

Gender, Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Trans Chican@ Survivor¹

By J.F. “Frank” Galarte

The title of my talk today, is “Gender, Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Trans Chican@ Survivor,” from the title you will note that the talk is inspired by Emma Pérez’s essay, “Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from a Chicana Survivor” that appears in Carla Trujillo’s edited volume, *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, published twenty years ago in 1991 by Third Woman Press.² It is a privilege for me to build on one of the many groundbreaking works by Chicana feminist scholars that without, I wouldn’t be able to give the talk that I have been invited to give to you today. To be honest, this talk was extremely difficult for me to write, because historically, in both MALCS and other spaces, discussions and debates about trans and genderqueer inclusion in “women only spaces” have been contentious and extremely difficult to have - If anything before I begin, I want to underscore how important it is for me to respect the struggle and historical context for this *sitio y lengua* from which MALCS emerged³. As a trans masculine identified person, I have my own reservations about asserting solutions to what must be a collective discussion and decision. What I know that I can do, is posit new strategies and approaches for thinking and talking about Chican@ and Latin@

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² I have been fortunate enough to work with Dr. Pérez for my dissertation work and our discussions have also very much informed the few thoughts that I will share with you.

³ During the height of second wave feminism there was a backlash against transgender women who sought inclusion in feminist women only spaces – this is well documented in Janice Raymond’s book *The Transsexual Empire: the Making of the She-male* and contested in Sandy Stone’s famous essay, *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*. Many transgender and transsexual lesbian feminists have also critiqued the prohibition of Transgender and transsexual women at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.

Transgender populations and the bridges that our communities need to make, as we perhaps refocus the discussion toward community survival, sustenance, empowerment and healing rather than simply inclusion⁴. As inclusivity may run the risk of blanketing over difference, as well as histories and experiences that spring from varied origins. As I looked for the most logical and practical way to approach this I began to think about my own personal history and how I came to be where I find myself now, as a Trans identified Chican@ feminist scholar. As I thought about this journey, I thought mostly about the different emotions that have imprinted themselves upon my own body and memory as I faced and encountered both the uncertain and the unfamiliar. For that reason, today I will be talking about expanding and/or shifting the *sitio y lengua* first posited by Emma Perez in 1991. When we think about claiming, creating and asserting space - what that space initially looks like or feels like is both unfamiliar and uncertain, it takes some getting used to.. Today, I'm going to talk a little bit about my own position and experience as a trans identified Chican@ feminist scholar and the theoretical framework for analysis, *el sabor del amor y del dolor*, that I conceptualized in my dissertation. But first, I would like to revisit some of Emma's key arguments in the 1991 essay, the largely inform the theoretical interventions I make in my own scholarship.

Pérez poses that “pervasive homophobia constructs sociosexual power relations in society and pervasive homophobia in our Chicana/o community limits the potential for liberation and revolution.” In her essay she looks to French feminists for a paradigm to

⁴ I use Chican@ rather than Chicana/o as it is posited by Sandra K. Soto in her book, *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The Demastery of Desire*. She describes Chican@ as a “queer performative,” a “departure from certainty, mastery, and wholeness while still announcing a politicized collectivity, and refusing “the norms of legibility and the burdens of visibility” (3).

interpret sociosexual relationships and hierarchical structures between and among heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men,” and highlights the significance of sexuality to observe how sexuality is expressed for colonized people, especially women - because she notes that at that moment (and even today), sexuality remains an obscure controversy in the Chicana/o academic community (Pérez 160). Pérez, most importantly in this essay highlights how Chicanas seize sociosexual power to create their own *sitio y lengua*. Pérez, notes that Chicana feminist works emerge from *un sitio y una lengua* (a space and language) that rejects colonial ideology and the by-products of colonialism and capitalist patriarchy -sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. The space and language is rooted in both the words and silence of Third-World-Identified-Third-World-Women who create a place apart from white men and women and from men of color, if only for a weekend now and again (in the footnotes she cites MALCS as one of these spaces). Pérez offers simple solutions, faith and hope for the future - embodied in our spoken words and in our writings. Faith, hope, fear and anger take shape in the form of language through our written works, which are as Audre Lorde notes, “the skeleton architecture of our lives” - written works that are shaped by our feelings and emotions lay the foundation for a future of change and bridge our fears of what we have never been or known before (38).

My own work centers the Transgender and gender non-conforming Chicana/o body, and builds on the paradigm put forth by Pérez and other Chicana feminist scholars that called for sexuality as a site of inquiry in Chicana/o Studies⁵. Conversely, I redirect

⁵ The work of Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, Deena Gonzalez, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, Emma Pérez, Carla Trujillo, Norma Alarcon, Anna Castillo, Catriona Rueda Esquibel, Ellie Hernandez have made invaluable contributions that document the politics of Chicana butch-femme subjectivities, analyzed how technologies

the conversation towards exploring a new language expanding how we write about gender in order to explore how transphobia is also one of the by-products of colonialism and capitalist patriarchy. I argue that the Transgender and gender non-conforming Chicana/o body exceeds the fictive truths and values that Queer, Transgender and Chicana/o scholars have both purposefully and unknowingly attached to these populations. What I am getting at is, how can we expand or create from scratch a new *sitio y lengua* for talking about intersections that articulate gendered, racialized and sexed bodies that do not conform to society's repressive drive to discipline them to stable gendered and sexed subject positions. This requires us to look for and imagine a reality that differs from what already exists, it also means that we must risk leaving or changing spaces that are comforting to us.

For a moment I'd like to be frank, about what it means for me to be Frank. As a transgender identified Chicano, I feel as though I have had to leave home, and create home from scratch multiple times. At this point I think the constant state of discomfort that I experience daily, has actually become home and it has taken me years to come to accept that. There are a few examples of this that I would like to share with you:

I come from a fairly conservative Chicano family from a small town, Brawley - some of you may know it - for those of you who have never heard of it - my town is located approx. 25 miles away from the Calexico/Mexicali port of entry. Growing up in a small town was like having an enormous extended family, everyone knew my parents, my grandmother, etc - for years after I left for college when I'd run into family friends and acquaintances at the grocery store or at mass everyone always told me how proud they were of me. Soon after I began presenting as masculine,

of gender and desire inform Chicano patriarchy, offered critiques and perverse readings of Chicana/o cultural production, and documented a gendered and sexed Chicana history that turned Chicano history on its head

all those comments stopped and were replaced with judging stares and stares of pity directed at my parents. All of a sudden I felt unwelcomed and mostly felt like I had lost my home. When I am there, it is uncomfortable for me, but I refuse to give up a space that I know will always be a part of me.

Secondly, when I began a doctoral program at UCSB where I thought I would find support, I encountered homophobia and transphobia from one of my own cohort mates. A young Chicano made it a point to ask quite a few members of our cohort, "do you think they have a dick?" According to Perez's article that I cited earlier, this was this young man's attempt to confirm the absence of a "legitimate phallus" and reaffirm the law of the father - and a strategy for "putting women back in their rightful place". My own masculine presentation and positioning was soon disavowed, and I felt as though I was constructed as a "deceiver". This works hand in hand with how our assumptions about gender are fixed, my perpetrator constructed me as a deceiver or pretender - invariably denying and preventing my existence - all of you here know that deceiver and pretender are not far from traitor. This incident marked this space, as not mine - this was not a life-affirming sitio, as I was robbed of my right to share with my colegas how I identified, how I saw myself.

The last example happened just yesterday, as I checked in at the registration table. I have not legally changed my name and on most "official" documents go by my first initial - J. and my middle name "Frances". I had registered as J. Frances Galarte but my name tag read J. Frank Galarte - interlaced with the name confusion was gender confusion, I realized I was being read as a man, as I was informed about MALCS' women-only policy at workshops, panels and the banquet. As soon as I clarified I was indeed both "Frank" and "Frances" the name confusion gave light upon the gender confusion and it was determined that I was welcome at all the "women only" spaces - but in the back of my mind all I could think was, "am I really welcome?" These name/gender trouble situations are the hardest for me when it is with Chicana and Latina elders whom I respect and admire... I was not offended or angry, just concerned about my presence - I know I don't fully identify as a woman, but I sure as hell do not consider myself to be a "man" at least not a man who wants access to varying degrees of power and privilege to exert upon women. This is precisely why I say that I experience discomfort and uncertainty a majority of the time, because I really don't know who I'm going to be read as or what kind of (safe/unsafe) encounters I've have on a given day.

For those of us who occupy that in between space or that excess of

gendered/racialized/sexualized categories - transformation, compassion and reconciliation

are always in flux - as is a constant state of vulnerability. I am vulnerable as I stand here

today to tell you my story, but I am open to that risk, as Anzaldúa asks us to be open to

taking emotional risks in her essay, “(Un)safe Spaces, (Un)natural Bridges,” I am open to take the risk of being wounded because in some shape or form I am wounded everyday. I do this because of my commitment to the wish to repair, and to heal our wounds as a community of Chicanas, Chicanos, Chican@s, (our wounds being those bequeathed to us by colonization and the wounds we impart on each other via the destructive behaviors condoned and maintained through patriarchy). As you do, I seek faithful allies. I think we all understand that the issue at hand more than just inclusion, it is about survival – and in order to survive, we must build the coalitions and spaces necessary to create and share a language that revitalizes, heals and nurtures that survival.

I recently completed my dissertation and my journey through graduate school has been just as much about learning theory as it has been about the theories I have created from the intimate spaces of oppression and fear that largely framed my livelihood. Being an academic who writes about a community that is continually disavowed and described as vulnerable and “at-risk “while being a part of that community is a difficult task. Why? Because I know the numbers, or rather I know that myself and transgender women of color specifically are more likely to be victims of transphobic and homophobic violence.⁶ This is why I know that I am a survivor and significantly privileged to be able to stand here to share the words I am sharing with you today. From my research, and knowing the very little literature there is about transgender Chicana/o and Latina/o populations - I know that most of what we know, we learn in relationship to rates of violence and death among transgender people. At this point, I think we can no longer ignore transphobia’s role

⁶See the National Coalition for Anti-Violence Programs Annual Reports for more info: www.ncavp.org

alongside homophobia, sexism and racism - they all work systematically to control and condition our communities - and we as a community further that violence and damage by ignoring it because we do not fully understand transgender identities and practices or because they make us uncomfortable. As noted by Linda Heidenreich, "Chicana and progressive Chicanos continue to challenge rigid gender roles, but we have yet to successfully challenge either white or Chicano masculinity" (63). There are connections between violence against women and violence against transgender populations, According to Witten and Eyer:

Violence against transgenders bears many similarities to violence against women and to anti-homosexual victimization...Violence against women (committed by men) is often justified by the perpetrators as...a reasonable action to take against a woman who is transgressing social restraints...Sexual violence against transgenders often receives similar justification...perpetrators often believe that a person who transgresses the norms of gendered sexuality, either by engaging in sexual relationships with members of the 'non-opposite' gender, or by behaving as the other gender, is deviant or morally defective, and thus a deserving victim of violence and aggression. (463)

In case you didn't know, men of color are grossly overrepresented as perpetrators of homophobic and transphobic violence – this is part of patriarchy's destruction of our community.

As I mentioned previously, I seek faithful allies and as Gloria Anzaldúa has taught us, building bridges is an act of will and an act of love, and a "promise to be present with the pain of others without losing ourselves to it" (Anzaldúa 4). In my own work, that is why I began to develop this concept of *el sabor del amor y del dolor*, in an effort to develop a *lengua* for talking about the emotions, or affects that we experience as we

experience oppression, desubjugation and dehumanization⁷. *El sabor del amor y del dolor* is both a theoretical framework and a reflective practice - it requires being in a state of hermeneutic uncertainty, because one must be attuned to what they feel, it requires that one be present to their own emotions and to the emotions of others. It is also a return to the body, which is formed by and through our encounters with pleasures, pain, pleasures that are painful, etc – in other words, the racialized, gendered, sexed body is a site of embodied knowledge whose contours and boundaries are formed by such encounters and also conditioned by them. In the *Decolonial Imaginary*, Pérez writes, “the body is historically and socially constructed...it is written upon by the environment, by clothes, diet, exercise, illnesses, accidents...it is written upon by the kind of sex that is practiced upon the body and that the body practices” (“Decolonial Imaginary” 108). This is to say that the material body itself is engraved with psychic desires that manifest themselves in multiple ways, both through bodily practices but also in response to society’s repressive drive to discipline bodies that unhinge stable subject positions. Just as society and repressive discursive regimes seek to discipline the body into “normal,” categories our bodies push back. Anzaldúa writes,

We all respond to pain and pleasure in similar ways. Imagination, a function of the soul, has the capacity to extend us beyond the confines of our skin, situation, and condition so we can choose our responses. It enables us to reimagine our lives, rewrite the self, and create guiding myths for our times. (5)

⁷ For more on “*el sabor del amor y del dolor*” see my dissertation entitled, “El Sabor del Amor y del Dolor: Violence, Affect and the (Trans)Body in the Chican@ Historical Imaginary”

Therefore, we must be open to our feelings with each other especially when we are trying to work together to lay foundations for a future of change, we must inevitably bridge across our fears of what has never been...

I have one final story to share, that is an example of me being open to the feelings of others and the negotiations I must make to maintain these ever important life sustaining *sitios*;

Two days ago I was driving with my parents from Tucson to Brawley and we stopped in Yuma to eat and my Ama loves to hit the casino - so she convinced me that she and my Apa should go to the casino and that I should work on my platica and my grading at starbucks since she does not have internet at her house. I agreed, it is afterall my mom, how can I say no? When her and my father returned she peaked her head in the door to call me, and when the barista greeted her, my mom replied, "No, I'm not buying anything, I'm just picking up my daughter!". I immediately, put my bag down and said, "Ama!" and she looked at me and said, "What? You're still my daughter, aren't you?" I stood quiet for a moment, and I looked at her and replied, "yes, Ama, I'm still your daughter."

I said this and believe this because right now I know it means far more for my mother to know that I value all that she taught me as her daughter, than it means to me to have her see me as and refer to me as her son, because she doesn't know me as her son yet, we've only just begun to know each other in that way — but together we have begun to make our own bridge to be able to create new ways of knowing and loving each other as *familia*....

I hope that from the *cuentos* that I have given you today and the writings of Chicana feminist scholars, we can all begin a conversation is difficult and uncomfortable,

but perhaps find some kind of home together as we venture towards creating that which we do not yet know...

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