

Notes from a Trans* Chicana/o Survivor

by J. Frank Galarte

This is an excerpt from a plenary talk delivered at the 2011 MALCS Summer Institute at Cal State Los Angeles. Trans is used here as a more inclusive and encompassing term for those who would be included under the umbrella term “transgender” but do not necessarily fully identify with the term. This term is being used more frequently among trans* communities in an explicit effort to acknowledge that there is a multitude of trans*identities.*

To be honest as a trans*masculine identified person, when I was asked to write about the future of MALCS as a “woman only” space, I had many reservations about proposing solutions to what must be a collective discussion and decision. 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.[i] Before I begin, I want to underscore how important it is for me to respect the struggle and historical context for the *sitio* from which MALCS emerged. As I looked for the most logical and practical way to approach this short essay, I began to think about my own personal history and how I came to be where I find myself now, as a trans* identified Chicana/o feminist scholar. Rather than solutions, here I want to posit new strategies and approaches for thinking and talking about Chicana/o and Latina/o Trans* populations and the bridges that our communities need to make, as we refocus the discussion toward community survival, sustenance, empowerment, and healing rather than simply inclusion.[ii] Inclusivity may run the risk of blanketing over difference, as well as the histories and experiences that spring from varied origins. As I thought about my 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 in intimate spaces and places.

For that reason, I would like to propose expanding and/or shifting the *sitio y lengua* first posited by Emma Pérez in her 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. Starting here makes sense since this discussion can be unfamiliar, uncertain and even uncomfortable, though it is necessary because for some it means survival. When we think about claiming, creating and asserting space it is often just that — survival (both emotional and physical) — that is at stake. By weaving my own position and experience as a trans* identified Chicana/o feminist scholar into a discussion of the key arguments made by Pérez twenty years ago, I hope to highlight the necessity to revisit how we define and delineate which spaces are for whom and perhaps what happens when one’s positionality no longer is fully encompassed by the limits and the terms of inclusion. I believe this is the challenge that trans* identified persons present to both the *sitio* (“women only” space) and *lengua* (discourse for talking about sexuality *and* gender) of Pérez’s essay.

It is a privilege for me to build on one of the many groundbreaking works by Chicana feminist scholars without which I would not be able to engage in a kind of feminist scholarship that attends fully to intimacies at play in the intersections of race, gender and sexuality. In her essay Pérez argues that “pervasive homophobia constructs sociosexual power relations in society and pervasive homophobia in our Chicana/o community limits the potential for liberation and revolution” (163). She looks to French feminists for a paradigm to 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 – which must be embodied in our spoken words and in our writings and have the possibility to lay the foundation for a future of change, and bridge our fears of what we have never been or known before (if we let them).

In an effort to illustrate Pérez's solutions, I'm going to offer a *cuento* that speaks to the complications that a trans* identified Chicana/o body represents to this *sitio y lengua*. This summer I was invited to participate as a speaker on the LBT Plenary at the MALCS Summer Institute and this occurred 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, which the registration staff could not find, but I happened to notice a name tag that read "J. Frank Galarte." I pointed at the name tag and said "J. Frank Galarte, that's me," to which the staff person responded, "oh, then the name must be wrong," to which I responded "no, Frank Galarte, that's me." As I was handed my program and name tag I realized that I had confirmed my gender to the staff as male and was no longer being registered as a participant, but a guest. The staffer then informed me of MALCS' women-only policy at workshops, panels and the banquet. At this moment, I clarified I was indeed both "Frank" and "Frances." The name confusion shed light upon the gender confusion and after an awkward moment of silence it was determined that I was indeed welcome at all the "women only" spaces.

In the back of my mind I questioned whether I was really welcome: "Am I only welcome as Frances, but not as Frank?" Interlaced with the name confusion was gender confusion, and to me it was certain that I was only admissible upon the symbolic refusal of my trans*masculine identity. Therefore, it was okay that I looked like or was read as a man, but I was welcome only if I refused the male reading. I was left with so many questions, anxieties and a sense of discomfort as if I was trespassing in a space that I had always assumed as a safe one for myself – but then I wondered: did my presence all of a sudden make the space unsafe for other conferences participants? I began to reckon with the possibility that I could be read as an intruder, someone who was compromising this *sitio* for others because of my trans* identity. 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 identify as a woman, but I cannot deny 25 years of experiencing the world as a woman, which will always inform the ways in which I inhabit the category of "man" (not a category I totally self identify with either). How we understand "man" does not reflect a the type of trans*masculinity that resists the assumption that "manhood" can only ever mean access to varying degrees of power and privilege to exert upon women. This is an example of the limitations of both the site and discourse that we are working with and this is how trans* identities complicate "women only" *sitios*. We really don't know how we're going to be read or what kind of (safe/unsafe) encounters we'll have on a given day.

I recently completed my dissertation and my journey through graduate school has been just as much about living theory as it has been about reading and learning theory, as I have crafted my own theories, born 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 trans* women of color specifically are more likely to be victims of transphobic and homophobic violence.[iii] This is why I know that I am a survivor and significantly privileged to be able to do the work I do. From my research, and knowing the very little literature there is about trans* 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 trans* people. At this point, I think we can no longer ignore the circumstances bequeathed to us by colonialism. We need to acknowledge transphobia's role 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 transphobia because we do not fully understand trans* identities and practices or because they simply make us uncomfortable.

This is why I began to develop my own theory of the flesh in my dissertation, where I theorize the concept of “*el sabor del amor y del dolor*.” This is work that I will continue to research, write about and share.[iv] This work is my effort to develop a *lengua* for talking about the emotions, or affects that we experience as we experience oppression, desubjugation and dehumanization. “*El sabor del amor y del dolor*” acknowledges emotions as the decolonizing *movida* that can push us to consider new *sitios y lenguas*. The first step is that we must be open to our feelings of discomfort, fear and even loss that accompany change, which is what I have attempted to articulate in this brief essay. In *Borderlands: La Nueva Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa writes, “we all respond to pain and pleasure in similar ways,” 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 (5). We must inevitably bridge across our fears because building bridges is an act of will and an act of love. As a trans*masculine Chicana/o feminist, I am an ally to Chicanas in the struggle against dehumanization, desubjugation and oppression both within and outside Chicana/o and Latina/o communities. Now I turn to you in solidarity and admit that I too seek faithful allies...

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[i] 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* (1979) and contested in Sandy Stone's famous essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto” (2006). Many transgender lesbian feminists have also critiqued the prohibition of Transgender and transsexual women at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

[ii] I use Chicana/o rather than Chicana/o as it is posited by Sandra K. Soto in her book, *Reading Chicana/o Like a Queer: The Demastery of Desire*. She describes Chicana/o 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).

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

[iv] See *For more on “el sabor del amor y del dolor” see my dissertation:*

Galarte, J. F. “El Sabor Del Amor Y Del Dolor: Violence, Affect and the (Trans)Body in the Chicana/o Historical Imaginary.” Diss. University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, 2011. <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/2142/26393>

My critical article that more fully addresses these issues is in progress and as an extended version of this blog, will elaborate further on “el sabor del amor y del dolor.”

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Comments:

1. *Maylei Blackwell* October 25, 2011 at 3:29 AM

This is so powerful and way overdue. Thank you for your courage, insight, the inspiration ... let's keep the discussion moving forward. Maybe the name of the MALCS blog should be changed to Chicana/o speak! ¡Adelante Frank!

2. *Frank G* October 26, 2011 at 9:11 PM

Maylei, thanks for your comments and thanks for reading!

3. *lasandrella* November 1, 2011 at 8:27 AM

What an amazingly beautiful and poetic act of courage, Frank. Your words will help open the door for others. –Sandy Soto

4. *Mujeres Talk Moderator* June 2, 2012 at 6:27 AM

Frank, your blog essay has had 915 pageviews on Mujeres Talk so it continues to be a source of enlightenment and empowerment for MALCSistas and others. Thank you for writing it!

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