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Muxerista Pedagogies and Praxis:

Art, Activism, and Scholarship as Resistance and Restoration

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Muxerista Possibilities desde el Desierto:

A Research Note from a Vegas Muxerista

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Abstract

This essay reflects on my engagement with muxerista pedagogies and offers a personal account of its power and impact on my life and research. I focus on my positionality and educational journey, as well as the key interventions of femtorship, storytelling, friendship, love, and healing. I foreground my experiences growing up in Latine communities in Las Vegas, and discuss how muxerista pedagogies, and by extension, muxerista research methods and epistemologies, shape and frame my research.

Keywords: Muxerista pedagogies, Las Vegas, Latine communities, racial geography, researcher reflexivity

This essay reflects my engagement with muxerista pedagogies and offers a personal account of its power and impact on my life. I focus on my positionality and educational journeys, as well as the key interventions of femtorship, storytelling, friendship, love, and healing. In particular, I foreground my experiences growing up in Latine communities in Las Vegas, and discuss how muxerista pedagogies, and by extension, muxerista methods and epistemologies, shape and frame my current research project.¹ I first encountered muxeristas, muxerista pedagogies, and ethnic studies as an undergraduate at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) in 2014. It has been over 11 years since this first encounter and 9 years since I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Gender and Sexuality Studies. Much has transpired that would not have been possible without muxerista pedagogies and communities. In the following text, I share my muxerista origins and how muxerista pedagogies inform my scholarly identity and research trajectory.

A muxerista theoretical framework establishes the validity of theorizing and resisting colonization as a distinctly feminist and activist process. Dr. Anita Revilla (2010) defines a muxerista as a “Chican[x]/Latin[x] feminist and activist, committed to social change and an activist commitment to eliminating all forms of oppression and social injustice.” Principally, a muxerista framework “is committed to challenging all types of oppression in Chican[x]/Latin[x] communities, including but not limited to racism, imperialism, patriarchy, heterosexism, homophobia, nativism, and monolingualism” (Revilla 2004). These are the definitions I draw from in this work. Thus, muxerista is a term connected to legacies of queer Latine feminist activism, resistance, and community creation and nurturance (Revilla, 2004). It depends on close reflection on self, especially in connection with our personal and communal (often ethnic/racial/gendered) experiences, which have been shaped by societal structures. This is often connected to an element of consciousness-raising, both in its exposure and in its furtherance in our personal lives, relationships, and/or careers. Muxerista pedagogies transformed my understanding of justice by providing an actionable and ever-evolving framework that expanded my world and grounded my personal commitment to liberation in the lived realities of the day to day.

¹ I use Latine as a gender expansive and inclusive identity rather than Latinas and Latinos, which are gendered along the binary.

A Vegas Muxerista at UNLV

As I neared the end of my first semester of college, I happened to come across a flyer on campus for a course in the gender and sexuality studies department, Dr. Anita Revilla's Chicana Feminisms upper-level seminar. I distinctly remember feeling nervous and excited when I saw the flyer. Ethnic studies had not been taught at any of the public schools I attended growing up in Las Vegas. And while I had come across books and magazines about feminism, and one book on Chicano history at the public library, I had yet to fully engage or feel connected to either feminism or Chicano ideologies. But an opportunity to learn more about Chicanos AND feminism seemed groundbreaking to me at the time. So I emailed Anita to ask whether it was possible to take the course, as I had not met the prerequisites. Anita messaged back, letting me know I was welcome to join, and provided the information and next steps to enroll in the course. The course Chicana Feminisms proved to be life-saving, affirming, and world-expansive; it also facilitated an introduction to local Latine radical and queer students and activists. At the end of the semester, I emailed the final assignment and wrote: "Thank you so much for such an amazing class. I'm considering minoring or maybe even majoring in Women's Studies. I plan to continue reading and expanding my understanding of Xicana queer feminism." My interests went from one course to a lifetime commitment to muxerista values.

The simple act of bypassing the course prerequisites signified that, even before I entered her classroom, Anita recognized my life experiences as critical knowledge. While I had yet to take introductory courses in gender studies or ethnic studies, she fostered a learning environment that was accessible, engaging, and critical for students with diverse backgrounds and varying levels of engagement with the subject matter. She taught Chicana feminisms and ethnic studies through a firm grounding in her lived experiences, demonstrating the value in storytelling, self-reflexivity, and beginning at the root. She shared how her childhood and lived experiences shaped her multilayered social identities, providing real examples and eschewing academia's preferred "professional," impersonal, traditional mode of operation in favor of radical authenticity. This learning embedded within me a deep belief in the importance of starting with myself, not in a selfish way, but in a very real way that understands that the way each of us engages with the world, our communities, friends, and partners is tied to our identities and our understandings of the world around us. In the many classes I took with Anita during my undergraduate career, she consistently included a positionality assignment in her

courses, where she asked students to reflect on their race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, disability, and other social identities in an essay to map how these aspects have shaped our engagement with oppression and privilege, and to explore how intersectionality may have impacted our lives. This self-reflexive practice had multiple components: the modeling and examples Anita provided within her lectures, the conversations and reflections generated in the seminar, and the positionality essay, which allowed students to connect the course topics and materials directly to our lives at an individual level. This practice has stayed with me a decade later, informing and shaping my personal life, education, professional career, and research commitments.

In her teaching, inside and outside the academy, Anita embodied and modeled a muxerista way of being. Part of what distinguishes Muxerista Thought from Chicana feminism more broadly is a muxerista sensibility that openly centers queerness, love, and community liberation through questioning and challenging established norms, binaries, and practices of violence. In practice, Dr. Revilla challenged hierarchical ways of relating and grew to be more than a professor or femtor; she was also a friend, a loved one, and a part of my community and chosen family. She invited her students to conferences, exposing us to different places and communities of people involved in and interested in Latine queer politics. Together, we road-tripped from Las Vegas to the Association of Joteria, Arts, Activism, and Scholarship (AJAAS) conference in Phoenix, Arizona. She also invited us to the Chicana/o Educational Pipeline Summit at UCLA, where she carpooled with us and helped us secure a small motel near Koreatown in Los Angeles for the weekend. During that trip, she brought us (undergraduate students and Las Vegas muxeristas) to various cultural institutions in Los Angeles and even invited us to a speaking engagement organized by her colleague and friend, Dr. Nadine Bermudez. We were able to meet many of her colleagues, mentors, and students at UCLA and East Los Angeles Community College. For many of us, this was our first time leaving Las Vegas and experiencing these parts of Los Angeles. She opened possibilities and provided access to spaces where we could engage and think beyond ourselves, all while building community, creating connections, and critically engaging with our identities and histories. Muxerista learning and growing together are defining components of living a muxerista life and enacting a muxerista vision. While an orientation towards justice and anti-oppression work is felt and lived prior to coming into a muxerista way of being, a learned and modeled commitment to each

other becomes an integral part of the consciousness-raising process. This process necessitates both individual and communal accountability and care. For me, encountering Anita and the first generation of muxeristas, aka “The Activist Crew,” in my early undergraduate career, then forming part of the following generation, demonstrated the possibility of bridging academia, social justice, and found family in my life and career (Orozco, 2022; Orozco, 2025). This was also the first time I even thought to consider the existence of queer Latines. Muxerista pedagogy transcends the classroom and fosters queer possibilities that live on through our dreams, visions, careers, and relationships. Engaging with muxeristas relationally and adapting this strand of intersectional, Chicana feminist practice reaffirmed my intrinsic belief in the value of my communities’ self-worth and knowledge while also providing a mirror so that I could view and recognize this inherent value and worthiness within myself.

In this essay, I write from a space of personal transformation, intimately connected to my dissertation work, and based on my experiences growing up and finding community in Las Vegas, Nevada. I have been on the receiving end of femtorship and spirit restoration (Revilla, 2021) under Anita’s guidance since my undergraduate years. Spirit restoration is also what my muxerista familia connections bring to my life. We practice healing justice through the relationships we build with each other, centered on love, understanding, and acceptance. The muxeristas in my world are life-sustaining, real and true lifelines.

A Vegas Muxerista at UCLA

After the trip to Los Angeles, I became curious about attending school there. Visiting campus and hearing Anita’s stories about graduate school and her experiences around the campus solidified the possibility of more beyond Las Vegas. Ten years later, I am a doctoral candidate at UCLA in one of the three programs in the nation that offer a doctorate in Chicana/o/x studies. Muxerista teachings and worldviews have been integral to my life and the work I do. Like many other academics in ethnic, feminist, and gender studies, my work is deeply personal, reflecting my lived experiences and values. I embed a muxerista methodology into my dissertation work because, to me, it seems almost natural and a part of who I am. Muxerista methodologies involve deep reflexive intentionality throughout the research process. In some ways, that has contributed to my project taking longer than expected, as the drive to be intentional, real, and mindful can turn into perfectionism and fear of unintentionally harming others, which then leads to procrastination and avoidance. In the next passage, I identify and

share my understanding of and engagement with muxerista methodologies in relation to my dissertation research.

Muxerista methodologies inform the questions I ask, whom I ask them to, and the care I have for participants, my work, and its value. Esposito and Evans-Winters's (2022) intersectional research approaches resonate with my own incorporation of muxerista theories and methods as frames for my research. In their book, they speak to the importance of self-reflexivity and intentionality in the research process, emphasizing the importance of understanding ourselves deeply as researchers because our experiences, perceptions, and cultural identities undoubtedly impact our work and its outcomes. Similarly, muxerista research approaches require self-reflexivity and beginning with the self. This is why my own experiences and engagements with Las Vegas form the foundations of my research project. When I think of Las Vegas, I think of my parents and their hard work and sacrifice, and how their lives are impacted by the conditions created by the combined forces of capitalism, labor, and migration. As I think of my work and research, especially through the added lens of a muxerista vision, I generate endless research paths and more questions to ask participants. There is so much in Las Vegas that is worth recognizing and knowing, so much potential for intervention and invitation. One question that comes to mind now is, how do Latines navigate agency within the constraints placed on them as they live in Las Vegas? Do they have agency in building their families? How do they feel or process their emotions? Do they choose to save money towards the possibility of a future away from this? Las Vegas is portrayed as a liminal space, home for now, not home forever; work for now, not work forever. What does retirement look like for folks like my parents? Aside from their endless commitment to work and family, they have difficulty imagining the possibility of rest, engaging in hobbies, or developing new behaviors and patterns. As my mother continues working hard as a production worker at an industrial laundry facility, where she has been for over 25 years, providing linen services essential to the hospitality industry in Las Vegas, she wonders how much longer her body can withstand the extreme conditions and demands. Yet, she continually states that all she wants is for her children to be happy, healthy, and financially stable. And she cannot fathom the possibility of asking for more for herself. From my experiences living in Las Vegas and now through my research project, I see how these communities have agency in the face of difficult conditions, altering circumstances, and creating

new possibilities through imagining and yearning for more, if not for themselves, then for their children and families.

Place, Tracing the Roots, and Latine Geographies

Self-reflexivity and beginning at the root means tracing and contextualizing my lived experiences. I am the daughter of Mexican immigrants, born and raised in Las Vegas, Nevada. I grew up in a working-class family with my two parents, two older brothers, and one older sister. Home to me evokes feelings of the dry, hot desert, images of older homes with multiple cars in the driveways, desert xeriscaping, bougainvillea, rose bushes, sparse trees, and the hustle and bustle of traffic along Las Vegas Boulevard. Home, parents, immigration. Many are lured to the infamous tourist destination by the promise of abundant work, the elusive potential for realizing the American Dream, and the yearning to provide better opportunities for their kids, for stability, for peace, for happiness. It means being surrounded by working-class people of color in areas of Las Vegas that evoke personal feelings of safety, home, grief, and comfort in areas others might consider “dangerous,” “ghetto,” and forgotten. It means witnessing dignity and sparks of life and lives even in the midst of hunger, struggle, sadness, and survival. It means understanding how my parents have struggled and continue to struggle to sustain a sense of stability, while also balancing a longing and anxiety about where and what home has meant for them. That’s aside from experiencing the impact of trauma, oppression, poverty, and physically labor-intensive jobs on their health, relationships, and well-being. A lived and practiced *mexerista* sensibility and methodology is inextricably tied to place. It is the affective, the lingering emotions and feelings tied to place as knowledge and information, that I prioritize in my research, data collection, and methodologies. That is why my own work seeks to honor and understand the Latine communities and population across the Las Vegas Valley and their lives in relation to place (Hernandez-Toledo, 2016 & 2020). Racial geography scholars have demonstrated that space, regardless of size or scale, matters and holds information, agency, and power, and that space has been shaped across time, both in the real, physical, built environment and cognitively through collective and individual memories and imaginations. The space of Las Vegas is unique for a few reasons. It has been constructed with gaming, tourism, and leisure in mind. This means the needs of those who live and labor in Las Vegas to sustain this resource-intensive place are often ignored, in deference to the Valley’s tourism-centered economic growth and profit. This is reflected in the collective imaginary cultivated across popular culture,

both domestically and abroad, of Las Vegas as an internationally-renowned tourist destination, where fun, frivolity, spending, and vice are expected and encouraged. This imaginary often subsumes the realities of the lives of working people and their families who might call Las Vegas home. As is common in service work and tourist destinations, the labor of service and construction workers is often relegated to the background, discredited, and often underpaid and exploited. When workers rise, as they historically do and as they will continue to do so, their perceived value to dominant society is often limited to the role they play in producing the resources required to make Las Vegas possible; their own lives, knowledge, and ways of knowing are often ignored or unacknowledged.

My dissertation has grown out of my experiences and those of my family, friends, and community. A muxerista theoretical lens and methodology frame my ongoing engagement with research and have informed my focus on the broader Las Vegas Latine population. Particularly relevant, muxerista values emphasize a community-grounded approach. This means we value and honor the knowledge everyone holds. When examining and working with Latine communities and individuals, especially in a tourist economy dependent on a large service industry, it is critical to question hierarchical systems that shape the perceived value of education and deservingness, as reflected in job titles and class status. Muxerista teorías and values stem from Chicana and feminist activism, teaching, and scholarship. A muxerista praxis is rooted in my work and research goals. Similar to stories shared by many other first-generation students, my parents often perceive themselves as “undereducated” or “sin educación” because their childhood realities in rural Mexico limited the education accessible to them and their families. At their rancho, Las Cruces de Barreras in Michoacán, public education options were limited and, for decades, included only primary school teaching. Here, it’s important to note that even within the limited range of schooling offered to their community, education was often an unreachable dream because of capitalist, colonial systems and structural inequalities. These systems made their large families reliant on their children's labor. My parents were forced to leave their families and homes because their traditional ways of living seemed incompatible and at odds with the growing demands of a changing world. For my dad, this meant a routine passage between Mexico and the United States as a young man. Like many others, my father traveled in pursuit of temporary employment so he could save and return to Mexico. For my mom, this meant leaving for the city for a brief time at a young age to pursue a trade.

Unfortunately, instead, she would encounter anti-Indigenous and anti-peasant classist sentiments imposed on her by her own family. To this day, my mother recalls how her sister-in-law held her hopes of pursuing trade schooling against her, forcing her into unpaid work and forcing her to cut her long hair short because of the discriminatory association long hair had with a rural, peasant, working-class, indigenous connection. With this dream shattered, my mother returned to her rancho, where the only option for leaving her parents' home seemed to be to marry and start a family of her own. I share these stories not only because they matter, but because their origins shaped my family's journeys to Las Vegas, Nevada and connect to similar stories that have brought many others to Las Vegas on similar journeys.

Conclusion

Las Vegas is my home. It is also a site where the forces of the war and defense industry, capitalism, U.S. westward expansion, globalism, and modernity collide in interesting, often inequitable ways. It is more than a tourist city. It is a place where people work, survive, and where Latine communities find ways to experience joy, celebration, and care in the face of persistent erasure and disavowal. It is where I learned to expand my world, exploring possibilities through muxerista practices of communal and relational care. While my parents, like many other immigrants, instilled within me a respect for education, this respect developed into a harmful relationship between education, self-worth, external validation, and capitalist values of economic upward mobility, at whatever cost. Muxerista femtorship and community building intervened to reframe my view of education. Muxerista pedagogies provided visions of love, justice, and liberation, acting as a pathway to personal healing. Latine communities in Las Vegas are deserving of attention and care within ethnic studies and beyond. The stories, labor, and knowledge of Latines in Las Vegas are invaluable. This research note is meant to provide snippets of muxerista pedagogical practices in action through the years, from my first encounter as an undergraduate student to the current role it plays in my personal life and research. It is part of an ongoing journey, as I will continue to explore questions of home, labor, family, survival, and agency in Latine Las Vegas.

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