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Coming Home

The Latina/o Queer Zone of Comfort

Rita E. Urquijo-Ruiz

“We’re going to have to do something about your tongue . . . I’ve never seen anything as strong and as stubborn.” And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down? Wild tongues can’t be tamed; they can only be cut out.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

In my book *Wild Tongues: Transnational Mexican Popular Culture* (Urquijo-Ruiz 2012), I theorize about accepting and utilizing the multifaceted aspects of our identity as queers of color in order to transform our communities. I state:

[There are many] issues pertaining to Chicana/o queer identity and the factors that enable [a] subject to become *comfortably queer* amid family, community, and institutional homophobic rejection, including hegemonic practices of racism. A Chicana/o queer subject is often pressured to privilege one aspect of her/his identity (sexual or ethnic) over the other and continually struggles to negotiate and integrate both. . . . [Therefore,] this queer zone of comfort is created and inhabited by a Chicana/o and Latina/o queer subject after negotiating his/her identity conflicts. It is a cultural territory where the subject is empowered by his/[her] sexual and ethnic cultural citizenship to create an ideological intervention through a politics of identity and difference. [This] is a safe space and a discursive location from which queers of color can decidedly contribute to the liberation of their respective communities. In order to fully inhabit this queer zone of comfort, the subject must create familial and familiar unbreakable bonds with other members of his/her community who support social change for the betterment of the group. (Urquijo-Ruiz 2012, 138)

Comfortably Queer: A Personal Account

Growing up, I always thought I was a GENIUS!!! Don't laugh! This is true! I honestly felt that there was nothing I couldn't accomplish: academically, artistically, linguistically, physically, and theatrically. I was always the best. You name it; I could master it. I learned this self-confidence from my mother, Carmen Ruiz (may she rest in peace). She was tough and hard-working, and no one could tell her what to do. My parents both taught me to defend and assert myself: "No te dejes, chingate a quien te haga daño." The expected response was physical violence, but when I was young I was very skinny and little for my age, so I learned early on that the best way to defend myself was with my mouth, with my tongue, with my words. In fact, words were all I had, but any time I told anyone off I became an *hocicona* and *malcriada*. My maternal grandmother would ask, "¿Cuándo te vas a quedar callada?" The answer, of course, was ¡NUNCA!

But allow me to start this story at the beginning . . .

I was born in Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, into a family of twelve children. I'm the eighth-oldest or the fourth-youngest, depending on which group of siblings wants to claim me. My family is of very poor origins. Neither one of my parents finished elementary school, but they encouraged all of us kids to get an education. Even so, this wasn't enough, and most of my siblings didn't make it to high school. Today, I'm the only one in my extended family with a doctoral degree. But this journey hasn't been easy.

Given our poverty and the fact that my father died when I was eight years old, my mom had to work very hard to feed twelve mouths. She accomplished this well; however, the nourishment I needed was of a different type. I hungered to be hugged, kissed, and loved by her and by my relatives in general. But there was no time and no space for this in my family. Those were *cursilerías*, corny things that only the rich people in the *telenovelas* could afford. So I knew early on that at some point I would need to feed my soul elsewhere . . . away from them. I would need, as Cherríe Moraga encourages us, "to make familia from scratch" (1986, 58).

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Ever since I can remember, I had a hard time fitting in with my family. I was the classic tomboy who played mainly with boys, cars, wooden tops, marbles, and a broken bicycle with no pedals. By the way, this bicycle had a seat that was not well secured and I found a way to pleasure myself on it as I rode it. Oh, I remember that broken toy fondly! If I ever played *a las muñecas*—with dolls—I refused to pretend to be a mom and a *comadre* like my sisters; instead I would build awesome houses with my father’s tools and my mom’s *sábanas y cobijas*, the old sheets and blankets. After I nailed the sheets to some pieces of wood and to the walls outside of our home, I would play at being the teacher, *la sexless maestra* who didn’t have to have a husband or children. I hated holding a doll in my arms as much as I hated wearing dresses.

The freedom to play these games always came at a price, though. My siblings, especially my brothers, made fun of my budding *marimacha* self and would call me “hombre sin huevos” (man with no balls). This to me was the most hurtful insult. Sometimes I would cry out of anger, feeling like there was nothing I could do except defend myself by retorting “¡No estén chingando!” or “¿Y qué chingados te importa?” My mind has always created mental images, so it was horrible to picture myself having balls and the implied phantom penis to which the insult alluded. I never wanted to be a boy; I only wanted to have the freedom that my brothers and male friends had to be themselves and to like or love girls. You’re probably thinking: this is the classic lesbian story. And yes, it is, but with a few twists.

My feeling of not fitting in, of not belonging in my family, drove me away from them. At the age of twelve, during the summer when I first started working, I would stay for weeks at a time at the house of one of my mom’s friends who owned the *raspa* or *raspadería* (shaved ice) store where I worked. My mom would scold me and ask why I didn’t come home anymore. I told her only that I usually got off work at midnight and that it was easier just to spend the night there. When I was fourteen or fifteen another one of my mom’s friends asked my mom to let me live with her because all of her children were grown and lived in the United States. My mom accepted, and I managed to live in the same neighborhood as my family but a few houses away from mine. Finally, this same friend asked my mom to let me come to the United States to live with her son’s family so that I could go to high school, learn English, and then return to become a bilingual secretary. This sounded like a perfect plan, except for the fact that I would be undocumented for at least three years.

I crossed the border at the age of sixteen with a passport that was to expire in thirty days. Once in high school, I was placed in English as a

second language classes (or as the *chileno* playwright Guillermo Reyes calls it, “English as a stressful language”). I learned English quickly. During my junior and senior years, I lived with a gringo family who tried to adopt me so that I could get my papers and go see my relatives in Mexico. Unfortunately, I was seventeen years old by then, and the adoption process would take longer than a year; five different lawyers told us that the family couldn’t adopt me since I would be an eighteen-year-old adult.

That same year, I found out that California law required the state to cover college tuition and state financial aid for undocumented students. With much support from my high school counselors (a Chicano named Eulalio González and a white woman named Lorraine Klebeck), I was accepted by the University of California, Riverside (UCR), and it became my campus starting in fall of 1990. This meant, however, that I would not be able to see my family for at least four or five more years.

At some point, one of my older sisters managed to visit me twice, but I longed to see my mom and even my crazy siblings. Coming to this country at such an early age and leaving all my family behind was the most difficult decision I have ever made. But I knew I could make a difference, and I knew I didn’t fit in with my family anyway. The endless search for my own “home” continued. It wasn’t until much later that I learned that home was and is with(in) me. As Gloria Anzaldúa states in *Borderlands/La Frontera*: “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (1987, 22).

At UCR, I started discovering my Chicana and queer identity. I joined the campus chapter of MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán), but unfortunately most of its members were homophobic and sexist. So I helped create a feminist, queer-friendly group called Mujeres Unidas. I didn’t leave MEChA altogether, though. Instead, when I became its co-chair, those of us who were conscientious worked to “queer” the organization. We co-sponsored visits to our campus by Moraga, Monica Palacios, and Luis Alfaro, and by Carla Trujillo, the editor of one of my favorite books, *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About* (1991). Trujillo stated that no MEChA chapter had ever before invited her to any campus because she was an “out lesbian,” and so, she said half-jokingly, she was suspicious and scared when she received our invitation. I told her that our MEChA was different and that everything was going to be just fine.

But it wasn’t until my sophomore year at UCR that I finally began to come to terms with my queerness during a process that was very long and

painful. During my closeted years I wasn't feeling like a GENIUS anymore, because after all, geniuses are perfect and my internalized homophobia kept telling me that queers were not.

During my junior year, I petitioned to attend the University of California, San Diego, for two quarters so that I could be openly queer away from my community at Riverside and possibly scope out the Department of Literature for graduate studies. Once there, my new city offered me the refuge I sought and I had my first open queer relationship. But when the academic year was over, I had to return to my home campus and leave my girlfriend and my freedom behind. She and I made the effort to have a long-distance relationship, but I told her it did not feel safe to come out officially until I left Riverside.

I remember one evening when Guillermo Reyes's play *Men on the Verge of a His-panic Breakdown* was brought to UCR. I understood and enjoyed every single queer joke, laughing loudly. This did not escape my nonqueer friends Lupe and Lilia, who invited me to dinner afterward and very gently encouraged me to come out to them: "My love"—our mutual term of endearment—"if you have anything to tell us, anything at all, please know that we love you very, very much, just the way you are." For an hour, I kept up the pretense that I had no idea what they were talking about. But finally their insistence and their loving ways of talking with (not "to") me offered a safe space and I was able to embrace the freedom of finally being/feeling at home with these two friends.

However, as many of us know, the coming out process can be long and complicated, so the fights with myself were many. I had been gradually coming out to my friends and family in the United States, but not in Mexico. Unfortunately, in graduate school I found myself in an abusive queer relationship that almost cost me my life. I had planned to kill myself in my Chevy Blazer on New Year's Eve 1999. But then I thought that if I died that night, no one from my family in Hermosillo would have known me: the real, queer me. I also thought about my youngest brother Charly and about how my decision to leave this world would affect him, especially since we had already lost our mom (to lung cancer) and an older sister (killed by a drunk driver). The tragedies in our family had been many; we did not need another one. So after much contemplation, I called my oldest sister Olivia in Mexico and came out to her. She was as supportive and loving as I had hoped. Having come out to at least one member of my family meant that I had finally begun the process of "coming home to myself and being comfortably queer."

Now, as a professor, I have many privileges, yet I continuously struggle to survive within the US academy, which is not used to having people like me within its confines. My presence has helped others who join me in the fights for our rights. I attempt, in every way possible, to center queerness in our communities and in my classroom. I would not be able to do the work I do if I hadn't survived my/our struggles with the help of many relatives, friends, supporters, and allies.

To close, I leave you with this. Moraga, who writes of “not fitting in” within the different communities she represents, has said, “I come from a long line of *vendidas*” (1983, 117). In my case, this line would be rendered slightly differently: “I come from a long line of *tortilleras*.” My maternal grandmother and my mother used to make *tortillas sonorenses* and sell them in order to make ends meet. These are big, extra-thin tortillas with a diameter the length of a woman's arm. Sometimes they would make fifteen or twenty dozen a day. Their tortillas were famous and were brought even to California and Arizona by some of their lifelong customers. Their tortillas sustained them; their tortillas sustained us . . . much as my own *tortillerismo* now sustains and nurtures me.

¡¡¡¡¡Qué vivan las tortilleras y toda la jotería!!!!
¡Mil gracias!

Notes

This essay is based on a keynote address delivered at the first National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies Joto Caucus conference at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, November 10, 2007. At that conference I set out a theoretical framework, one that now appears in my book *Wild Tongues: Transnational Mexican Popular Culture* (2012). Here I offer the unpublished, personal part of this speech.

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