

# Chicana Feminism as a Bridge: The Struggle of a White Woman Seeking an Alternative to the Eclipsing Embodiment of Whiteness

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CHICANA FEMINIST THEORISTS reframe ways of knowing to both challenge hegemonic understandings of learning as well as whitestream—common sense notions about people who are positioned in the U.S. as “different” (Anzaldúa, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Hurtado, 2003; Moraga, 1981; Sandoval, 1991; Villenas, 2010). They do so largely by drawing upon lived experiences and subjugated personal and communal histories (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011). Their works broaden the understanding of intersectionality, including the ways identities overlap and merge and how these identities, whether they be related to race, indigeneity, sexuality, or spirituality, are also the targets of oppression (Anzaldúa, 2000b; Koshy, 2006). Meanwhile, white people continue to enjoy unearned privileges because of their whiteness, generally without naming or even recognizing the privilege (Allen, 2001; Hartigan, 2005; Leonardo, 2009; Lipsitz, 2006; Marx, 2006).

Chicana feminism and other theories challenge whitestream thinking—thinking which casts the “normal” as anything situated originally in white culture and anything outside it as novel or even deficient—into denaturalizing the generally unspoken norms and assumptions of whiteness so that alternative paradigms become more central to researching and interpreting the world. This is especially so in the field of education, which faces increasing challenges in an era of testing and accountability and quickly-shifting racial and socioeconomic demographics. Chicana feminism, among other frameworks, explores the lived experiences of Latinx in education and addresses inequities in education from their vantage points. In this article, I offer an *autohistoria/teoria* (selfstory-theory) (Anzaldúa, 2002), theorizing my engagement as a white woman, educational researcher of Chicana feminism, one who attempts to be a part of a “new tribalism” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). I conclude with suggestions researchers may consider as they approach this important framework.

In a rich exploration of a generation’s worth of application and expansion of Chicana feminist epistemology, Calderón, Delgado Bernal, Pérez-Huber, Malagón, and Vélez (2012)

examine how “Chicanas use this framework” and how Chicana voices and experiences must continue to be foundational to exploring research from those who have lived what is being researched. What happens, however, when someone who cannot claim being Chicana as an embodied experience, wants to engage this framework? This was and is precisely my case, and may be for other readers. Part of the liberatory potential of Chicana feminism may include usage of the theoretical framework by those who cannot identify as Chicana. I became sensitized to Chicana feminism over several years—largely because of a natural attraction born from living and working for years in Mexico and then among Latinx populations in the U.S.; as I did so, I eventually wanted to draw from the theory to develop my research and broader understandings of the world. I found that without Chicana feminism, my worldview was more limited, anemic. Indeed, Sofia Villenas calls on all of us to explore “other knowledges,” including Chicana feminism, toward “reframing and addressing ... our collective survival” (Villenas, 2012, ¶5).

This usage, however, presents questions, which I attempt to answer in this article. How might I, as a woman who came into the world and walks through being read on the outside as a white person, understand and appropriately engage a theory that underscores, for instance, the physically and culturally embodied experience of Chicana feminism as a way of knowing (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002; Moraga, 1981)? What must I do in order to engage it without appropriating it into the toolkit of whites’ historical oppression of others (Smith, 2006)? These are the questions I explore throughout this article. I hope this sheds light on my own journey in engaging Chicana feminism for the consideration of other researchers as they engage themselves. First, I turn to several central ideas that frame my work.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings and Approach**

Anzaldúa (2002), at the end of her life’s work, examined how the path toward “conocimiento,” or knowing, included the complicated work of building and becoming bridges of understanding that span beyond current constructs of difference and identity:

Being Chicana ... is no longer enough, being female, woman of color, patlache (queer) no longer suffices. Your resistance to identity boxes leads you to a different tribe, a different story (of mestizaje) enabling you to rethink yourself in more global-spiritual terms instead of conventional categories of color, class, career. (p. 561)

Anzaldúa does not negate the real impacts such categories have on people’s lives; she begins, instead, to construct additional ways we can personally and collectively identify. This extends her earlier work, which highlights the pain of bearing the bridge on her back (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) as well as the complicated and liminal experience of being on and living among borders (Anzaldúa, 1999), both real and figurative. Those on the furthest borders are among the best able to explain them because of their positioning to see a more complex picture. This is precisely why we need to use Chicana feminism as one source of researching and understanding education, because of its situatedness on the margins as well as its ability to create and interpret polyvocal, hybridized understandings (Hurtado, 1996; Villenas, 2010). As the historically marginalized voices of Chicanas surface, only by listening and deeply understanding can the oppressive voice of whiteness be tempered, shifted, and newly influenced by other voices.

It is by recognizing the intersectionality of identities as well as systems of oppression—including racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, immigration and language status boundary keeping—that Chicana feminism emerges as encompassing embodied experiences, referred to as theory in the flesh (Hurtado, 2003; Moraga, 1981). For instance, the *mestizaje* concept Anzaldúa mentioned above refers to the notion of a clean melding of what are referred to in Mexico as the “three roots” of African, indigenous, and Spanish origins. Her theory-experiencing/making is part of a shift in consciousness, what Anzaldúa (1999) referred to as “mestiza consciousness,” one that can “stretch the psyche ... from [strictly] convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality ... to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes” (p. 101). This expansive thinking is one that necessarily allows a tolerance for ambiguity—a foundational skill for embracing the intersectionality emphasized by Chicana feminists in terms of identity claims as well as experiences. Anzaldúa succeeds in reframing the more static concepts of identity like *mestizaje*, bending it into something new, something which creates new and perhaps unlimited possibilities of understanding in *mestiza* consciousness.

The tolerance for ambiguity in Chicana feminism also provides one an ability to challenge binaries and dualisms (Villenas, 2010). The “black-white binary,” for instance, of so much discussion in race relations in the U.S. is one that is challenged by Chicana feminism, by which theorists explore their positioning as African American, white, Latinx, among others—depending on context. Villenas (1996) recognizes her role as both colonizer and colonized at once in her research with Latinx families in North Carolina. Similarly, hierarchical structures are challenged (see Calderón et al., 2012) and allow for creation of new spaces of creation and construction, such as through the Xicana Sacred Space (see Soto, Cervantes-Soon, Villarreal, & Campos, 2009) where faculty collaborated with students while invoking a spiritual sense in their work, centering “Chicana sources of knowledge ... away from the dominance of Western colonial epistemologies” (Calderón et al., 2012, p. 518). In the Xicana Sacred Space, voices of the marginalized are in the foreground; power dynamics do not follow those typical of white hegemony but rather are collaborative in nature, and the space allows for spirit to be present. The Xicana Sacred Space, which they created in the university—a space ordinarily out-of-bounds for the spiritual or for breaking down hierarchies—is part of the Chicana feminist notion of embracing the possibility of being in *Nepantla*, a “liminal state between worlds, between realities, between systems of knowledge, beyond symbology systems” (Anzaldúa, 2000c).

Chicana feminism offers a new vision toward social transformation. It invokes a recognition of spirituality (Fernandes, 2003; Keating, 2013), including a spiritual sense of one’s *antepasados* (ancestors) and the shared ancestral wisdom passed through generations (Delgado Bernal, 1998). This social transformation also comes through the “different tribe” (Anzaldúa, 2002) described earlier. Saavedra and Nymark have described this as the “new tribalism” or how “we/you/they can witness how we are all in each other,” which “avoids essentialist notions of who we/you/they are and constantly challenges who we are” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 268). Trinidad Galván refers to this new tribalism as well, situating it alongside the need for *convivencia* (being in close companionship with) and *supervivencia* (a form of surviving while thriving), both coexisting in profound ways, especially “in our connection to others” (2011, p. 556). What this may look like, in part, is what Anzaldúa (2002) described as retribalization:

by recognizing that some members of a racial or ethnic group do not necessarily stay with the consciousness and conditioning of the group they’re born into, but shift momentarily

or permanently. For example, some whites embody a woman-of-color consciousness, and some people of color, a white consciousness (p. 570).

This article weaves my autohistoria-teoria (selfstory-theory) alongside my emerging understanding of Chicana feminism (Anzaldúa, 2002). Anzaldúa (2002) explains that autohistoria-teoria is “a personal essay that theorizes” (p. 578). I try to show how my evolving sensitivity/subjectivity as influenced by Chicana feminism enables me to develop a *conocimiento* where I can view, at least partially, from the margins, in my efforts to interpret as a researcher.

Here is a partial version of my own autohistoria, one that starts with parents whose marriage began in a trailer in West Virginia, a state I recognize as an internal colony within the U.S. (Kasun, 2013). The story continues with my father dying of a rare form of cancer (one that may have been provoked by living in a valley where coal was used to produce steel for export, a valley where industrial waste hovered) when I was seven; I would survive an abusive and mentally ill mother who endured her own sexual abuse as a child and was never able to get help for it, ultimately choosing to end her own life in 2016. My autohistoria moves to becoming a scholarship recipient in college, to learning from the grassroots, urban poor in Guadalajara, Mexico. Through my experience in Mexico, I not only learned that the materially poor could represent themselves in successfully organizing and creating their own loving communities, but I learned—finally—how to speak of our beloved dead, a subject often taboo in whitestream U.S. ways of knowing. In the granular day-to-day of Mexico, I learned it was safe to laugh and cry about our dead, to include my dear father. I was finally free to celebrate and honor how he taught me to catch tadpoles while camping, how to fish West Virginia rivers, how he played so lovingly with me and my siblings. Engaging with him and his death in this way was an experience that took me beyond the tears cried privately into a pillow as I had mourned him through the years.

I began teaching high schooler transnationals/immigrants in the Washington, D.C. area because I needed to keep this connection with Latinx cultures alive for me, and because I wanted to advocate for bridges of understanding among the rich cultures in my home country. I attended a graduate program as a minority to learn among Chicanas in order to expand my understandings of the world. My story emerges as a researcher who unlearns whiteness. My unlearning is evidenced in the way I can now engage the dead, publicly, among those who remain. This unlearning also includes dropping a way of walking through the world where I did not notice how my whiteness, and whiteness much more largely, impacts all of us. Instead, I recognize and hold space for the ways it burns those who cannot claim white identity, whether it be through the Black Lives Matter movement or through the ways immigrants are positioned in the discourses of U.S. presidential elections. At the same time, my unlearning of whiteness positions me to see how I am damaged by whiteness; the sense of shared complicity I have in knowing I can advocate for my own children in schools without being questioned or suspected because of their racial identity or mine; how I can step up for so many advantages with this skin. I have unlearned the white histories/fictions of my country to understand how we have positioned ourselves squarely on the backs of people of color, of slaves, of the victims of genocide, toward creating an industrialized space on land that was parceled and sold. This history courses through my veins and through my mind in thought—in my heritage language of English, when it would have been German, or Croatian, or Welsh—or some combination thereof—had my ancestors not traded into whiteness. This history echoes in the moment my mother pulled the trigger to take

her life; one where the taboos of sexual abuse likely led to a lifetime of mental illness, one I place largely on the shoulders of white culture (Kasun, 2016a).

I find myself a researcher among transnational/immigrant, Mexican-origin families and their ways of knowing and how they are understood in schools (Kasun, 2014; 2015a; 2016b), transformed in my attempts at work as a *Nepantlera* (Kasun, 2015b). For me, Chicana feminism became a space to which I gravitated because of my experiences as a Spanish speaker/learner, living and working among Latinx, and as somewhat marginal in my upbringing. In attempting to engage a “woman of color consciousness” (Anzaldúa, 2002), I discuss race with my children, the real and deadly histories of my country, leading them toward engaging and changing our lethal histories. I am having them learn Spanish to hopefully develop a cultural appreciation beyond the confines of monolingualism in a U.S.-centric lifestyle. I teach my university education students in these ambiguous and uncomfortable interstices wherein we create bridges together toward understanding. I read the works of women of color. I engage women of color in ways I hope are not only on my white terms, particularly with those who are my friends.

The final section covers the friendship I have experienced and shared with Chicana feminists. I show the generosity of spirit many Chicana feminists have shown me in efforts to be my friend, such as my inclusion in a *Xicana Sacred Space* (Soto et al., 2009), wherein I was invited to participate among other *Chican@* scholars in a way that was co-constructive, loving, and at the same time critical. Echoing the terms of Lugones and Spelman (1983), I illustrate how only through friendship have I been able to understand Chicana feminism. I also show how my journey among some Chicana feminists has shown me concretely that my understanding of Chicana feminism is only partial, despite my bilingualism in Spanish and English and my years of working and studying in Mexico. For instance, while I have adopted new cultural senses to understand the world, my cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal, 1998) will never include, for instance, the senses developed by living a childhood as a Latinx or having Latinx ancestors who have influenced my thinking. I argue that understanding Chicana feminism, as a bilingual white woman with a working-class background from West Virginia, is a continual process which requires effort and patience from both oneself and Chicana feminists in their friendship.

To conclude this article, I recommend how historically marginalized people and those whose identities are often engaged from the positioning of oppressor can continue building bridges of understanding through the framework of Chicana feminism (Elenes, 2001). For me, these bridges are a lifeline, a source of survival out of my cloying and oppressing whiteness, which I attend to in this article. I want to be clear that it is not so much I, in my whiteness, who builds the bridge, but rather I find the bridges that have been cast, bridges that I can help extend. I caution that anyone who attempts to engage Chicana feminism do so seriously and not as a passing fancy. I offer this paper especially for whites interested in helping find these bridges and to allies of whites who, through the building of bridges, would be willing to attempt to construct this “new tribalism.” The only way we can bridge the limiting borders of distrust and ignorance to a place where the “new tribalism” becomes reality is through a serious commitment to the friendships we forge in humility alongside our guides in this framework.

### **Initial Exposures: Waiting While White**

So you need to learn to become unintrusive, unimportant, patient to the point of tears, while at the same time open to learning any possible lessons. You will also have to come

to terms with the sense of alienation, of not belonging, of having your world thoroughly disrupted, having it criticized and scrutinized from the point of view of those who have been harmed by it, having important concepts central to it dismissed, being viewed with mistrust, being seen as of no consequence except as an object of mistrust. (Lugones & Spelman, 1983, p. 580)

There is a deep history of white women denying women of color's stories, urgencies, existences; it underpins the feminist movement in the U.S., from the fight for women's suffrage—which was won, shamefully, at the expense of the inclusion of women of color (Newman, 1999)—to the general exclusion of women of color from the feminist movement in the U.S. (Frankenberg, 1999). In this section, I highlight moments of fumbling toward what I call unlearning whiteness and then my conscious sense of needing to wait to engage the framework of Chicana feminism, a process which has been occurring for decades now.

While my whiteness and visceral sense of disdain for injustice may have naturally pushed me toward feminist theories in college in the mid-1990s, my class background did not articulate well with many of the better-publicized struggles of the theories of white feminism. The foregrounding of access to reproductive health and white beauty standards were important but not central to the realities I had observed up to that point. From my adolescence onward, I began questioning, writing about, and seeking justice for the exploited—from the recently closed coal mines and steel mills of West Virginia where I grew up, to my reckoning with global economic structuring of inequalities of which these mills and mines were a part. I experienced a form of dissonance as I encountered theories of white feminism, especially as they tended to focus so much, it seemed, on the individual, rather than senses of the collective (Delgado Bernal, 1998), which, in many ways, attracted me toward engaging Chicana feminism. I am grateful for the privileges I enjoy because of the legions of women who have paved the path before me, yet it is evident that part of that paving was done precisely so other white, especially middle class, women could enjoy a certain kind of vision for what a woman could be.

Without having the language to name it this way, I struggled to unlearn whiteness, probably from the first time I was assigned a research paper and chose the topic of the injustice of apartheid in South Africa when I was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This consciousness—a fumbling disconsciousness away from whiteness—was probably influenced by a confluence of my class positioning and mentoring by Catholic laypeople who embraced liberation theology—a theology that argued that Jesus had a preferential option for the poor (Gutiérrez, 2001). There were the people whose material lives seemed so urgent to me as a high school student (and still do) based on my observations of conditions growing up in West Virginia. I remained unable to articulate that my unlearning was a move away from whiteness and instead took opportunities to do the unlearning without naming the whiteness—the very trap that whiteness is—a privilege which shall remain unnamed. Social justice oriented study abroad programs, financed by my scholarship status as an undergraduate, led me into Mexico and a beginning understanding of colonization as well as the learning of a new language and cultures. I found myself liberated from many painful, whitely-framed problems because of my contact with Mexican friends. I lost the strictures of the fear of talking about my beloved dead father, something that had become taboo in my family and among whites, in general, by hearing people talk lovingly about friends and family they had lost, in addition to observing family traditions for Day of the Dead in some parts of Mexico. While I also observed different forms of social problems in Mexico, I also

learned, for instance, to include celebration as a key part in the everyday, the present moment, instead of the mad, white rush to orient my ways of knowing only toward the future.

After living in Mexico for five years, I returned to the U.S. in 2002 determined to do my part to help a white-minded United States come to terms with embracing its internal others and became a teacher of immigrants in Washington, D.C. area public schools. It was here I began to see more clearly how the structural oppressions of life in the U.S. played out in the everyday lives of students, such as how students were districted to attend subpar schools based on their neighborhood borders and how it directly related to their parents' (lack of) income. I realized I needed to learn more so that I could understand and work toward subverting this system of oppression. I wanted to do the work of subverting the system for the good of those oppressed by it. Yet I also wanted to do this work for my own transformation as a white woman otherwise locked into the everyday hideousness of enjoying privileges I never merited, the white privileges that consumed and still consume me, as I receive better treatment in public, better services for my white children—things that sicken me and yet bolster me in my positioning in society (Lipsitz, 2006; Thandeka, 2000). This desire for “more” led me to the steps of the University of Texas, based on an intuited sense that I needed to learn from and with Latinx. I needed to make sense of my own life so deeply rooted in Mexico as well as many former Latinx students' lives—through formal scholarly frameworks and the everyday talk and theorizing around the kitchen table, in the domestic space of home (Delgado Bernal, 2001).

Well over half my classmates in a doctoral-level qualitative methods course were Latinx; we were literally and figuratively in the borderlands in our university in Texas, taught by a man from the L.A./Mexico borderlands. The minority of students were white. The course was intense, demanding, and a dramatic shift from the ordinary business of university study in that it represented ways of knowing from the points of view of subjugated knowledges (Hurtado, 1996). The knowledge and ways of knowing of those in the margins have long been subjugated as a result of our nation's and world's colonial past. This knowledge, often rooted in native ways of knowing, is not widely represented in the whitestreamed classroom. This advanced qualitative methods course honored, embraced, and activated the subjugated knowledge of students and the professor. After reading several Chicana feminist articles, the self-identifying Chican@s commented frequently, “This is the first time I've ever taken a course that speaks to me, where I feel I belong.” These women and men presented rich research projects that theorized pedagogies of the home, sexuality, and the border; I found myself shaken by their presentations of the testimonies from complicated and courageous women, men, and families. I was a novice at the time. I waited and let the seeds germinate.

Chicana feminist theory speaks to and from subjugated knowledges (Hurtado, 1996). These knowledges are always there; the framework provides the tools of language in order to use the knowledges for additional creative purposes. The theorists in Chicana feminism (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Latina-Feminist-Group, 2001; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981) write creatively in ways that co-construct knowledge rather than deconstruct knowledge (the Western way), casting arrows through work to demonstrate one's prowess and superiority. The women and men in my narrative and oral traditions course were learning at a dramatic pace and (re)constructing stories with the newly acquired adhesives to their narratives. Sometimes pain was drawn forth, but in the spirit of developing depth of understanding, not merely pain that was biting, frightening, and disempowering. I bore witness. I thanked those with whom I began to bond, but I sat back quietly much more often than usual in my classroom participation. I sensed there was an

unfolding of understanding before me, and I had things to add, though sparingly. Had I not been careful and patient and quiet, my additions could have ruined their work.

At this point in my understanding, I would have spoken out of turn if I had attempted to construct new knowledge—after having read approximately ten articles, including Delgado Bernal’s (1998) foundational *Harvard Educational Review* article exploring Chicana feminist epistemology and Villenas’s (1996) exploration of how the researcher may be complicit in colonizing while attempting decolonizing research. It was as if some of my cells had been awakened, and I could feel a new energy emerging from my encounter. Delgado Bernal, for instance, explored how “liberal feminist” scholarship had failed to explore the intersectionality of identities beyond the oppression of patriarchy in structural analysis (1998). She then showed how the nexus of immigration status, the Catholic church, borderlands, mestizo identity, and others could be woven alongside cultural intuition toward engaging research in an approach quite different and more complete than the liberal feminism she accurately critiqued. Incidentally, she also highlighted how these intersections added to the approach of Critical Race Theory, which, for me, illuminated a more nuanced path at interpreting the world. This is likely what happens while unlearning whiteness to a woman who is open to and reads *La Frontera/Borderlands* for the first time. Activation that dances around the edges of *mestiza consciousness* occurs. The danger of a neophyte usage of Chicana feminism from white folks is clumsy malappropriation.

I provide an example by examining *la facultad*, or the ability to see through the deeper reality of things. Anzaldúa describes *la facultad* as “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning” (1999, p. 60). As a qualitative researcher, for instance, I long for *la facultad* to be able to understand the landscape of the research questions before me. I do not claim to have *la facultad*, but as a researcher among Mexican origin families, I must understand that many of the people with whom I have researched possess this ability. In contrast to common sense (Apple, 2004), where the knower relies on hegemonic understandings of why reality is the way it is (such as the idea that the poor are poor because they don’t work hard enough, a “common sense” idea which fails to include any structural or systemic analysis of power and history), *la facultad* allows the knower to rely on subjugated knowing instead. In my research, for instance, I see Mexican origin, transnational women across borders lament and analyze the loneliness of living in the U.S., the rich elites who bring their life partners to the U.S. at times for paid labor, and the racism that strains their life chances (Kasun, 2014; 2016c). I could not have understood this perception and knowing of the world so readily after only a one-semester course that partly covered Chicana feminism.

In short, as a white woman, I needed to wait. We are trained in the U.S., especially middle and upper class, to act *now*, as if we could will the future into the present on our own terms through our spending and “work ethic.” We are the progeny of the architects and core believers of the American dream—that we can do anything and be anyone we want to, the true believers of the myth of meritocracy (McIntosh, 1990). *Nepantleras*, or the Chicana feminists who are skilled at inhabiting the in-between and understanding the pain of the in-between (Anzaldúa, 1999; Keating, 2006) know differently.

### Exploring Embodiment of Epistemology From White Positioning: Decolonizing the Colonizer?

I cannot say I am a citizen of the world as Virginia Woolf, speaking as an Anglo woman born to economic means, declared herself; nor can I make the same claim to U.S. citizenship as Adrienne Rich does despite her universal feeling for humanity. As a mestiza born to the lower strata, I am treated, at best, as a second class citizen, at worst, as a non-entity. I am commonly perceived as a foreigner everywhere I go, including in the United States and in Mexico. This international perception is based on my color and features. I am neither black nor white. I am not light skinned and cannot be mistaken for “white”; because my hair is so straight I cannot be mistaken for “black.” And by U.S. standards and according to some North American Native Americans, I cannot make official claims to being india [*sic*]. (Castillo, 1994, p. 21)

How can I understand and appropriately use a theory that underscores the physically and culturally embodied experience of Chicana feminism as a way of knowing (Delgado Bernal, 1998, 2002; Moraga, 1981)? When Ana Castillo—alongside other Chicana feminists— theorizes her places in the universe, she recognizes a host of tensions about who she is and who she is not, tensions surrounding identity with which I will never reckon. Chicana feminists have subjectivities which orient their multiple ways of knowing the world in ways I, the physical embodiment of a white person, will never have. Delgado Bernal and Elenes describe them thus:

Chicana feminist subalternized theoretical tools highlight that Chicana subjectivities (the sense one has of oneself and position in the world) are heterogeneous, complex and contradictory, and respond to multiple forms of oppression. These theoretical tools have been produced, in part, as the result of collective community memories that contest the legacy of colonialism and in turn seek to offer decolonizing strategies. (2011, p. 102)

While I cannot claim the same subjectivities, I can work toward reframing my own colonized thinking. I can see, for instance, how I was brought up in my formal school experiences not to love the mountains that surrounded us in West Virginia but to study mountains as merely one geographical feature among many, including archipelagos, peninsulas, and icebergs. This disassociated knowing turned something that could have physically oriented my knowing into the earth around me to an abstracted knowledge. Instead of internalizing an oppressive, unofficial national curriculum that jokes about my home state based on classist caricatures of poor whites, I could have learned more of a funds-of-knowledge oriented approach (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) to being from West Virginia and valuing the ways family members and neighbors constructively used the land and animals. And rather than situating my thinking in exploitative *ownership* as the primary way a person relates to the land—a colonial exploitation that has permanently damaged all people’s quality of air, water, and food—I can choose to relate my subjectivities to Chicana feminist subjectivities and further decolonize my thinking by drawing upon indigenously-oriented (re)framings of land, which embrace a “mutuality of relationship with the land” (Pendleton Jiménez, 2006, p. 221).

I can also use these decolonizing tools to reflect upon my mistakes. I remember myself offering to “help” a grassroots organization of materially poor youth in central Mexico in 2014, after receiving my PhD and all the rich training I described above. The organization was, for the

first time, opening a café in a public space where “rich people” were going to be invited in as guests to spend money. I met the director through an organization with which I was partnering, and I explained that I “knew” what it was like to work for the rich after having been a waiter at the country club where I grew up, an experience I said was painful. And then I said I learned to *never* offer a “doggie bag,” (in lieu of politely suggesting I wrap it up to take home) as those who eat at country clubs “do not eat tonight’s dinner for tomorrow’s breakfast”—words I remember with crystal clarity more than twenty years later. The director kindly rejected my offer of “help.” It was only a few minutes later I realized this offer was not only unnecessary, but also likely offensive. Keeping my privilege in check and not inadvertently further colonizing are priorities I must continue to bear in mind.

It is tempting to argue that Chicana feminism is a tool that enables the colonizer to become decolonized. However, I want to be clear: first, white people enjoy a position at the top of the racial privilege heap. I am convinced that whiteness is complicit with patriarchal, capitalist arguments that maintain social structures which limit all people, and that work to the great benefit of whites (Roediger, 1999). That said, echoing Elenes’s argument that no one group is entirely monolithic (2001, p. 692), whites are not monolithically and singularly white in their cultural practices or subjectivities and identities. Also, whites do and should increasingly subvert racialized expectations of their own behaviors. I am arguing that whites are not singularly colonizers, and whites, too, must be represented as having multiple subjectivities. I am also arguing that whites are, generally, much closer to the center definition of what it means to be a colonizer and that we need help to unlearn whiteness. Rather than calling out individual cases of injustice, we need help in being able to identify the structures that create injustices, in order to see how ultimately they work against whites as well by limiting their ability to fully engage all people in love by fully recognizing the complexity and value of all people.

Chicana feminism becomes a bridge toward this understanding by providing insights necessary for whites to make sense of being more purposeful in upending the inequitable racial hierarchy, which continues to constrain our possibilities toward fullness as members of societies. Under the current hegemony of whiteness, whites need the explanatory power of a framework like Chicana feminism to understand the oppression they can never physically embody themselves; I need Chicana feminism. To be clear, it may not only be Chicana feminism, but this is the framework that has deeply resonated for me in my work. Whites need all kinds of bridges, which could be engaged through a host of frameworks. As Anzaldúa (2002) invokes,

To pass over the bridge to be something else, you’ll have to give up partial organizations of self, erroneous bits of knowledge, outmoded beliefs of who you are, your comfortable identities (your story of self, *tu autohistoria*). You’ll have to leave parts of yourself behind (p. 556).

Whites, especially, need to learn how to leave parts of themselves behind in their *unlearning of whiteness* in order to subvert their sense of racial superiority and their intersections with all forms of oppression. Specifically in my research, I have become reframed by what I have learned in Mexico, including my learning of Spanish, to engage research participants in understanding how deeply the border often pervades Mexicans’ lives on both sides. I have borne witness to story after story about how loved ones are separated, sometimes forever, because of this artificial construct, including stories from people I have come to know and love. These whom I have loved are the motivation for my activist-oriented approach to my work (including

research) toward creating a world where “many worlds fit.” The depth of care I have experienced and the care I have offered have cast me into a person with a different identity. The working-class West Virginian, child of an abuser, scholarship recipient, and so many other labels, has become infused with ways of knowing in Spanish, cultural aspects regarding the celebration of life and the dead, new senses of Catholicism and syncretism, toward becoming a woman, a mother, a researcher, who has feet in worlds that span physical borders and now spiritual ones.

Chicana feminists are clear they are not the source of a pure, ground-level innocence from which they can make all claims to absolute truths. Villenas, for instance, recognizes her multiplicity of identities as a researcher, “a fluid space of crossing borders and, as such, a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity and subversion” (1996, p. 729) wherein she could be pulled in to dominant and whitestream culture, co-opted to speak against other Latinx in her research—something she had to work against. She recognized that she could become the colonizer despite her efforts at doing decolonizing work. Similarly, I can insist I find ways to work toward decolonization through my own work. And this is where I must use alternative paradigms of understanding if I am to make any progress in creating a more just, loving, decolonized society, for the current paradigms appear to be maintaining a status quo, at best. Lest this sound like a mere intellectual exercise, I look toward Chicana feminists’ inclusive senses of spirituality, love, and sexuality to indicate the ways in which Chicana feminism both wraps in existential needs and allow for an expansiveness of ways of knowing and being. I yearn to be part of the retribalization Anzaldúa (2002) discusses, toward a “new tribalism” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008) where I become part of something much larger, one of many forgers of alliances toward “critical liberation” (p. 269).

### **The Altar/Kitchen Table/Theory-Making**

Chicanas have thus sought to re-historicize, appropriate, humanize, and sexualize these symbols [such as the Virgin Mary] to explode dualistic categories and express the power rather than the powerlessness of women in history and presently (Villenas, 2006, p. 458).

At the first annual conference on the life and work of Gloria Anzaldúa, in San Antonio in 2009, several women sat at a simple yet attractive table on a theater stage. Nearby an altar was illuminated by glowing candles, populated with photos of Gloria Anzaldúa, brightly colored weavings, and images of La Virgen de Guadalupe. The table was full of fruits and breads that could be shared. This was one of the large keynote sessions, and women sat at the table and theorized among themselves about Anzaldúa’s work and her life, seeing the two as interwoven, as well her influence on their lives. This “theorizing in the kitchen,” with the incorporation of the daily altar close at hand, shows the links of everyday yet subjugated knowledges at play in Chicana feminists’ lives. I witnessed this event as a connectedness I longed for in my own work, among my own community, where my sense of scholar-self was not fragmented from the other parts of who I am. The discussion was rich, full of anecdotes and theorizing. I left the session and the conference believing there was another way to *be* despite one’s presence in academia, a way that was not violent and combative but synchronistic. It included speaking about love, and the unspeakable, the taboo, the mundane, the ordinary, and doing it in community, much like the framers of the Xicana Sacred Space suggested (Soto et al., 2009). For a moment, I had engaged

that space with not just the disembodied head of my self in the academy, but with my whole being—spirit, heart, mind—feeling whole and together.

### **From the Depths of Gratitude: Engagement of Chicana Feminism**

Finally, the project of a new consciousness at the crossroads also entails linking Chicanas/Latin@s de-colonizing struggles to other women, other people, other cultures and other struggles (Villenas, 2010, p. 456).

Imagining that whites agree to engage Chicana feminism with intentionality of being reflexive about their positioning, of continually understanding their complicities in oppression, of exploring their own multifaceted subjectivities; what, then, can whites do to engage this framework in order to use it without appropriating it into the toolkit of whites' historical oppression of others (Smith, 2006)? How does a white person begin to consider such engagement?

As a white woman, I must first ask. Obviously, there is no council on the ownership of this framework, and such a thing would be antithetical to Chicana feminism. While whites cannot gain formal permission for its usage, there are ways to ask to borrow the framework. With great gratitude, I have asked other Chicana feminists about their honest opinions about my possible usages of the framework. Before pressing women of color with one extra burden in the academy, as they are overburdened beyond other faculty, I attempt to measure the integrity of my work and my intentions in using the framework. These questions include:

- Does my work attempt to create a more just world?
- Does my work help show the intersections of identity and historical struggles in a way that honors the contributions of Chicana feminists?
- Does my work help promote a new kind of consciousness that works against oppression and stands in solidarity with the struggles of Chicana feminists?
- Is there beauty and love (in all the complicated ways we define them) in this work?

In order to engage Chicana feminism, I must also struggle to grasp what it means to have differential consciousness and attempt to employ it in my (re)visioning of the world around me. In Sandoval's (1991) exploration of how hegemony warped the emancipatory efforts of (White) feminism in the U.S.—which largely ignored or marginalized women of color—she demonstrates how differential consciousness has been at work alongside and despite white feminists' work in the U.S. Part of this differential consciousness, to me, includes both feeling and expressing a depth of gratitude for the work done by Chicana feminists. This is the work that has helped illuminate a decolonizing path toward liberation, toward unlearning whiteness. It is also part of a recognition of my belonging, to how the “we/you/they can witness how we are all in each other” (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008, p. 268). Whiteness would have me believe the myth of meritocracy; the “new tribalism” of Saavedra and Nymark instead offers me a space, however unmerited, to *be* and *know* in ways I could not have conceived without their help, without the generative work of Chicana feminism.

There may be people who will be irritated by my engagement of Chicana feminism, even if it is done with sensitivity. This is where hope and love come into play. It is no secret that

white communities are often suspected as naïve, ill-intentioned, white saviors, exploiters, and colonizers; with good historical reason, many hold these suspicions (Smith, 2006). It is only when enough white people consistently demonstrate a willingness to shift into differential consciousness to subvert systems of oppression, working in solidarity, that we can create a world where we are all emancipated from the limiting constraints and intersectionalities of systemic racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other forms of oppression toward a world bound first by love.

I see this love among friendships. Lugones and Spelman (1983) wrote about the substance of friendships 30 years ago when considering how white women might engage the work of women of color in their research. It was *only* through friendship that white women could come to terms with their needs for new frameworks and begin to learn from and with women of color. These are friendships immersed in the terrains where others live, not in the white terrains where people of color are forever adapting in ways that allow whites to feel comfortable about their friends of color as “just like us.” Lugones and Spelman (1983) argued that white women needed to own up to the “very difficult task of understanding the text of our cultures by understanding our lives in our communities” (p. 581) while recognizing that they lacked the knowledge and theories to do so on their own.

I speak from my experience. Through friendship with Chicana feminists, I have been loved into understanding differently while sitting around the kitchen table, holding children, placing my daughter and son into the hands of these friends, planning articles, making sense of theories, making sense of the fabric of our lives. I think back to my time as a graduate student. One of my friends, a Chicana feminist, and I had just finished presenting at a conference in an East Coast city, and she fell suddenly and strangely ill. It was as if the neuroses of the (nearly always white) conference format had penetrated her, and she shook uncontrollably, unable to warm herself or stop the shaking. We went to the hospital together. I kept notes while streams of doctors asked her questions and tested her. I held her hand, laughed, and shared stories, as she tried to understand what was happening.

Years later, I continue wondering about the (un)healty, whitestream design of academia, including the conference we attended and what I will always suspect was the unhealthiness of our academic journeys which pushed my friend into this collapse. The episode passed and the doctors released her the next day, with no diagnosable illness, just a “you’re now physically stable and free to go.” For me, part of my unlearning whiteness means understanding that hyper-performing in white spaces, academia included, is not necessarily worth it. My friend and I have discussed so many times about how we might be doing decolonizing work in these colonizing institutions. I struggle with this unlearning, questioning whether my own health-related issues are not the result of adhering to the white expectations of academia. This same Chicana friend has helped me consider my own life path in the academy, with my life partner, my children, and the overlapping of my dreams (both from sleep and active listening) and daily life. We have shared our sense of maternal instinct regarding having other children while changing each other’s babies’ diapers. She has pushed me in understanding my background and how it reverberates with Chicana feminism; she has helped me shift from white ways of knowing toward this continuing process of unlearning whiteness. I have attempted to be a friend who supported her in considering family choices, including whether or not to have an additional child and on whose timeline to do so, because of and despite the white academy, for instance. She, among so many generous friends, has been a guide. True to friendship, I have reciprocated through my own loving and sharing.

### Departures, Waiting, Next Bridges

Finally, the project of a new consciousness at the crossroads also entails linking Chicanas/Latin@s de-colonizing struggles to other women, other people, other cultures and other struggles. (Villenas, 2010, p. 456)

You wonder when others will, like las nepantleras, hand themselves to a larger vision, a less-defended identity (Anzaldúa, 2002 p. 571).

I cannot imagine how whites would ever approach Chicana feminism without having loving friendship with Chicana feminists. Nor can I imagine engaging the framework without first having had organic friendships. My life has been blessed in that sense. We can certainly learn from this framework as we are exposed to it in writing, art, and testimonies by Chicana feminists. We can begin to let our cells quake as we explore a framework written from standpoints that elucidate realities which have previously been mystified.

Engaging the framework of Chicana feminism remains daunting—in this white body, in this continual process of unlearning whiteness, akin to what Hayes and Hartlep (2013) refer to as “unhooking from whiteness,” or walking away from the privileges it bestows and working toward disrupting whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). It is not daunting in the sense that Courvant (2002) describes her white privilege: “It is privilege that allows me to pretend that being a white woman confronting racism is hard” (p. 459). In order to engage Chicana feminism as sensitively as possible as part of my continual unlearning of whiteness, I remind myself not to lose sight of whites’ long history of co-optation of, and violence toward, people of color. Concretely, this means, for instance, continuing to listen to Chicana feminists before I speak, fighting the temptation to speak first, in order to learn from their subjugated knowledges. At the same time, I work to position myself as relevant in my engagement of Chicana feminism, since I see the framework sometimes mapped to include only those who identify as Chicana. Calderon et. al (2012) explain that “this work is uniquely Chicana in that it draws from the borderland experiences of Chicanas and the theoretical ideas ... that emerge from those experiences” (p. 535). I must continually reposition myself as an outsider trying to engage the centrality of messages articulated by those who can best explore resistances to oppressive forces of whitestream culture and its intersectionality with other forms of oppression. The last thing I want is for white women to engage Chicana feminism in ways that co-opt its tools.

In my research on transnationalism and ways of knowing, I explore both empirical work (Kasun, 2014, 2015a, 2016a, 2016c) and my own reflective theorizing through the engagement of Chicana feminism. I remain mindful of how the white researcher has posed as the omniscient knower of the *other* (Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Narayan, 1993; Russel y Rodríguez, 1998) and work instead toward a connectionist understanding (Anzaldúa, 2002) of those with whom I have researched, toward decolonization of both self and those with whom I work (Smith, 2006). I have explored how transnational, Mexican-origin families have used the foundational analytical concept of *Nepantla* (Calderon et al., 2012; Anzaldúa, 2002)—or the space of the in-between, where possibilities of action may and do emerge—and how it works in their lives, especially in schooling (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 459). I have taken on the lens of the *Nepantlera*, one who inhabits the complexities of in-between space, to reflect on my own work as a woman reared Catholic among predominantly Mormon students at a public university (Kasun, 2015a). I have also

explored transnational, Mexican-origin families *saberes*—ways of knowing in describing their *sobrevivencia* (Kasun, 2015b), or ability to survive and thrive in their everyday lives as lived across borders (Kasun, 2016c). I also engage Chicana feminism to explore the ways the Mexican-U.S. border becomes part of how Mexican-origin transnational families know the world (Kasun, 2016b). When I try to conceive of my work without the engagement of Chicana feminism, it evaporates. At the same time, I wonder where errors hide in my work, where my whiteness eclipses the lenses of Chicana feminism I need; I wonder where my Chicana colleagues provide me a generous read in my missteps. All the while, I can think of no better way to understand so much of my research.

I concur with Lugones and Spelman (1983) that white people who are trying to understand with women of color must do that work in solidarity, in real friendship, in love. A couple years ago, I spoke with three white women doctoral students who studied with Chicana@ colleagues of mine. The colleagues sent them my way because they thought I, in my whiteness, could address their budding interest in engaging Chicana feminism. I shared my *autohistoria/teoria* (Anzaldúa, 2002) with them; I worried. Did my discussion perhaps hit their own ethical checklist in such a way that greenlighted their usage of the framework, in ways that perhaps mirror my own checklist? Could these women walk away from any sense of obligation to Latinx communities, ones from whom they stood to learn, now that they had been “absolved” by speaking with me? Was there love and solidarity in this engagement?

This last prescription of love and solidarity is antithetical to the Western project of the university and its long history of relying on the sterilized sense of pure thought and reason (Anzaldúa, 2002). This last prescription is the only one that can truly liberate, in love and through love. I have to let those white women go on their journeys; maybe they will come back to me, or to other elders or guides. I hope they, and anyone who attempts to engage Chicana feminism, do so with all seriousness and exquisite sensitivity. Otherwise those who can in no way claim Chicana@ as an embodied identity can do far more harm than good, burning bridges, violating. It is in this hope, however, in this spirit of love—one that does not erase differences nor impose itself on others—that I look toward building more bridges. Along with Chicana feminists, we can work to draw from “alternative sites of knowledge production and coalition-building” (Villenas, 2010, p. 452). Historically, I as a white woman am in no place to be at the front of Chicana feminism; I am in a space where I must carefully listen, in such a way that I am transformed through the listening and witnessing. Then I continue to engage the framework in a way that builds coalitions and bridges toward creating peoples bound by love and healing, especially as it relates to research. We are, after all, “interrelated with all existence ... interconnected and interdependent” (Keating, 2013, p. 183).

May these words heal the de-spiritualization of the academy ...

May these words heal our separation from ourselves, each other, and the visible and the invisible world

May these words “transfix us with love,” so together we will soar

(Lara, 2002, p. 437)

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