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Queer Girls in Class

Lesbian Teachers and Students Tell Their Classroom Stories

Lori Horvitz, Editor



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When we are in love, all our senses are heightened and we discover ourselves in brand new ways by allowing others into our space, into our bodies, into our minds.

Through the physicalization of learning I came into myself. I connected with untouched parts of me and came into a new community, a new history, a new story of who I could become. And when I lugged my bags of books from Dr. Carbone's office to the library, I found Anaïs, took her out, brought her back to my room, and fell in love again.

“Who Do I Have to Forgive to Move On From This Place?”: *Meditations from a Third World Feminist Lesbian*

Kristie Soares



My favorite quote from famed scholar/activist/healer Gloria Anzaldúa reads, “Some of us are leftists, some of us are practitioners of magic. Some of us are both” (*This Bridge* 209). Indeed, after years of Women’s Studies coursework and a lifetime of enacting border identities, I have come to recognize that in any situation I am undeniably “both.” I am both she and he, both the border crosser and the border guard, both the lawbreaker and the law itself. I began my journey as a Ph.D. student at a prestigious California university with this quote, and the concept of “both,” fresh in my mind. After several years of being a nomad—living in Miami, Gainesville, Boulder, and back again—I had finally arrived in California. It was here that my partner and I had decided to settle. It was here that we were going to register to vote, plant flowers in our back yard, and finally paint the walls of our home. It was in California that I was going to finally become “myself,” pin down this nomadic identity, and figure out who “I” was. It was here that I could finally stop living as “both” and be “one.” Just “one.”

The first quarter of my Ph.D. program, I enrolled in a seminar entitled Decolonizing Feminism, taught by none other than one of my idols—U.S. Third World Feminist scholar Chela Sandoval. What I did not know at the time was that this course would threaten my desire for a stable identity and bring me back, once again, to what Anzaldúa called a *nepantla* state—the condition of being between conditions, of being a bridge maker, of being always decidedly “both.” It is from this

nepantla state that I have learned to negotiate graduate school, and from which I write this meditation today. What follows is a compilation of academic and personal musings that chronicle how my experiences in a Decolonizing Feminism course helped me to survive my first year as a third world feminist lesbian in a Ph.D. program.

In college I was a revolutionary. I was a performance poet. I was an activist. I was everything that I have spent the rest of my twenties trying to recapture. Every time I performed poetry on stage with someone else, every show I helped organize, every feminist classroom I sat in, I was doing the difficult coalition work that I have since only read about in most graduate classrooms. It was a time when my identity was "at the edge of the skin," as I shared myself freely with those around me (Rowe 35). It was a time when sameness was not a prerequisite for holding the same social vision, and people came together.

Then I went to graduate school, where performing power is nine tenths of the game and coalition doesn't help you get ahead in the graduate classroom. It was a difficult transition that demanded I develop a consciousness to help me navigate my different performances of self. I had to develop an awareness that could witness all of the other versions of "me," which is what Anzaldúa calls "conocimiento." I had to find some way to avoid buying into the roles I was playing. As Anzaldúa says, "After years of wearing masks we may become just a series of roles, the constellated self limping along with its broken limbs" (*Making Face* xv). During the first year of my Ph.D. program I struggled to create a consciousness that kept me in touch with the interface between these masks.

When I arrived in California I was in the process of searching for new ways to deepen my *conocimiento*. I had become so proficient in the language of White male Eurocentric philosophy and could play the game so convincingly that I had become, I feared, one of "them." I was afraid that I had abandoned my roots and internalized everything I had intended to rebel against. What if graduate school had only pushed me further away from the spiritual being that I had been all along?

I was thinking about these issues when I read Cherríe Moraga's essay "Long Line of *Vendidas*." I wrote:

I am so conflicted about Moraga's piece! I've read it many times before and recognize that it gives voice to thoughts I myself have had: "White lesbians don't get me"... "You couldn't pay me to go to the Michigan Womyn's

Festival"... "It's not cool to claim you're a lesbian if you don't sleep with women"... But at the same time all of these thoughts are ones I would later go on to question once I pushed myself to think critically. Although it's true that certain groups of feminists or lesbians don't feel welcoming to me, my antagonism toward them doesn't make it any better. So when Moraga makes sweeping statements about White women it drives me crazy because she's erecting boundaries between people, but at the same time she's echoing the little voice inside of me that thinks things like: 'Why did I sign up for a graduate class in the English department? These dry White people have no interest in talking about anything socially relevant.'

Indeed, my attempts at achieving a greater level of coalition building had often led me to the issues I expressed in this free write. Although on a spiritual level I felt a connection with all beings, it was often hard to witness this kinship in certain situations. Just as Moraga expressed disillusionment with the behavior of some white feminists, so too had I found myself frustrated with the behavior of certain colleagues since arriving at my Ph.D. program.

This power struggle became most apparent in the graduate classroom, which seemed to exist primarily as a space for graduate students to flaunt their knowledge. Each week I would grow more and more frustrated as my colleagues manipulated the conversation with talk about dead philosophers, rather than material realities. In one instance, during a class discussion about exile, important contributions about the conditions of political exile (poverty, feelings of displacement, etc.) were deflected by one student's diatribe on the meaning of the word "political." What had started as an open dialogue about the implications of political exile art, quickly deteriorated into this student's quest to define politics, from Aristotle onward. In this class, as in other academic settings, I often watched angrily as my colleagues lost themselves in the rhetorical and linguistic games of academic theory, in order to escape dealing with existing social inequalities—inequalities that affected my life as a lesbian, a Latina, and a human being.

Once again I found myself having to deal with the difficulties of doing *nepantlera* work. How can I create bridges between my world and the purely theoretical world of my colleagues? How can I avoid seeing them as the enemy? How can I learn to care about what they say, when they clearly have no interest in what I say? What happens if I don't form these coalitions? Will I find, as feminist scholar Maria Lugones does, that "the more independent I am, the more independent

I am left to be?" (7). Over and over again in this situation I forced myself to remember Moraga's words: "any movement built on the fear and loathing of anyone is a failed movement" (190). For me, the first year of my Ph.D. program was an exercise in working through this fear and loathing. It was a process of remembering that different skin color, sexual identity, and theoretical vocabulary are poor indicators of a person's truth.

Moving to California also brought up issues of cultural identity for me. I am, inescapably, a half-breed: half Cuban heritage and half Brazilian heritage, half American citizen and half ethnic Other, half here and half there. I grew up in a Latin American family, but I have spent my entire adult life living in primarily White towns interacting with primarily White folks. I would be lying if I didn't admit that I sometimes feel more at home outside of my hometown of Miami. Moving out West brought up many of these issues of cultural belonging that I thought I had dealt with years before. To my surprise, a move across the country will bring up skeletons you had long shoved in the back of the closet. You could say it swung the door of my closet wide open—so to speak.

I faced this cultural baggage during one session of our Decolonizing Feminism class. As part of a small group exercise I was asked: "What tools do you have to combat colonization?" I wrote:

How do I combat colonization? I do it by being smarter than the colonizer, because I can never change the way I look but I can change how much I know. So it's true I often have slip ups in any of the languages I speak... My Spanish vocabulary never seems to be large enough to express my opinions in Spanish graduate seminars. A slip of the tongue usually gives me away as a second-generation Brazilian when speaking Portuguese. Even my English has felt limited, with several botched idioms when trying to communicate with my American office mates. But at least I speak 3 more languages than most people in power. It's true that I didn't go to private school, but do you have a PhD? It's true that I'm brown and a lesbian, but when I'm a professor and your kid is in my class I have the power to teach him anything I want.

In this free write I echoed many of the cultural issues that I had faced since moving to California: issues of feeling like the only brown person in a primarily white town, issues of having to use my high level of education as a first line of defense against prejudice, issues of always feeling out of place in my native languages. The most difficult part of the situation, however, was feeling left out even amongst those that

shared my culture. As the only out lesbian in my Ph.D. program, I often found that other Latinas misunderstood my experiences as much as my White colleagues did.

I received a lesson in looking past these differences during one session of Decolonizing Feminism. In a discussion about gender roles, one female Latina student shared: "When my husband gets home at 7:00 I feel compelled to start cooking and cleaning. I don't know why. He doesn't ask me to, but when he's home it just feels right, in a way it doesn't when he's not home." I was shocked to hear this student share these feelings, because—much to my surprise—I could relate. I later wrote:

Girl I feel you. But not in the way you think. I'm not going to pretend I've done a large amount of research on what it'd be like to be a heterosexual female, but I can say that in all my years of dating men I never felt so entrenched in a female role as I do in my lesbian relationship now. My girlfriend and I are both what you might call "femme" lesbians (a term that can barely begin to get at the various ways one can be both a woman and a lesbian). But yet even with her long hair and occasional skirt wearing, something about her still makes me feel like I should be grabbing a dishrag.

In this free write I meditated on the unexpected similarities between myself—a queer graduate student in a long-term relationship—and my classmate—a heterosexual, married undergraduate. I was surprised to find that I felt oppressed by gender roles in a way that was similar to my classmate. How could I have missed such an obvious connection? I asked myself. Why would I assume that I have nothing in common with this classmate, just because she was straight and an undergraduate? How many other similarities must there be between myself and my other classmates?

This free write served as a way for me to come to terms with my own tendency to see differences between myself and others. It was a concrete reminder of the work that I must continue to do to "decolonize" myself, and to be able to build coalitions. It showed me that being intellectually committed to third world feminism is not enough. One must do the inner work that the third world feminists advocate, in order to be the kind of person that can truly articulate a third world feminist coalitional politics.

The turning point in the first year of my Ph.D. program came during one session of my Decolonizing Feminism course after reading the words

of third world feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander. Alexander writes about the process of coalition building, stating that it is a daily practice requiring: “revolutionary patience, courage, and above all humility” (101). Reading this statement caused a shift in my consciousness. If only I could learn to have the patience and bravery necessary to be humble (a quality not generally prized in graduate school), I realized I would be able to make deeper connections with others. If only I could forgive my colleagues for seeing me as other, I could stop othering them as well. If only I could move past the boundaries between myself and others, I would realize there are no boundaries between myself and others. After the reading the article, I wrote the following:

This article is literally changing my life...it offers a way to do the activist work I've been called to do in academia but feed my soul at the same time... but at the same time it's scary because making coalition with people on this profound level—not just to get what you want, but to heal and decolonize yourself—is very scary. It requires accepting who you are and revealing it to other people...it requires forgiving them for staring at me when I walk down the street holding hands with my partner. It's difficult, but I'm ready to heal. Who do I have to forgive to move on from this place?

To me this free write represents the definitive point in my journey toward *conocimiento*, or awareness. At the moment when I wrote these words, I opened myself up to a witnessing consciousness that was able to observe me as I observed these feelings. The moment was so profound that within days I found I had been transformed. It was as though my question, “Who do I have to forgive to move on from this place?” was instantly answered.

By tapping into this consciousness I came to realize over the next several days that my experiences over the past few months did not represent the totality of my being. During these months I had been erecting barriers between others and myself for survival in my Ph.D. program. Although I did not recognize it at the time, they were modes of resistance that I had employed to survive. For me, witnessing a level of consciousness in which I could dis-identify with these tropes marked a definitive point in my *conocimiento*. It allowed me to see myself as more than just the sum of my actions, thought patterns, and identity categories. It pushed me to see myself as I had before becoming a graduate student—as a spiritual being doing profoundly spiritual work in an academic setting. This confirmation of my nature has influenced my interactions with others, my coalition building, and

my feminist politics. It has brought me again to the *nepantlera* state from where I write this meditation on being a third world feminist lesbian in academia today.

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