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# A Briefing for a Descent into Hell

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# *A Briefing for a Descent Into Hell<sup>1</sup>*

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*Muy estimado público, primero quiero darles las gracias por haber venido de todos los rumbos a este congreso. My sincere gratitude to the 1996 Conference Site Committee, to all those who have worked to put this conference together. And thank you René Núñez for your words of wisdom and inspiration.*

As I worked on my presentation many things happened but nothing much changed. Each day brings new feelings. One day I am buoyant, full of hope and optimism; the next day I am filled with despair. The next day there is a new assault on my sensibilities, on my beliefs, on my being. Yesterday morning, three new events assaulted me: the news that the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, in a 3-0 ruling, said that the University of Texas Law School may not use race as a factor when admitting students for the sake of adding diversity to the campus; an article about a 27 year-old Sacramento woman, immigrant from Nicaragua, mother of five children, married to a United States (US) citizen, who will be deported; and finally, the news that University of California Regent Ward Connerly was denouncing Angela Davis because she was outspoken in her opposition to the so-called California Civil Rights Initiative. Thus, I must go back to my original title, "A Briefing for Our Descent Into Hell."

But first, I offer you a poem written by humbly me:

UN PASO PA'DELANTE, DOS PASOS PARA'TRAS  
ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

I.  
Silencio, silencio, no sean ruidosos;  
Silence, silence, hush your sweet soft voices, my children,  
¿Por qué amá? Pos, ¿es que ai viene La Llorona?  
But why, Mama, why? Is the Llorona coming with the rain?

Silencio, silencio, no sean ruidosos;  
Silence, silence, hush your sweet soft voices, my children,  
Oye, amá, alguien toca tan recio en la puerta;  
Listen, Mama, we hear someone knocking loudly at the door;

Silencio, silencio, no sean ruidosos;  
Silence, silence, hush your sweet soft voices, my children;  
¿Onde está apá? ¿El echa a correr a La Llorona?  
Mama, where is Papa? Is he chasing away the Llorona?

Silencio, silencio, no sean ruidosos;  
Silence, silence, hush your sweet soft voices, my children;  
¡Amá, amá! A apá se lo lleva La Llorona vestida de soldado,  
Mama, a deathly looking soldier-woman is dragging Papa away.  
No, no my children, it's the Border Patrol;  
and now they return for me.  
No, no mijitos, es la migra . . . y ahora vienen por mí.

## II.

Amá, apá, quiero ir al colegio, me gusta estudiar  
Mama, mama, I want to go to college, I love learning;  
No, no, no se puede hija mía; no hay dinero, no se puede pasar allí;  
No, no, my child, there is no money to enter there;  
¿Por qué no . . . amá . . . apá? Estudio mucho, no ando de callejera,  
ni de coqueta. ¿Por qué no?  
Why not, Mama, Papa? I study hard, I don't roam the streets;  
I'm not a coquette, why can't I go?  
No, no mijita, no se puede, no hay campo en la universidad;  
ya cerraron algunas escuelas, ya se hicieron cárceles;  
hay mucho campo en la cárcel;  
No, my child, this can not be, there is no space in the University;  
Colleges are closing . . . turning into prisons;  
there is plenty of space in prison.

Pero yo no quiero estar encerrada,  
hay muchas escaleras en la prisión  
hay muchos candados en la prisión.  
las noches son muy largas y solas en la prisión.  
I don't want to be imprisoned;  
There are too many ladders in prisons,  
there are too many locks behind those prison walls;  
the nights are long and lonely behind the wall;

Me vuelvo loca, le tengo miedo a la oscuridad.  
I would go mad; I fear the darkness.  
¿Amá, apá, ya se apaga la luz?  
Mama, Papa, is the light going out?  
The light . . . , I no longer see the light;  
This darkness drives me mad,  
it weighs heavy on my heart.  
La luz, la luz, no veo la luz, me vuelvo loca . . .  
Me pesa tanto el corazón.

And there is no light.

Still, the motto of the University of California is: **LET THERE BE LIGHT!** We are spiraling into darkness, the darkest times for la raza since the mass deportations of the 1930s, the worst for higher education since the 1950s battle over loyalty oaths. I feel mortally wounded by the passage of Proposition 187 last November 1995 and by the July 20, 1995 vote of the University of California Board of Regents eliminating the use of race, national origin and/or gender as one of the several criteria used for admissions, hiring, and contracts. It feels as if all my work, all of our work of the past 30 years is under attack. We, those of us who work to improve the quality of life from the perspective of one specific ethnic-racial group, or even from the perspective of a people of color, are being repudiated. I feel erased. My soul is imprisoned in this dark tunnel!

If the truth shall set me free, then all around me must be lies: what the Regents say, what many educational leaders say, what the media reports say, what many elected officials say. It is a lie when they say that affirmative action is preferential treatment, that it discriminates against white men. It feels like a lie when they say that ending affirmative action is the means to end racial and gender discrimination. It is a lie when they decide that people, whose only crime is to risk life and limb to provide a better life for their families, are not entitled to basic amenities. They lie, those who say that race is no longer a significant fact of life in the USA. It is a lie when we hear that racism, sexism, and homophobia affect everyone equally. All lies!

These lies are a cover-up, a cover-up for the new American Experiment. These past 500 years of colonization and of a struggle within the Americas has been about indigenous people deciding whether or not we would let the new immigrants stay and thrive in these lands. These next few years will be about whether or not these usurpers will let us, indigenous people, continue to stay and thrive in the Americas. I know I am not in California whose population just passed Proposition 187, but today the US Congress is debating passage of immigration legislation that will include requirements that new immigrants must know English before they arrive in the United States, and that will restrict access to public education for undocumented workers and their children. The Anglo-American hatred for us, children of Mexicanos, Centroamericanos, and Sudamericanos is deeper than I thought. It is racist and xenophobic. It is a hatred directed at our reproduction, at our children. The society wants our production but not our reproduction. This hatred produces these genocidal policies.

The messages to la raza, Chicanas, Chicanos, Latinas, and Latinos alike, is that we must harvest the food, prepare the food, serve the food, and wash the dishes. We must build the houses, clean the houses, clean the yards, clean the streets; but we cannot sit down and eat at the same table. This is what racism, sexism, and xenophobia is all about: we can do

the work of the society, but we cannot share the goodies of the society.

Commentators such as Dinesh D'Sousa, Linda Chávez, and Shelby Steele denounce affirmative action because they do not believe it solves the problem of racism or sexism. They are willing to keep our peoples imprisoned in lies because they do not see the connections between tolerance and acceptance of racism and sexism and not finding solutions. They do not see that we have learned to tolerate racism, sexism, and homophobia. No, tolerance is not a virtue nor a strategy. What solutions do they offer in place of affirmative action? None. If they are not part of the solution, then they are part of the problem. Affirmative action is after all, important because it was seen as a solution, a means of helping all of us know each other in higher education and in the workplace as equals at all levels of expertise, not just in hierarchical relations.

We, the self-proclaimed scholars of Chicana/o Studies must not be a part of the problem. We must be leaders in finding solutions. We must light the way out of this dark tunnel. We must be guiding lights out of the darkness. We must set our people free, free from this darkness into which we have spiraled!

But in order to help resolve issues, Chicana/o Studies must articulate a counter-hegemonic discourse, a discourse accurate as well as stimulating, intellectually and ethically superior to prevailing discourses. And our discourse must be understandable and meaningful to all of our distinct communities. And we must take that knowledge and discourse back to our communities. We must educate our communities. We cannot allow these battles to be lost because of ignorance.

These are, of course, the external attacks directed at our communities. We must certainly also deal with problems and challenges within Chicana/o Studies. These attacks, along with new realities, experiences and changes in the objective conditions of our communities, have created new tensions within Chicana/o Studies, including: stronger identification with national origins among the various groups constituting our communities; inflexibility of the theories and terms/language adequate to dealing with the new realities; a sense and appropriation of the other; and bipolarities in a world of gradations.

To deal with the external attacks and the internal tensions, we must chart new directions within Chicana/o Studies. We must define our own discipline; we must take possession of our theories and ideologies; we must integrate the object and the subject; we must listen to the voices of our youth as well as to the voices of our elders; and above all, we must listen to the voices of our youth as they chant their own call for power. We must work on erasing boundaries—boundaries between men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, Latinas/os and Chicanas/os, young and old, our brothers and sisters of color in the struggle. We must strengthen

our connection with the community; Chicana/o Studies scholars, be they students or faculty, must be the organic link between the intellectual world and the community; we must not allow ourselves to be separated from our communities. We must maintain the intellectual tradition of the scholar-activist personified by Ricardo Flores Magón, Sara Estela Ramírez, Jovita González, Ernesto Galarza, Bert Corona, and Julian Zamora, and all the people who have been honored as NACCS Scholars.

These areas in need of reformulating in Chicana/o Studies are an imperative as we move to our next step in the development of our inter/discipline, the articulation and implementation of strategies. Strategies to combat racist/sexist/homophobic attacks should be emerging from within Chicano/o Studies, not exclusively from there, but certainly profusely. The tasks before us are obvious. We must reverse the July 20, 1995 of the UC Board of Regents because the University of California is a place where Chicana/o Studies must gain intellectual leadership. We must defeat the California Civil Rights Initiative. We must not allow the implementation of Proposition 187, the Save Our State Initiative; we must resist all other anti-immigrant legislation. We must resist the building of new prisons; we must rescue our children from the mean streets, from prison, from death; we must end abuse and violence against our *mujeres*; we must rescue and rebuild our public education system; and finally we must find our common ground and articulate our vision of our future. In the process of attacking these problems, we must not allow ourselves to become sacrificial lambs on the altar of affirmative action. Affirmative action has never moved us far enough nor fast enough. We have other very urgent work to do.

We must give new meaning, real form and implementation to our chant: no justice, no peace! It is imperative that we support the pro-affirmative action forces, be they hunger strikes, protest marches, or other actions. This human sacrifice must end. Each of our Chicana/o Studies programs must issue statements clearly stating our position on all of these important issues. Stanford University's President Casper defined affirmative action as the process of "keeping open an avenue whereby the deserving and exceptional may rise through their own efforts". We should be able to say something at least as positive. Our college campuses should lead society to justice and to do good works.

Let me conclude by proposing some general strategies and some specific strategies for NACCS. All of us can start by educating ourselves and our communities on the issues; find out who is doing what, deconstruct and reconstruct. We can all inform ourselves on the actions taking place. I urge you to step over the line; cross that border; decolonize your minds. *No tengamos miedo*. Let us be willing to commit not so civil acts of disobedience. As René Núñez has already reminded us—organize. And listen, LISTEN to the voices of our youth.

And what can you, as NACCSistas do? You can write letters to the University of California Board of Regents, to Regent Connerly, reminding them of their obligation to the people who support the University. Write to the lawyers in the court cases giving them better arguments than those they seem to use. Let your bodies be seen in rallies, marches, protests. And talk, talk to the media, the radio, the television, the newspaper, for there is too much of a one sided vision in the mass media today. NACCS members should demand legislative hearings in their respective states. Finally, we need to issue our own Chicana/o Studies agenda for the next century, for where we want to be by the time of the NACCS thirty year anniversary.

Although we are in a deep darkness now, there is light at the end of the tunnel. We will find our way out of this darkness, and when we do, we will make this world a better place. This is our briefing for your descent into hell. Now let us go out into the world and do good works. Let us make NACCS work for our people.

## Notes

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1. Title has been borrowed from a Doris Lessing novel. This text is the Keynote Address delivered at the 1996 National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Conference, Chicago, Illinois.
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