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Introduction

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On the Matter of Civic Morality:
Testimonio Introduction to NACCS Tejas Foco 2013 Conference Proceedings

Tiffany Ana López

This year's NACCS Tejas Foco conference marks a benchmark in my over two decades of attending NACCS. The location of the University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) and its surrounding Rio Grande Valley brought a particular charge to the events with the university being home to the Bracero oral history project and a critical mass of scholars and students dedicated to honoring the life and work of Gloria Anzaldúa; a community renowned for its vibrant artistic production of literature, music and more recently, murals; and the surrounding region in all its geographic and cultural complexities offering a dramatic litmus paper for gauging national debates about immigration and citizenship. Together, these elements informed the palpable sense of affective, intellectual, and activist community that one perceived throughout the conference. Membership of the Tejas Foco clearly assembled together as a collective with many years of ongoing conversation underway. The conference committee appeared to consciously harness this energy in their organization of plenaries, sessions, workshops, and events strategically designed to foster and advance this conversation. I left the meeting tremendously energized by the body of work I'd encountered over the many days of conferencing and inspired by the vision presented about the future of our field, but most especially the lens that the conference organizers employed to direct that vision.

In their selected theme for the conference and in their introductory program notes, Co-Chairs Sonia Hernández and Marci McMahon affirmed community-based pedagogies, scholarship, and activism as central to Chicana/o studies, most especially in the present moment. Our communities are very much currently under siege, particularly in the realms of education, law, economics, and cultural production. Consequently, community must remain the

focal point of our work with teaching, scholarship, service, and activism necessarily placed in tandem. As we have seen with the ripple effect of SB 1070, the visibility and critical mass of Chicana/o's are viewed by the dominant culture as agitating the status quo, which is indeed one of the major goals of Chicana/o studies as a proponent of social justice. While some cultural critics declare the contemporary moment as one that is "post-" race, gender, class, etc., for most of us, such thinking is preposterous as we are still working to fully realize not just the theory but also the promise and practice of cultural citizenship in all its manifestations. We cannot in any possible way afford to unmoor our scholarship, teaching, service, and activism from a concretely understood sense of community.

In his important essay, "The Role of the Chicano Academic and the Chicano Non-Academic Community," composed during the early 1980s amidst debates about affirmative action and diversity in higher education, Tomás Rivera (one of Chicana/o studies' foundational educators and creative authors) writes,

The priority for the Chicano academic should be to become a respected member of the academy through excellence in teaching, research or creative activity, and service. Chicano academics can play any role they choose. It is important that the role be chosen carefully for effectiveness. The Chicano community is changing drastically, expanding rapidly in numbers and becoming more amorphous. It is also becoming more vigorous. The Chicano academic should get involved politically with the community. But the involvement should be principled. In the last analysis, the Chicano academic and the community will have to develop, as a priority, a *civic morality*. A civic morality gives clarity of action that one can hope to build a better community. *Ni más, ni menos.* (p. 43 in Vernon

Lattin, et al., *Tomás Rivera, 1935-1984: The Man and His Work*; Bilingual Review Press: Tempe, 1988.)

By civic morality, Rivera means that our education – about the patterns of history, systems of power, and agency gained through research or creative activity – combined with our access to the resources of the university, requires that we see ourselves as morally bound to serve the community by sharing our knowledge with and among the community. He asks us to remain ever mindful of the larger impact we wish to make with our work, meaning that we remain clear why it is we ventured to the university in the first place. If the commitment is social change, then we must consistently, actively, and thoughtfully cultivate an engagement with the broader social world as a means of forging that change. Notably, Rivera writes that both “the Chicano academic *and* the community” (emphasis mine) together must develop a civic morality. His call asks that in serving the community, Chicana/o academics cultivate an understanding within the community that they see the university and its academics as accountable to the community. The relationship and the work must be mutually informative.

Throughout the 2013 NACCS Tejas Foco Conference, I repeatedly witnessed the contemporary incarnation of Rivera’s call that we imagine ourselves as change agents responsible for acknowledging, sharing, and expanding access to education as a platform for social justice. Plenaries on the transdisciplinary nature of Chicana/o studies, the current state of the field, radical teaching, and the testimonio invited us to both chart and disrupt academic boundaries. There were several pre-conference activities, such as writing and professional development workshops for undergraduate and graduate students as well as university faculty and teachers at UTPA whose student body demographic is 90% Latina/o. These workshops are incredibly significant as they engage in fostering the entire pipeline of Latinas/os in higher education by providing resources of information, skills, and mentoring necessary to empower

all participants to successfully move forward and, perhaps most important of all, have the specificity of experience to draw from in themselves one day becoming a workshop leader. The conference also featured sessions and events with creative artists and cultural visionaries, such as Helena María Viramontes' writing workshop; accordionist and pioneer Eva Ybarra's musical presentation; the multi-media testimonio based theater presentation of *Crawling with Monsters* directed by Eric Wiley; a Noche de Cultura featuring Amalia Ortiz and several other noted CantoMundo poets (<http://www.cantomundo.org>); and a musical presentation by Edcouch-Elsa Mariachi Juvenil Azteca. Notably, conference activities were advertised as open to the public and garnered spotlight focus with local news covering the inauguration of the new MAS space on the UTPA campus with heartening comments about the importance of MAS to the university and the community offered by UTPA President Robert Nelson, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Havidán Rodríguez, and MAS Director Stephanie Alvarez (see <http://www.foxrio2.com/80663/utpa-bronc-report-513/> and <http://blogs.utpa.edu/coah/2013/02/25/ribbon-cutting-and-conference/>). This press acknowledged the importance of the university and its commitment to serving the needs of the community and participating in community development through Mexican American and Chicana/o studies. Overall, the conference program affirmed how as leaders, we cannot afford to become dispirited by politics, or lost in the quagmire of academic jargon, or even the splitting of institutional hairs. First and foremost, by both purposeful design and critical intent, our work must be accessible and grounded in community.

My own presentation was one of many that spoke frankly about how one's cultural upbringing and personal experience provide the springboard for critical engagement and involvement in community building. I shared about the play adaptation I've authored of Rivera's classic novel, *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, and other new projects I'm

shepherding as Professor of Theatre and Tomás Rivera Endowed Chair in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of California, Riverside, where I am director of an annual conference around themes central to the life and work of Tomás Rivera and developing new programming in Latina/o studies and the creative arts, including a recently inaugurated Tomás Rivera Teaching Assistantship as well as a community access series on Latina/o visual and performing arts for the Art and Barbara Culver Center of the Arts in downtown Riverside. As a scholar of theater, literature, and creative arts, and former editor (2005-2012) of *Chicana/Latina Studies*, the flagship journal in our field focused on feminist engagement, I have been interested in how writers, artists, and cultural producers create work focused on matters of trauma and violence as a means to stage a public conversation towards personal and cultural healing.

The vision I bring to my work is very much informed by my identity as a first generation college student who grew up in an economically and emotionally unstable household charged by extreme violence and dysfunction across the board. Of three siblings, I am the only one to complete high school (and barely, at that), complete college, and achieve economic and familial stability. I have a brother in prison for killing our father, and my relationship with both my brother and sister is haunted by our parents' legacy of passing forward their wounds. This personal history has made me keenly aware of the crucially important role of mentors and publicly accessible programming in higher education as a means to tap into promise that would otherwise languish away. These are the two things that I can concretely identify as having made the greatest difference in my life. I feel extremely lucky and blessed for having been educated on the last wave of affirmative action because that programming bolstered my academic skills, developed social consciousness, cultivated a sense

of civic morality, and introduced me to the mentors who served as role models for the type of work I have engaged in throughout my career.

The connection of the Chicana/o academic to the community remains vitally important with role models and programming visionaries more crucial now than ever before as today's Latina/o youth face increasingly embattled terrain, represented by the incomprehensibly young ages at which they are routed into the bowels of the prison system and the tragically low rates of high school graduation. When I look at the diversity of faces in the classroom at the Hispanic Serving Institution where I have been a professor for nearly twenty years, I am heartened by the growing presence of women of color but continue to be struck by the absence of young African American and Latino men. And still, decades after Affirmative Action and its modest gains, the face of the faculty does not in any way match the face of the student body. These observations represent the critical call for recognition of the need to actively serve community with an eye towards expanding the pipeline into higher education in the kind of strategic and comprehensive way envisioned by revolutionary educator and community activist Geoffrey Canada, described in Paul Tough's excellent book about his work, *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America* (Mariner Books, 2009). Canada is clearly doing the kind of work Rivera so hopefully suggested in his early writings about administrative leadership.

In my plenary presentation, I explored some of the challenges in remaining visionary within academia. As Rivera states, we must first serve the community by cultivating excellence. It is a reality that within academic institutions, our excellence must be formally vetted, a process that is both personally stressful and in many instances politically taxing. Cultivating excellence and navigating through the vetting required by achieving degrees, merits, and promotions places great demands on one's time and spirit. Hence our need to remain mindful

that the work of cultivating excellence is part of the Chicana/o academic's engagement with civic morality. We must also be mindful that leadership demands not just trained researchers and analysts but also creative and agile thinkers. Every movement needs its intellectuals, however these minds must be cultivated to be critically introspective, forward thinking, and inventively resourceful. This is one of the other reasons I so appreciated the conference organizers' deliberate inclusion of the humanities alongside the social sciences branches of Chicana/o studies. (How many Chicana/o studies departments and programs have theater scholars, creative writers, or MFAs on their faculty?) We need to better incorporate the arts into Chicano studies, not just for the sake of intellectual diversity, but more so because the arts represent a very important discipline and a creative mode of thinking and, as such, help us to expand our critical repertoire while also providing an avenue that powerfully speaks to our community, one that clearly energizes students to better draw them into the pipeline of higher education.

While we have access to incredible resources at the university, we are often forced to engage in various battles that can in the end prove distracting and dispiriting. In the hard forging of socially conscious academic work, it becomes too easy to lose sight of the bigger picture regarding the relationship between institutions of higher education and community building. We need to see the resources of higher education and the university as something to creatively use and – most importantly – expand. I was inspired at UTPA to hear of the creation of a Gloria Anzaldúa student fellowship fund and their consideration of also creating a named Teaching Assistantship. Tomás Rivera and Gloria Anzaldúa share in being two creative artists and community scholars who both frankly and critically offered their life stories as a means to challenge and inspire all of us to remain visionary about what it is we might best contribute to community building through our work in higher education. The ambiente of the 2013 NACCS

Tejas Foco conference represented the tradition of such work. May you be energized, moved, motivated, and inspired by the extraordinarily generative work of the conference represented in the proceedings gathered here in this volume.