based on citizenship status, or the effects of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in terms of economic/social displacement. We can see these intersections in the struggles of young college women who face racism, sexism, and sometimes the effects of family poverty as they maneuver their way to graduation. Or we can see how the brown queer body is subjugated in Chicana/Latina youth’s search for a place and space to call home. In this book, we call attention to how institutional forms of oppression work through classrooms, schools, social services, and other pedagogical spaces.

Finally, the parts collectively draw attention to the sociopolitical role of Latina/Chicana feminist pedagogies and epistemologies. While we highlight individual agency, we also stress the communal processes and the conviction of social justice derived from our ways of knowing, learning, and teaching, for the benefit of our entire communities and beyond. The meanings of *feminista* and *mujerista* themselves are not about women’s rights per se but about community rights. Yet a *feminista* perspective insists that our community struggles must begin with women and children’s issues; indeed we must start with those most vulnerable and most often left behind in a globalizing economy (Castillo, 1994). In this way, the sociopolitical nature of Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies and epistemologies calls for reforming educational and social service institutions to benefit all youth and families.

Chicana feminist theories are thus mobilized, transfigured, and even metamorphosed as they are employed in engaging women’s lives in diverse contexts and across the life span. The bridging of Chicana feminist thought with education is a practice, a method, and a way of life for the editors of this collection. And yet, like novelist Toni Cade Bambara writes in the foreword to *This Bridge Called my*

Back, this book also needs no foreword because it is the afterward that will count. “The work: To make revolution irresistible” (1983, p. viii).

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