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# Fiera, Guambra, y Karichina!: Transgressing the Borders of Community and Academy

Patricia Herrera

*University of Richmond*, pherrera@richmond.edu

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*Fiera, Guambra, y Karichina!*Transgressing the Borders of  
Community and Academy

Jennifer Ayala, Patricia Herrera, Laura Jiménez, and Irene Lara

As Latinas with diverse biographies in and out of the university,<sup>1</sup> we share a commitment to actively engage with all of our communities. As students and teachers, we are expected to leave our personal lives out of our “intellectual” workspaces, causing feelings of isolation and fragmentation (hooks, 1994). We are concerned with the ways we can maintain a sense of connection and wholeness for our well-being and that of our communities. Our collaboration with the National Latina Health Organization’s (NLHO)<sup>2</sup> Intergenerational Latina Health Leadership Project has enabled us to work toward this goal. This project provides a revolutionary model for holistic health education that includes university courses, regional conferences, community partnerships, and student internships. Together, these components offer an opportunity to participate in an integral educational experience that is aimed at co-creating the field of Latina health and dismantling a hierarchical model of teaching and learning.

In this chapter, we share our reflections about the project’s successes and challenges and why we feel it has been a transformative experience for all involved. Having had numerous discussions as we developed the course, planned for conferences, and prepared public presentations, we found that these *pláticas* (intimate conversations, see Godinez this volume) have inspired some of the clearest articulations of our pedagogical theories and methods. So, following our commitment to integrate ways of knowing and teaching from in and out of academia, we have chosen to employ what in academia might be considered a nontraditional method to collectively write this article to be reflective of our dialogues (see Smith & Smith, 1983). We, Jennifer Ayala (JA) and Patricia Herrera (PH), co-instructors of the Hunter College course, Laura Jiménez (LJ), consultant and former Program Director of the NLHO’s Intergenerational Latina Health Leadership Project, and Irene Lara (IL), co-instructor of the UC Berkeley course, held a series of bicoastal discussions from Fall 2001 to Spring 2003. The edited transcriptions of these telephone and e-mail discussions as well as the historical background of the project follow. Although the four of us are the co-authors, the creativity, determination, and commitment of

many women have fueled the project and collaborative on both coasts. *Muchas gracias hermanas* (thank you sisters) for your commitment, faith, and work on this project.<sup>3</sup>

### NUESTRA HISTORIA: THE INTERGENERATIONAL LATINA HEALTH LEADERSHIP PROJECT

The NLHO and graduate students from UC Berkeley and the CUNY Graduate Center collaboratively developed the “Redefining Latina Health: Body, Mind and Spirit” course with input from Hunter College undergraduate students. The course was born out of our collective desire to reintegrate our whole being into our learning and teaching processes and as a means toward creating community within as well as outside the university setting. The process began in California with the partnership of the NLHO and the Chicana/Latina Studies Working Group at UC Berkeley. The NLHO, a nonprofit, community-based organization (CBO) has worked toward the empowerment of Latinas through health education, public policy, and advocacy since 1986. The Working Group was formed in 1997 for graduate students to support each other’s work in Chicana/Latina-related issues. Together they created the “Redefining Latina Health” course first offered at UC Berkeley in the fall of 1998 by the Department of Chicana/o Studies; the Women’s Studies Department joined in sponsoring the class the following year.

The course is unique in that it incorporates an interdisciplinary approach and uses the NLHO’s “Self-Help Process” to discuss health issues in a broad context. Paulita Ortiz, one of the NLHO’s co-founders, developed this peer counseling method based on the models of the National Black Women’s Health Project and the Re-evaluation Counseling Communities. (Avery, 1994; Silliman, Fried, Ross, and Gutiérrez, 2004). A spiritual, intellectual, and emotional process, it brings people together for support with the goal of healing wounds inflicted by oppression and facilitating social change. At the heart of “the process” is the assumption that all individuals have within themselves the ability and the resources to heal their own wounds. Once reconnected with this power of self-transformation, a space for collective action and community transformation moves from theory to possibility. The NLHO strongly believes that the most effective way to affect social change, locally, nationally, and internationally, is through the facilitation of personal transformation. This Self-Help Process is distinct from individualist self-help models because it is grounded in a political desire for liberatory systemic change. In practice, the process takes place in trainings or support groups, also called healing circles, and entails people telling their own stories, or “sessioning,” in groups of two or more. The counselors, or “listeners,” are trained in peer counseling techniques

that assist the “storytellers” with sharing their experiences and “discharging,” or *desahogándose* (which literally means “undrowning”), and in this sense, releasing the emotions that can be suffocating.

The Process is taught to the graduate student instructors who then integrate it into their teaching and use it to maintain cohesion with each other and the NLHO Program Coordinator throughout their co-teaching experience. In addition, it is offered as extra credit “training” to the students in the course. As a defining component of the course’s pedagogy, the instructors and students incorporate the Process’s theories and methods into the classroom to facilitate the processing of knowledge learned in and out of the class. It asks students, “Now that we have this information, and we better understand our selves and society, what are we going to do? How do we put our theories into action?” The Self-Help Process breaks down the isolation perpetuated by a capitalist system and shows people how to regain their healthy self-esteem and behaviors.

To fully integrate the Process, we carefully considered the structure of the class. How can we encourage students to tell their stories when they have been schooled to automatically regurgitate the information that an instructor offers? We consciously attempted to blur the constructed power differences between teacher and student by sitting in a circle. Because we understand that life’s challenges affect how we engage in our daily activities and consequently how we participate in class, we begin each class with a “check-in” as a way of acknowledging the present state we are in. When you bring your feelings to the table you begin to understand the obstacles that prevent you from participating fully in your life, what we refer to as “being present.” The check-in varies from discussing how you are feeling to posing a question that encourages participants to relate to the topic of the day. By also participating in the check-ins, we further demystify the traditional separation between student and teacher.

“Checking-in” clears a space for the class to more fully engage with the issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality raised in the course readings, films, visual art, and lectures, as well as by guest speakers, community involvement, writing assignments and class discussions. Together, we examine how these social categories are crucial to the understanding of Latina health. Moreover, emphasizing community-university links, the course also includes an internship component in which the students can elect to do a ten-week internship with the NLHO or with other CBOs. In designing and adapting the curriculum to represent our students, we have always taken their social locations into account. Out of a total estimated 200 students enrolled in the course in California and New York since its inception, about 90 percent have been women. Although we have welcomed the participation of men in the classroom, we have made sure that the focus is about the experiences of women and how men may participate in the oppression of women. In the fall of 1999, when this project traveled to the east coast, the NLHO Program Coordinator and

one of the Berkeley co-instructors met with constituents at Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center students to initiate a new collaborative in New York City. As it was established, the dialogue among the NLHO, undergraduate students and prospective graduate student instructors helped shape the course, adding and subtracting readings to change it from a Chicana focus to reflect the Caribbean influence in New York City's Latina/o population.

Expanding discussions of course topics to a broader audience, a component of the project has been the organization of Intergenerational Latina Health conferences by the NLHO, community volunteers, and students. In April 1999, the NLHO's first Intergenerational Conference, "A Celebration of Latinas Coming of Age," offered workshops at UC Berkeley on Desire and the Erotic, Birth Control Options, Violence in Relationships, and Reproductive Health and Rights among other topics to over 300 participants. In October 2000, the Second Intergenerational Conference, "Haciéndose Mujeres: A Celebration of Latinas Coming of Age" took place at the City College of New York. More than 150 people participated in workshops, which included Oppression, Power and Sexuality, Access to Health Care: Know Your Rights, and Substance Use/Abuse and Decision-Making. Several of the workshop presenters and many of the conference self-help facilitators, volunteers, and participants were students from Hunter and UC Berkeley, including the graduate student instructors.

And now, to begin our journey together NLHO style, as we did at the beginning of every "Redefining Latina Health: Body, Mind and Spirit" class, we invite you to "check-in" with us by asking yourselves the following question as a way of centering yourself and preparing to be present for our dialogue.

*How do you identify yourself and what does this identity have to do with health?*

LJ: I am a woman under construction, Chicana, sometimes Xicana, Latina, Mexican, most recently Indigenous and quite possibly Asian and African. I am third generation of my family on this side of the imaginary line they call the US-Mexico border and first generation of my family in New York. I decline to label my sexuality but instead prefer to say I desire. I am committed to the health of my body-mindspirit as I am to that of my daughter, mother, grandmothers, and my many *hermanas*. I show this in the support I offer my *compañeras*, my commitment to healing myself and the many wounds inflicted on my communities by colonization.

PH: I am my dreams and in them, I remember that I am a dove seeing what is to come and following the waters that take me home. I become one with the sun, my fire and source of energy. I am a first-generation Ecu-American. But I feel culturally connected to my Nuyorican and Chicano brothers and sisters. I am *mestiza*. My mother a white Ecuadorian. My father, an Afro-Ecuadorian, claims no connection to his blackness. But when I look in the waters, I see the rebirth of my ancestral roots—Indigenous, African, and Spanish. Their spirit plus my soul close to nature live in and on my body. Who am I? I am a sun woman always in the process of becoming, learning about the rays I radiate.

JA: As a daughter of diasporas-meeting-at-the-borderlands, I've learned to speak the tongues of tradition and creation. I've also learned to recognize the many faces of violence, oppression's stepchild. On the outside, in policies that say "Go! You do not belong. You do not deserve." In structures that whisper "We moved the clouds to your sky, so the sun can shine in ours."<sup>4</sup> And on the inside, where the shadows are cast, we sometimes drink the poisoned rain, and spit it on each other, killing the spirit of too many in our communities. With my sisters and allies I am/we are actors, together a force! We sift through injustices, so long draped in collective silence, and solder the fragments, piece by piece, with our hopes and dreams, our *respeto* and love, our spirits and communities strong. Such is the journey of healing.

IL: Grounded in the lands of *Guanajuato* before and after 1521, and *las Californias* before and after 1848, I feel an affinity to all my sisters and brothers in *las Américas*. I am a woman learning not to fear my spiritual and sexual knowledge. Learning to trust the spirit signs in the world and ensouled in my flesh. I know myself to be healthy when emotionally present and spiritually aware. When able to use all of my faculties in pursuit of intimacy, understanding, and social change. When able to live in faith. *Fé en mi misma, en la fuerza divina*. I know myself to be healthy when I kiss my flayed fingertips instead of bite *mis uñas inocentes*. I know myself to be healthy when I kiss yours and ask you to make this healing journey with me. With us.

## IDENTITIES AND ALLIANCES

*What do we mean when we say Redefining Latina Health: Body, Mind and Spirit?*

- IL: First of all, historically when anything about Latinas is taught in the university, it is typically by non-Latinas. We, as Chicana and Latina instructors, are redefining what is perceived as the typical college instructor as well as what is viewed as "legitimate" curriculum and pedagogy. We are the subjects of this course, the co-creators of knowledge, and not just the objects of studies that historically have been full of negative assumptions. Through our teaching, we're also in a position to empower students to view themselves as active subjects of knowledge rather than as receptacles ready to be filled with the knowledge we impart to them. Like many decolonizing and/or feminist thinkers before us (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1990; Butler and Walter, 1991; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), we're redefining the ways we understand and enact the production of knowledge.
- LJ: It was important to create and teach a class focused on Latinas because it places us within a historical context of communities, students, and teachers who have fought and continue to fight to be included in institutions of higher education, both in the curriculum and as teachers and learners. It gives honor to our *madrinas* (godmothers) who, by insisting that gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity (among other social structures) be addressed, affirmed that they had something distinct to add to the fields of Chicano/Latino Studies and/or Women's Studies (e.g., Latina Feminist Group, 2001). In the process of developing the course, we continually had to justify the need for a course solely on Chicanas and Latinas. Our response is, "Why shouldn't we have this class to share and analyze our own experiences, when up until now our schooling has silenced us and made us invisible?" It was also a really important opportunity to present a broader, more holistic idea about what health is. When we talk about health in the West, we're usually talking about, "What condition is your body?" or sometimes, "What condition is your mind?" When we put this project together we really wanted to talk about our physical and mental health, yes, but it's also important to talk about what we as Latinas deal with in our own experiences, and that is our spiritual or emotional health. How do we negotiate our various experiences and relationships to stay healthy?
- PH: The course is also about engaging with the students on many academic, social, and personal levels. In order to integrate body, mind, spirit, we must listen to each other's stories without judgment, be open to personal experiences, and then connect them with what is happening socially. When we listen to each other's experiences, we realize that non-Latinos are experiencing similar oppressions and so our commonalities are at the

forefront and we can then begin to build alliances. Because our class included Jamaicans, Haitians, Trinidadians, African Americans, and other people of color the question “Where do I stand in the midst of this whole Latino/Latina identity issue?” was pressing and it opened us to new ways of defining Latinidad. “What does it mean to be a Latina? Can a person from a different culture identify with or as Latinos/as?” It was really exciting to witness how the definition of “Latina” evolved and we came back to it throughout the semester as the subject got deliciously complicated. Our Latinanness is so rich and complex and changes depending on how we define home. The issues we bring to the classroom as instructors are intrinsically related to the fact that Irene and Laura are Chicanas or that my parents are from Ecuador and that Jennifer’s mother is from Cuba and her father is from Ecuador, or that we grew up in California or in New York. We concluded that the term Latina was not solely fixated on the idea of ancestral lineage to Latin America but in how we experience and resist the various systems of oppression (for more on the politics of identity and Latinidad see Flores, 1993; Fusco, 1995; Moya and Hames-Garcia, 2001).

- JA: Identity was something that was a focus of redefinition throughout the semester. In the New York area, as the history behind Hunter’s Black and Puerto Rican Studies Department reflects, Latina and Black identities are often connected. My sense from talking to you, Laura, is that in California, if there’s any connection made by Chicanas and Latinas at all, it is based on indigenous roots and there’s not much acknowledgment of an African past. It’s interesting how the different regional constructions of Latinidad impact the alliances we make.

*What are the “borderlands” we occupy in doing this work?*

- LJ: Well, I would say, we’re standing right in the middle of the borderlands between our communities at home and in the university, so that the space of the class really is the borderlands that we’re standing in. It’s trying to make that bridge or validate both of those experiences for ourselves as we’re standing in and moving between both worlds. The complexity of having these multiple interweaving identities—as students, women, Latinas, members of many communities—is often not recognized by our communities or in the university. Also, the concept of “bodymindspirit” is in itself a kind of borderlands because it’s not truly recognized the way we’re talking about it. We’re talking about bodymindspirit being indivisible (Lara, 2002).
- IL: Another way we’re creating a borderlands space is that as graduate students we’re in the borderlands between faculty and undergraduates, enabling us to make an impact in both directions of the imposed hierarchy.

It is telling that we were able to develop and teach a class that not only collaborates with a community organization, but also incorporates emotions, the bodymindspirit in ways that tenure-track faculty may be less likely to. Why? For one, pressures to meet institutional demands to research and publish discourage time-consuming collaborations with the community. A general lack of institutional support shadows the experiences of faculty of color, women in particular (Padilla and Chavez, 1995; Turner and Myers, 1999). We know that students of color already disproportionately turn to women of color faculty for support and, feeling overburdened with all the other pressures that “count” in academia, professors may try to protect themselves. Furthermore, academic training is influenced by Western binary paradigms that subordinate the body and spirit to the “rational” mind as the sole or primary source of knowledge and so does not typically validate addressing emotional concerns in the classroom—nor does it teach the pedagogical tools for doing so. In academic spaces we may talk about how “the personal is political,” yet there remains a hesitancy to theorize from our own wounds and act on the need for healing and transformation (for notable exceptions see Anzaldúa, 1990; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Anzaldúa & Moraga, 1983; hooks, 1994; James & Farmer, 1993; Latina Feminist Group, 2002). Our classroom as a borderlands is not a completely safe space, but we are attempting to construct it as a safer space to critically yet compassionately reflect on these issues because we see how it can empower students to participate in social change.

PH: We’re not only crossing borders academically and culturally, but pedagogically as well. The philosophy of this project is that graduate students teach the course and then pass on the information to the next person. Recently, a former student co-taught the course with me. So border-crossing is about structural changes in the classroom as well as social changes outside of the classroom. As we are crossing borders we desire to connect or to “(be)long” in a community and the result of that is creating affinities among various social groups.<sup>5</sup> It reminds me of how homophobia led Cherrie Moraga to “make familia from scratch each time all over again . . . with strangers, if [she] must” (1994). Like Moraga’s character, who realizes that “If I must, I will” (p. 35), this course is about building alliances, even if it means going outside of one’s own ethnic or other communities. The idea of “borderlands” includes physically and metaphorically erasing rigid borders. We’re breaking those walls down so that regardless of differences we can cross at any given moment to work as a community.<sup>6</sup>

IL: We’re taking down those walls that keep us from each other through our class content and pedagogy. Through our engagement with community speakers or others who aren’t necessarily “Ph.D. authorities,” for example,

we're modeling a nonhierarchical way of how to be with each other in the classroom and the world. Imperative to making our human connections clearer is moving beyond our own internalized walls and becoming conscious about the ways divisions have been imposed on us. In addition to looking at the ways we're transgressing ethnic and racial borders, it's been important to examine class and sexuality borders, all the dynamic multiplicities within each cultural identity. So, how do differences and racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic assumptions about differences impinge on our relationships with each other? How can we create solidarity across our differences? Our approach of interweaving diverse sexualities into the multiplicity of Latinidad in particular challenged some students to rethink their oppressive assumptions about "Latina/o" identity and community.

#### RISKS, VULNERABILITIES, AND CHALLENGES IN OUR PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGY

*How does our pedagogy question "legitimate" ways of learning and knowing?*

- LJ: Since the creation of this class, we have tried to dismantle hierarchies that are traditionally found in academia. To this end, the classes have graduate students take the lead with an NLHO representative, and we acknowledge different ways of learning. Students can choose to do research papers, creative projects, oral histories, or internships. They are also required to keep a journal. We have community speakers and internships to legitimate what they're reading in the literature. We're trying to demonstrate that there is more than one legitimate learning experience.
- IL: The first day of class, we presented the assumptions that not only are we all thinkers but that we are also social actors and feelers and have spirits, however you define it.<sup>7</sup> All these human faculties are interrelated aspects of who we are, and in turn we are all interrelated in a social web (hooks, 1994). We made it clear that we're going to use all of these faculties and link our minds with our spirits with our bodies in the co-creation of liberatory knowledge, a political act in and of itself. Moreover, it was very empowering to us as women of color who have been historically excluded from higher education, as well as whose knowledges and epistemologies have been ignored and devalued, to reaffirm and model to our students that "Yes, we can all think and theorize. Our thoughts and feelings are valuable." In transgression of pedagogies that ask us to fragment our selves, we encouraged our students to produce knowledge from a place that links bodymindspirit.

*What have been our most memorable teaching experiences?*

- IL: Before the first day of class in Berkeley we ceremoniously burned sage right outside of Dwinelle Hall and each one of us spoke our intentions for the class.<sup>8</sup> Emoting the nervousness as well as the hopes allowed us to experience that first day in a state of embodied, soulful awareness. By putting our theory, our faith, into practice, we set the tone for what our expectations were from the students. I think it also set the stage for a couple of weeks later when Christina (the fall 1999 co-instructor) and I sessioned each other about what it is like to be teachers in front of the class. We felt fear, yet we knew how important it was for us as instructors to break down the hierarchy of knowledge by being ourselves, being vulnerable in front of the students. I think it enabled many of them to have more courage about expressing their thoughts and emotions. We showed them a different way to be teachers and learners, a way that values the whole self, feelings included.
- JA: One time that sticks out in my mind was when we were discussing public and private violences. Normally, this class was pretty chatty, but on this particular week there was a huge cloud of silence hanging over everyone and at first we couldn't figure out what was going on — had people not done the reading or what? I remember one of the poems we read triggered a student to break the silence. She told her story, *en llanto* (in tears), saying that she just wanted to get it all out. It restimulated<sup>9</sup> a lot of other people in the class, and as instructors we were wondering, "What do we do now?" The reason for the silence became very clear; it was not lack of interest but fear of really engaging this painful issue. This was a powerful moment for me in the class even though it was scary, because it created a strong bond in the class.
- PH: That was such a vivid moment. I remember that I felt like I was putting on multiple hats. Not only were we positioned as instructors, but also as facilitators who speak about the emotions that come up. "Are we going to be the kind of instructors who just continue with the lecture of the day or are we going to stop and acknowledge what has happened?" And I was really glad that Laura was there because she encouraged us to apply the self-help techniques in our class and by extension in our teaching. As academics, we are taught to dismiss the feelings in our experiences, and we are demanded to deal with it in our personal time. What we are doing here is dealing with the issue of violence socially, as a community. So we are not only talking about these issues on a personal level but on a human rights level as well (see Levins Morales, 1998).
- LJ: It was really exciting to hear students express the ways they found to get support and create community. After participating in the self-help trainings, I've

seen students learn to support each other and learn how to ask for support. I've also seen the transformation of students in the classes, and I feel pleased because that was our intention in creating the class. The project was born out of reevaluating our own experiences in academia, recognizing the kinds of support from which we could have benefited, offering that to these new students and having them pass it on. So witnessing all these students creating community was really exciting.

*What was hard about the class, or when did it get hard?*

IL: One of the hardest things for me was getting restimulated by one of the students who reminded me of myself as an undergraduate: overwhelmed and dealing with internalized classism, racism, and sexism. I felt that now I had an opportunity to be the kind of supportive mentor that I needed back then. But it was very difficult because she would miss meetings or extended deadlines when I had made extra efforts. She brought up my own experience of feeling distress in the university, so I was faced with a part of my life that I didn't want to remember, but which obviously was still impacting me (Lara, 2002). I had to remind myself that this was her process and I couldn't "save" her, nobody can, she's going to figure it out in her own way and in her own time, just like I am in the perpetual process of doing.

PH: The hardest part was making ourselves vulnerable. As I was facilitating the healing circles — counseling and being counseled by students — I questioned how much of myself I was going to expose. I was conscious about the number of students who knew very personal information about me and I thought about how it would affect our relationship in class. And I had to let that go. Reminding myself that we created a safe space in our class so we could really share our personal stories, I had to trust that there was going to be confidentiality and respect regardless of the circumstance. One of the positive consequences when blurring such boundaries between instructor and student is that they begin to take responsibility for their knowledge and take the theory and put it into practice. Since we are breaking down the classroom hierarchy, participants had to constantly readjust to this new way of being. For example, three weeks into the class last year, a couple of students approached me and asked, "When is Professor Herrera coming to class?" Of course, at first I was offended by their comment but then realized that this was part of the process. I had not laid out all my academic cards at the forefront and therefore in their eyes I could not possibly be a professor. We decided to raise this issue in class because it wasn't only about the class but about what happens when hierarchies are dismantled. Even when there is a space of liberation, we often

inflict oppression on ourselves and our communities. And that is not what we are looking to perpetuate in the classroom. I wanted them to think on their own, to feel comfortable with their own ideas.

- JA: The whole vulnerability issue was definitely a challenge for me too. Trying to enact our pedagogy and recognizing it as an ongoing process was very cool and rewarding but also a risk and a challenge. It was risky because of the threat to our legitimacy as emerging scholars and educators who, as young women of color, may be held suspect from the get-go. It was risky because we didn't come in with a finished product, saying, "We've redefined the concept of Latina health and this is what it now means." It took me a while to realize this, but what we were doing was engaging the students and ourselves in a process and this process was the redefining. This was challenging because we aren't exactly trained to do instruction this way. Figuring out a way to integrate bodymindspirit as a whole entity and not just having one week on physical health, then mental, then spiritual, and so on, in the classroom was a challenge. How do you teach and model wholeness given the fragmentations we carry?
- LJ: Starting a new project in New York was hard for me because where I thought we were really going to have our best support turned out to be some of the people who challenged us the most. For example, we had a meeting with two Latina professors and although they said they were supportive of what we were doing, they really challenged us and questioned our legitimacy. Having Latinas question us the way that they did, as if we had to prove that what we were doing was legitimate and that we had the expertise to do it, was painful. I got restimulated and began to doubt myself. And that's hard. It takes a lot of courage to be OK with doing things nontraditionally and be able to stand up for that and say, "Yes, this is the way we want it to look. Yeah, we might have some people crying in the class. That's the way it's supposed to look."

## REINTEGRATING COMMUNITY AND UNIVERSITY

*How did the conferences relate to the classes?*

- LJ: The classes facilitated the development of the conferences. By doing the focus groups, and volunteering at the conferences, the students in the classes worked with the NLHO to produce the conferences. In addition to inviting community members to be guest speakers in the class, the conferences were one of the main ways that we brought the community into the university. Families and youth groups came to the conference together and were interacting with the university students. I remember in one of

the workshops in Berkeley I was talking to a young boy and he said, "I feel really good because I didn't really think this was for me, but I'm here and I feel really proud of myself as a Latino because I see other Latinos here in the university, and I know that this is my place too." It was really amazing; you know one of those things that happen once in a while. And at the New York conference, I talked to people who said, "This is great, when are you going to do it again? I didn't know it was going to be like this." They were referring to the integration of the Self-Help Process in the conference and how we not only gave information about reproductive health and sexuality, but, in connection with that, we asked people how they felt about these issues. Most of the time, people don't have the opportunity to talk about their sexuality and reproductive health because nobody ever asks about them outside of a clinical, medical setting.

- JA: The conferences were an expression of the social changes we talked about in class. They ran parallel to the themes of the class and gave participants an opportunity to discuss, raise awareness, and begin to plant the seeds of social change work around these issues. This was an important extension of the class, because it wasn't just about discussing the issues as an intellectual exercise, it involved taking some action—sharing our learning with our mothers, sisters, communities outside of the university.

### REINTEGRATING BODYMINDSPIRIT/OPPORTUNITIES FOR HEALING

*What strategies do we use to reintegrate the often fragmented bodymindspirit?*

- IL: Creating the structure of the conference was a practice of integrating bodymindspirit and legitimizing culturally different epistemologies. For example, in Berkeley we had two Latina keynote speakers: a community health and spiritual leader and an obstetrician-gynecologist. We also maintained a community altar, had a panel discussion about integrating bodymindspirit in our lives and work, and a Santera-musician did a spiritual closing from the Cuban Lucumí tradition.<sup>10</sup> An important lesson for me was seeing the integration as already a part of many people's everyday lives—the thinking with the feeling, the spiritual knowledges with the scientific knowledges. It was valuable to collectively experience the integration on a large scale and within the walls of academia that sometimes feel so disenchanting and fragmenting.
- JA: The check-in process was definitely a strategy. Some of our check-ins explicitly involved using our bodies in connection to the rest of ourselves. For example, we asked students to demonstrate how they were feeling by

using their voices and bodies such as stretching if they were feeling tired. Another time we asked students to “sculpt” or create a sort of still picture image using one another as the “clay,” depicting a form of violence.<sup>11</sup>

PH: That was one of the days I felt my experience in *teatro* was useful. In most cases, the body is usually lifeless as students demonstrate that they are thinking and listening when they diligently sit and take notes (see hooks, 1994). We were asking the students to remember a time when they were a witness to, or a victim of, violence. Within groups, one of them became the sculptor and the rest became the sculptor’s clay. The goal was to physically recreate this moment of violence by molding the body and not speaking. The images were quite compelling. We expanded the exercise by asking the students to either dramatize what would happen next or narrate a story based on the image. Doing this exercise really reminded me how theatre allows the body and the spirit to speak and in doing so we critically discussed public and private violences.

IL: The way that we sat, in a circle so we could see each other’s bodies, was important for trying to integrate bodymindspirit into the classroom dynamic. I made a conscious effort to not sit behind the desk or stand behind the podium even though that initially felt more comfortable, but to be part of the circle because I didn’t want to be this talking head. I am a better teacher when I teach from my bodymindspirit and not just my mind. One of the ways we tried to facilitate “theory in the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) was by collectively creating guidelines at the beginning of the course. These included: maintaining confidentiality, giving full attention to whomever is speaking, listening without judgment (we can agree to disagree, but it is not acceptable to attack someone’s opinion), being conscious that everyone be given a chance to speak, and taking the risk of trusting each other with our stories, feelings, and ideas. Although they weren’t always followed, they did help promote respectful dialogue and we as co-instructors could refer to them when necessary. Having these guidelines facilitates the sharing of personal experiences in a supportive environment and therefore the process of healing. Another strategy we used was the journals; they were valuable in redefining pedagogy to include the subjective and experiential as places of knowledge. They were a space where students could critically reflect and link their experiences with the course materials.

*What opportunities do we provide, facilitate, and engage in for healing?*

JA: Part of what we’ve been talking about is healing. Maybe one of the unstated or implicit goals of this class was to start that process of healing the fragmentations, either initiate it or maintain it or just address it in some way.

- PH: I agree, but it was also important to allow space for those students who were not prepared to go through this journey of healing. I remember that there was one student who did not even want to sit in the circle. Although she did not always participate in all the activities, she definitely went through a transformation. In her final presentation, she admitted her doubts about staying in the class and how initially she did not want to participate in our class community. She recognized that, even if it was the end of the semester, she was finally able to speak out in public and this was an important step for her. We achieved our goal. She was able to evolve and acknowledge the personal commitment necessary to integrate bodymindspirit in her life.
- IL: When I think of healing and transformation, I also think about decolonization—the need to raise consciousness about the ways Western dominant philosophies have been imposed since colonialism. I like how you put it, Laura, that indeed bodymindspirit is indivisible. But we've been taught that, no, there are strict borders and bad things will happen if you transgress them. In our class we discussed how Western binary thinking about the mind/body, spirit/body and thinking/feeling are presented as universal givens. We really began to understand how these are assumptions and not Truths by examining the legacy of colonialism in destroying or disavowing integrated ways of thinking about the self and health, such as *curanderismo* and *santería*. It's an act of pedagogical healing and decolonization to teach culturally different ways of thinking about our selves.
- LJ: When you talk about decolonization and consciousness-raising it makes me think about healing on a physical level. In particular, I was thinking about the discussions we had about the NLHO position papers critiquing Depo Provera and Norplant (see Worcestor and Whatley, 1996). It was really an opportunity for healing and consciousness-raising because although some of the students who shared that they have used or were using these forms of birth control said, "Well, I use it and it's the best thing that's ever happened to me," at least they were getting both sides of the story. There were also those who said, "Yeah, I used it and it messed me up," or "I didn't know about those long-term side effects." I think being able to look at those issues and connect them with colonization, racism, classism, and all the oppressions that we're suffering from leads us to the question, "So why is it that we do things that are not good for us?" Starting to ask those kinds of questions created a critical consciousness.
- JA: Yeah, it's making these connections that is so crucial. To me, the processes of consciousness-raising, transformation, decolonization are a part of the healing process or at least an opportunity for healing—it's not like we've put our hands on their heads and said "you've been healed," maybe it's just facilitating these connections. I'm reminded of students who

were familiar with the film *La Operación* (1982) about the history of sterilization abuse in Puerto Rico, but when they saw it in the context of this class said, "Well, now that I think about it, the same thing is happening in my family, except in the Dominican Republic we call it *prepararse*." It wasn't just an event that occurred sometime in the past in a particular location; it became something that had a direct impact on them individually and collectively. The survey we did with the class about their reproductive health practices was also another opportunity to make these connections.

- LJ: In terms of the survey and the opportunities for healing, I was considering how the students took advantage or didn't take advantage of those opportunities. It gave them an anonymous way of talking about their reproductive health. So we did this survey that was really amazing in New York, asking them, for example, "What contraceptive methods have you used?" And the results of that were interesting—out of so many "educated" people, many were using or had used the "withdrawal" method of birth control. Another surprise was the number of women who disclosed having abortions or using abortion as a form of birth control in the survey. The journals and self-help trainings were other opportunities to say, "OK, this happened to me." I remember it was not only, "Well, I had *an* abortion," women were disclosing, "Well, I've had two abortions." So, they were able to voice this, and that had to be a step for them in healing the shame that's perpetuated about abortion.
- IL: There was a wonderful moment of consciousness during one of the many heated discussions about abortion. A woman in the class confronted a man on his contradictory opinions regarding women getting repeated abortions: "You know, you're so critical of U.S. imperialism trying to control bodies globally, but then you're trying to control my autonomy, my body, women's bodies." Relating the colonization of land to women's bodies was an act of self-healing. She got it.
- JA: I also want to note that all of these experiences were healing for us as well.

### COMING FULL CIRCLE

In this chapter, you have walked with us through our journey of visions and possibilities, challenges and vulnerabilities. Coming full circle, ending as we begin, we close this piece in a unified voice with an offering of our intentions to those who have come before us and those to follow:

We offer you these words  
 We hope they will resonate with your own experiences  
 May they remind you of your own power

Give you the courage to heal and be your whole self  
 Radiate the warmth and light you need to integrate bodymindspirit;  
 Challenge yourself to  
 Bold transgressions  
 As you step over the imposed borders in work and life  
 Because we are making *nuestra historia*  
 Every step of the way.

## NOTES

The title uses Quechua-based Ecuadorian vernacular terms used to describe what are considered demeaning and/or transgressive characteristics of women. *Fiera* is roughly translated as ugly (a euphemism for “*fea*”), *guambra* means girl-child, and *karichina* is used to describe women who renege on their homemaking duties. We have chosen this subtitle in the spirit of reappropriating terms used against us as powerful women who challenge traditional roles.

1. The four of us are equally contributing authors; we are therefore listed in alphabetical order.

2. For more information about the NLHO or this project, please contact Luz Alvarez Martínez at P.O. Box 10872, Oakland, CA 94601, or e-mail [laluz-1@sbcglobal.net](mailto:laluz-1@sbcglobal.net). Also see “The National Latina Health Organization” in Silliman, Fried, Ross, and Gutiérrez, 2004.

3. Luz Alvarez Martínez, Executive Director of the NLHO; Dr. Jane Bowers, former Director of the Women’s Studies Program at Hunter College; Karina Céspedes and Christina Grijalva, co-instructors of the UC Berkeley course; Dayanara Marte, co-instructor of the Hunter College course; Erica L. Jiménez, NLHO Program Director and former student of the UC Berkeley course; Jennie Luna, former NLHO Program Coordinator in New York City; Dr. Norma Alarcón, Professor of Ethnic Studies and Instructor of Record at UC Berkeley; Dr. Lynn Roberts, Assistant Professor of Community Health Education at Hunter College; and Renée Stephens, former NLHO Program Coordinator. We also thank all of our students.

4. A poetry slam performer inspired this thought.

5. We are reminded of Alberto Sandoval’s (1999) use of the word “(be)long,” for in the desire to belong, we long to belong.

6. Juan Flores’s (1997) definition of *comunidad* is useful here. He states that “común’ refers to **sharing** those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap, the sense of ‘unidad’ is that which **binds** the groups above and beyond the diverse particular commonalities” (our emphasis) (p.184).

7. Because spirit and spirituality are defined differently according to culture, time, and place, we did not directly define these terms but instead explored various cultural

meanings through readings, guest lectures, and activities, such as altar-building. Several of our class readings addressed issues of spirit as integral to being, that which gives us or is necessary for life. (Examples of readings include Avila 1999; Castillo 1994; and Moreno Vega 2000).

8. Burning sage is a way some peoples who are native to this continent have historically cleansed their space of "negative" energy, asked for guidance from the ancestors, and marked spaces and events as sacred. It helped us as "modern" Latinas to reconnect with our roots to this land and to say that we are not only proud of these roots, but are unapologetic for our traditions, and all of these senses are part of maintaining our well-being. Burning sage helps us to viscerally ground ourselves, bring calmness to us and the space, and is an example of integrating our culturally grounded spirituality into our academic endeavors.

9. "Being restimulated" refers to the triggering of emotional patterns (such as feeling fear or self-doubt, freezing, stuttering, dissociating from your body) by a distinct situation that occurs in the present time but reminds the restimulated person of an earlier situation that is the original cause of the emotional response. Not only is the person reminded of the earlier event, he or she also experiences the same or similar emotions and responds similarly, effectively putting the person back in that situation.

10. Concha Saucedo, psychologist and director of a mental health clinic, was the community leader, and Cindy Grijalva was the OB-GYN. The panelists were: Chicana UC Berkeley Professor Laura E. Pérez, Afro-Cuban Santera Bobi Céspedes (who also did the closing), Puerto Rican Jewish writer Aurora Levins Morales, and Mexican immigrant herbalist María Martínez. At the conference in New York we had an opening performance by Pa'lo Monte, an Afro-Indigenous Dominican and Haitian Folkloric Ensemble and a ceremonial opening by Danza Cetiliztli Nauhcampa, a Mexica dance group.

11. We used Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* to create this exercise. New York: TCG, 1985.

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