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That's Why I Teach: It is My Duty to be Critical

*by Felix M. Padilla
Lehman College, CUNY*

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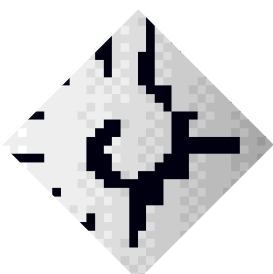
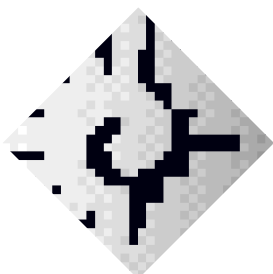
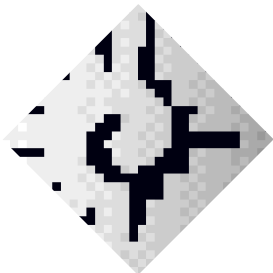
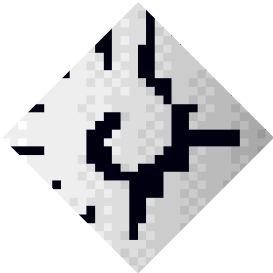
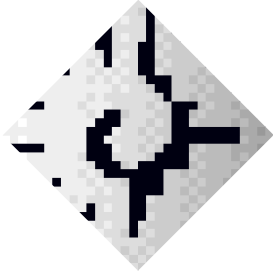
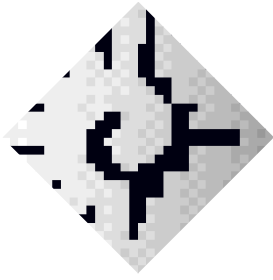


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Related Readings

This publication is part of *The Struggle of Latino/a University Students in Search of Liberating Education*, written by Felix Padilla.

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Dr. Felix M. Padilla is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Latin American and Puerto Rican Studies at Lehman College-CUNY. He is the founder and editor of the *Latino Studies Journal*. Prof. Padilla is the author of six books (1) *Latino Ethnic Consciousness* (1985); (2) *Puerto Rican Chicago* (1987); (3) *The Gang as an American Enterprise* (1992); (4) *Outside the Wall: The Struggle of a Puerto Rican Prisoner's Wife* (1993); (5) *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures-Sociology* (1994); and (6) *Let's Kick that Knowledge: The Struggle of Latino/a University Students in Search of a Liberating Education* (1996).

Prof. Padilla has written over a dozen of journal articles on topics like Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, and Cuban relations; the Sociology of Latino Culture and Identity; the Sociology of Salsa Music; Latino/a youth gangs.

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The **Julian Samora Research Institute** is committed to the generation, transmission, and application of knowledge to serve the needs of Latino communities in the Midwest. To this end, it has organized a number of publication initiatives to facilitate the timely dissemination of current research and information relevant to Latinos.

* *Research Reports*: **JSRI**'s flagship publications for scholars who want a quality publication with more detail than usually allowed in mainstream journals. These are edited and reviewed in-house. Research Reports are selected for their significant contribution to the knowledge base of Latinos.

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That's Why I Teach: It is My Duty to be Critical

Willie Colón is a famous, world renowned Puerto Rican salsa singer from New York City who has maintained a never-compromising, radical, oppositional voice for 30 years. In *Por Eso Canto* (That's Why I Sing), a 1993 recording, Willie Colón provides his most powerful and explicit explanation of how he has come to accept his political responsibilities as a singer. In general, *Por Eso Canto* can be seen as Willie Colón's critique of those who do not or cannot recognize the transformative, emancipatory possibilities of their work and of their cultural practices.

Since the late 1960's, Willie Colón has been an ardent critic of musicians who define and perform Salsa music as just another form of individual or social entertainment, rather than as a political, or cultural project. When you listen to his music and when you read his interviews in magazines and newspapers, you are most likely to find Willie Colón exposing the hypocrisy embedded in music, which detaches music from the most important political issues and conditions facing Puerto Ricans and other Latina/o people in the United States, Latin America, and the Caribbean.

Por Eso Canto

No puedo cayarantes de lo que me rodea,
I cannot remain silent in light of what surrounds me,

tampoco ignorar a los que sufren mil penas,
neither can I ignore those who suffer from a thousand sadnesses,

cantarporcantar no tiene ninguno sentido.
to sing for singing-sake has no meaning.

Yo quiero cantar porque siento un compromiso.

I want to sing because I feel a commitment.

No puedo cayarsabiendo lo que anda mal,
I cannot remain silent knowing what is wrong,
cambiar la mirada portemorar que diran,
to change my glance in fear what they might say,

cantarporcantares repetir mil palabras
to sing for singing-sake is to repeat a thousand words,

hablaral cantar es combersarcon el alma.
to talk as you sing is to speak with the soul.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Porque naci para cantar.

Because I was born to sing.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Llevo en mi cuerpo aquí el lelolay,

I carry in me here the lelolay,

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Es que no canto por cantar.

It's that I don't sing just to sing.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Mi canto es de campo, barrio y de ciudad,

My song is from the countryside, neighborhood and city,

Y poneso estoy aquí, cantando para ti!

And that's why I'm here, singing for you!

No puedo cayara lo que ocurre hoy.

I cannot remain silent to what is happening

today.

Si hay hambre o miseria, lo siente mi corazon,

If there is hunger or misery, it is felt by my heart,

Cantarporcantar es deseo de no mirar.

To sing for singing-sake is a desire not to look.

Hablaral cantares denunciary pensar.

To talk in your singing is to denounce and to think.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Porque naci para cantar. PorEso Canto!

Because I was born to sing.

Voy describiendo en cada verso tu llanto,

I am describing in each verse your pain,

Es que no canto por cantar.

It's that I don't sing just to sing.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Mi canto es de campo, barrio y de ciudad

My song is from the countryside, neighborhood and city.

Y poneso estoy aquí, cantando para ti.

And that's why I'm here, singing for you.

cantando para ti

PorEso Canto! Por Eso!

That's why I sing! That's why!

Para el mulato, y para el chinito,

For the mulatto, and for the Chinese,

para el lampilatto, and for

for the hairless and for the colorless

Heche Pa'lante, Somos Latinos.

Go forward, we are Latinos.

PorEso Canto! PorEso!

That's why I sing! That's why!

Y quiero cantarsin complejos, ni miedo.

I want to sing without any complexes, and without fear.

Mi compromiso es claro y sincero.

My commitment is clear and sincere.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Jimbaro, Jimbaro, Jimbaro, Jimbaro

Jimbaro, Jimbaro, Jimbaro, Jimbaro

Escuchas a ese bongo que dice!

Listen to the bongo that says!

Por Eso Canto! PorEso!

That's why I sing! That's why!

Oyeme bien,

Listen well,

para decirlo que siento,

to tell you what I feel,

para espresarsentimientos!

to express my feelings!

PorEso Canto! PorEso!

Por Eso!

That's why!

y portantas cosas hermosas, maravillosas.

and for so many beautiful things, marvelous.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Cantarpor cantar no tiene ningun sentido.

To sing for singing-sake does not make any sense.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Tampoco cayar,

Cannot remain silent,

es que tengo un compromiso.

is that I have a commitment.

PorEso Canto!

That's why I sing!

Porque no puedo ignorar

Because I cannot ignore

a los que sufren, a los que lloran,

those who suffer, those who cry,

a los que nada tienen de comer,

those who do not have to eat,

es que no puedo cayar.

is that I cannot remain silent.

Por Eso! PorEso Canto!

That's why! That's why I sing!

Just like the imprints left on my pedagogical practice by the teachings of the great Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and the progressive intellectual work of many liberating educators such as Henry Giroux, Ira Shor, Katheline Weiler, Peter McClaren, Bell Hooks, Cornel West, Jim Frasier, Donald Macedo, and others, Willie Colón's music has served as a reminder to always approach teaching as a medium of struggle and possibility. When I listen to the music of Willie Colón, my belief in pedagogy as the practice of freedom is reaffirmed. There can be found much passion and indignation, as well as a great deal of hope in the words of Willie Colón. His unmistakable, critical voice carries an enormous amount of anger; it also carries strength. But there is little by way of pessimism or fatalism in Willie Colón's passionate verses. He never despairs.

Willie Colón has long been one of my intellectual heroes, a true "organic intellectual," (to borrow the phrase from Antonio Gramsci, the brilliant radical Marxist philosopher and activist who was jailed by Mussolini for over 10 years for organizing the working class movement during the most repressive period of fascist rule in Italy). As an organic intellectual who has developed a great deal of pride, determination and confidence in his people, Willie Colón has used his work to serve as a cultural wake-up call for his people. I genuinely identify with Willie Colón, for my vision of society is also grounded in hope and liberating struggle. Though pain and suffering are unfailing themes in his music, as in *Porque no puedo ignorar a los que sufren, a los que lloran, a los que nada tienen de comer*, (Because I cannot ignore those who suffer, those who cry, those who do not have anything to eat), Willie Colón's hopefulness about a better life occupies a central location in his songs, as in *Heche Pa'Lante, Somos Latinos* (Go forward, we are Latinos).

I like presenting the classroom as a site of hope for my students. When the classroom becomes a space of hope, we can learn to dream together, once again. When the classroom becomes a space of hope, we can return to the youthful, adolescent dreams we carried before they were stripped from us by educational systems whose main function was to domesticate or incapacitate consciousness. The significance behind the idea of the classroom as a space of hope

lies in the recognition that many individuals in society die, as my good friend and colleague David Abalos likes to put it, "filled with dreams that never happened." In other words, people die with dreams which they were forced to forget. So, in my responsibility as a liberating educator, I must find different ways and strategies of educating that facilitate students' abilities to fulfill their longing, to reclaim their humanity.

"To die filled with dreams that never happened" is to live without hope, is to lose confidence in ourselves. When we live without hope, our abilities to envision the deliverance of humanity have been stifled, inhibited. When hope disappears, so does the ability to imagine basking in a climate of social euphoria, you now become an individual, someone who is socially impotent. As a hopeless humanity, it is the individual who counts, it is today, and not tomorrow or next year or next century, which becomes the cornerstone of life. In other words, hopelessness is the root of despair, apathy, and cynicism.

I speak to this opposite and destructive side of hope to demonstrate how liberatory possibilities do not make any sense unless they are embedded in a hopeful humanity. This is exactly what Willie Colón has in mind when he sings, *Cantar por cantar no tiene ningun sentido* (To sing for the sake of singing has no meaning). I have come to understand quite well that, as Paulo Freire indicates so clearly in *Pedagogy of Hope*, "without hope there is little we can do. It will be hard to struggle on, and when we fight as hopeless or despairing persons, our struggle will be suicidal" (1994:9).

It is necessary, then, to acknowledge that a democratic human life which is built around the principles of social justice and equality can only occur when we develop the ability to read the world critically. This is the reason why I always stress to students the value of understanding hope in association with critical understanding and encouraging them to appreciate the extraordinary wisdom which can be generated from truly understanding the dialectical relationship between hope and critical knowledge. In other words, I challenge students to develop an understanding for the kind of special union which must exist between hope and critical knowledge prior to undertaking efforts to liberate humanity.

And to speak to students about a critical perspective and approach to life requires that I spend time working with them, so they can develop the ability to examine and explore what lies behind the surface. For my students, this means developing a perspective which will always make them uncertain about supposed certainties, a perspective which will always make them learn how to unlearn. I really want to spend time helping students to develop the skills for going beyond and challenging dominant cultural messages which have been constructed and passed on as images of their representation. I make sure to provide students with the necessary time needed to develop the skills with which they understand and challenge deceiving appearances, which prevent them from seeing clearly.

It is important to recognize that before students can learn to identify and recreate deceiving images found in different forms of written and visual representation, we must be committed to “spend time working with them.” We are well aware that because of prior education experiences, patience and confidence must represent some of the most crucial ingredients in the process of teaching students to develop a different, critical view towards learning. We must be committed, with patience, to work at this transformation. We simply cannot undo over night the long process of critical knowledge denial they experienced in prior learning.

I return once again to my discussion of critical knowledge. In 1985, at the age of 67, Percy Bullchild wrote *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*, a series of powerful stories about the past and present of the Blackfoot Indian world. At 67 years of age Percy Bullchild wrote *The Sun Came Down* because he could no longer live with the historic misrepresentations of the Indian world by White writers and historians. *The Sun Came Down* serves as an excellent example of the reclaiming of a people’s history which was denied by someone else’s representation of that people.

“...I’m a Blackfeet Indian from Browning, Montana... We are all of the former Tribe of the Piegiens. Others of this former tribe are in Canada — the Kainais of the Bloods, the North Piegiens, and North Blackfeet tribe or band, all in Alberta, Canada. Our four tribes were once

one big Tribe of the Piegiens. We were split by the coming of the white man and their international boundary that presently divides the United States and Canada. I do not have a good education of the white man language, I cannot speak it fluently. Unfortunately, I only went to the sixth grade and I couldn’t speak English before going to school. And so the white man language is still very foreign to me. With what little education I have, I’m going to try to write the Indian version of our own true ways in our history and our legends. Most written history of us Indians, the Natives of this North American continent, and the South American continent too, has been written by non-Indians. But this is our history and our legends of our beginning, the very beginning of all life. Most of these are so false and smearing that it gets me mad. That’s the very reason why I’m writing now” (1985:1-2).

I use the story of Percy Bullchild and similar others to illustrate to students the significance of becoming critical subjects, capable of remaking objects and popular images which often conceal their true history, their true humanity. I use Percy Bullchild’s story and others to show students how as critical subjects they will learn and know how to refuse the ways and forms of their representation as subjugated “others.” Again, the essence of using these stories is to demonstrate to students how, as critical subjects, learning can become a creative act rather than a mechanical act of memorization and acceptance of information.

Just as important, I want critical knowledge to serve as the force behind students’ interest in interrogating their own politics in their roles as university students. What does it mean to be a university student today? What is the extent of understanding their civic responsibility, understanding their roles as critical human agents while attending an institution where information, or what the university likes to call “knowledge,” is always presented as fragments of unrelated facts, divorced from the context under which they are produced and absorbed, and therefore not germane for developing a critical imagination?

This is where critical consciousness becomes so essentially useful, for students can develop the ability for making linkages between their own body of knowledge and the social, cultural, political and economic realities that inform and sustain this knowledge, their knowledge. It is through a critical perspective that students can finally develop a coherent, holistic understanding of themselves, connecting self to the social world, always indicating their mutual conditioning. This is referred to by my friend and colleague, Donaldo Macedo, in his most recent and insightful book, *Literacies of Power: What Americans Are Not Allowed to Know*, as “clarity of reality” (1994:22). “The apprehension of clarity of reality,” according to Macedo, “requires a high level of political clarity, which can be achieved by sifting through the flux of information and relating each piece to another one so as to gain a global comprehension of the facts and their *raison d’être*” (1994:22).

Above all, what I do when I work with students is to urge them to accept critical knowledge as a precondition for a world of freedom, for human compassion and love. How can we envision a hopeful world; how can we have hope to remake, to rebuild, and to reshape the world without reaching a level of critical consciousness? For certain, we need to be hopeful to envision an alternative world, however, it is also essential to develop the critical perspective and vision with which to interrogate the conditions of our present human existence, including its contradictions and oppressive practices — none of which can be permitted to become part of this world we want to remake. This very same point is suggested by Cornel West in a dialogue with Bell Hooks. He asserts how “critical understanding is a prerequisite for any serious talk about coming together, sharing, participating, and creating bonds of solidarity so that Black people and other progressive people can continue to hold the blood-stained banners that were raised when that song was sung in the civil rights movement” (1991:8). Thus, it is important for students to learn the skills of a critical thinker, to be able to adopt a language, a discourse which locates hope at its very center, a critical language which dreams of human freedom and liberation.

In one class last year (1994), a student asked me to provide an example of the way critical knowledge can serve to inform hope. I presumed that he, along with other classmates, wanted to see what this idea looked like in practice. I turned to page 31 in one of our readers, *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice*, a special issue of the *Rethinking Schools* newspaper, and there was the best example I could think of. It was a poem by the title of *My Street at Night*. The poem, written by Faviola Perez, a fifth grader from La Escuela Fratney, a progressive bilingual and bicultural school made up of Latina/o, Black, and White children in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is about violence in her neighborhood. The poem is also about how to go beyond violence to find an alternative life.

This young girl’s vision of the world is critical, yet it is extremely hopeful. Her dream does not negate the human suffering around which she exists in the present; rather, her dream, her special dream, recognizes human suffering in its public and private form as a dimension of the life of the poor who have been trapped in inner-city neighborhoods — inner-city life becomes a consequence for those who are treated as

My Street at Night

My mom says, “Time to go to bed.”
The streets at night
are horrible
I can’t sleep!
Cars are passing
making noise
sirens screaming
people fighting
suffering!
Suddenly the noise goes away
I go to sleep
I start dreaming
I dream about people
shaking hands
caring
caring about our planet
I wake up
and say
Will the world be
like this some day.

“Others” in this society. To be so hopeful, she has come to recognize that in the same way this form of life was socially “created,” it can also be “recreated.” She is quite aware that people not only suffer under conditions of oppression, they can also resist and contest. In other words, this young girl really believes in the human capacity to transform society, as in “suddenly the noise goes away.” Her dream can be seen as a metaphor for the coming of transformation, for the coming of a dignity and solidarity of resistance, for the coming of that historical moment when the oppressed will ultimately become conscious of their oppression and decide to say “NO.”

The liberation suggested in the powerfully poetic words of this young girl is exactly what Willie Colón’s music embodies. Willie Colón, as a musician and as someone who comes from a working class background, refuses for his part to follow other musicians whose work is detached from the political reality of his people. *Cantar por cantar no tiene ningun sentido. Yo quiero cantar porque siento un compromiso. Cantar por cantar es repetir mil palabras, hablar al cantar es combersar con el alma.* (To sing for singing-sake has no meaning. I want to sing because I feel a commitment. To sing for singing-sake is to repeat a thousand words, to talk as you sing is to speak with the soul.) As a liberating educator I refuse to follow the conventional, neutral, transparent teaching practices of so many professors. I was a high school teacher for nearly four years and I recall that as early as the time when I was training to be a high school teacher, I had already learned or figured out the hidden side of “pedagogical neutrality.” To be a neutral educator, according to Henry Giroux, whose work has been described as constituting “a major discourse and foundation for developing and advancing a critical theory of education” (McClaren, 1988:XI), is to carry out a practice which upholds the culture of domination (1988). Specifically, Giroux writes: “Rather than viewing school knowledge as objective, as something to be merely transmitted to students, radical theorists argue that school knowledge is a particular representation of dominant culture, a privileged discourse that is constructed through a selective process of emphases and exclusions” (1988:XXX).

In “Feminist Scholarship: The Extent of the Revolution” (1990), Florence Howe makes a similar argument about teaching, especially as it relates to women. “In the broadest context of that word, teaching is a political act: some person is choosing, for whatever reasons, to teach a set of values, ideas, assumptions, and pieces of information, and in so doing, to omit other values, ideas, assumptions, and pieces of information. If all those choices form a pattern excluding half the human race, that is a political act one can hardly help noticing. To omit women entirely makes kind of a political statement; to include women as the target of humor makes another. To include women with seriousness and vision, and with some attention to the perspective of women as a hitherto subordinate group is simply another kind of political act” (1990:20).

And for Laraine Morin, a grade school teacher in Cambridge, Mass., there is very little in teaching which can be considered neutral. Laraine approaches teaching as a practice which is:

“professional and personal, intellectually challenging, and emotionally satisfying, an individual understanding and a communal action.”

She also writes,

“I am an African-American woman, a Roman Catholic, and a native Bostonian. I carry into the classroom my own early experiences, my curiosity, fears, preferences, culture, and race. It is this personal history, shaped by and shaping the learning process, which gives meaning to the lessons I teach” (1993:40).

Thus, to teach from a neutral perspective is to take students dancing to a tune played on behalf of domination. For students, this practice of pedagogical neutrality comes to represent an educational form of bondage — it means falling captive to a system of ideas, values and practices whose major aim is to instill in their minds tolerance for the dominant order. I believe to find in the idea of pedagogical neutrality the analogy for the “hegemonic intellectuals,” who according to Stanley Aronowitz and Henry Giroux, “do more than surrender to forms of academic and political incorporation, or hide behind spurious claims to objectivism; they self-consciously define themselves through the forms of moral and intellectual leadership they provide for dominant groups and classes” (1993:48).

Recognizing that human freedom and knowledge cannot be advanced through a pedagogy of neutrality, I believe to represent the contrast to that practice. I stand for a representation of the transformative intellectual whose mission is to “develop counterhegemonic pedagogies that not only empower students by giving them the knowledge and social skills they will need to be able to function in the larger society as critical agents, but also educate them for transformative action. That means educating them to take risks, to struggle for institutional change, and to fight both against oppression and for democracy outside of schools in other oppositional public spheres and the wider social arena” (Giroux, 1988:XXXIII). At a more general level, my transformative intellectual responsibilities resonate with those Edward Said assigns to the public intellectual. In his most recent book, *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said places the public intellectual within a context of commitment and risk, on one hand, and boldness and vulnerability on the other since, according to Said, the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented.

“The central fact for me,” writes Said, “is, I think, that the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy, or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, and cannot be

played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose raison d’être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. The intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles: that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously” (1994:11-12).

There is nothing neutral or transparent taking place in my classrooms, in my pedagogical practices. I am very clear when I define my teaching as a counter-hegemonic act, a fundamental way to oppose and to resist. To teach Latina/o students, other students of color, women, and progressive White students to learn and relearn together, to learn about and to make a commitment for social and community empowerment, represents one major political and pedagogical responsibility and commitment in my role as a transformative intellectual. This is exactly how Willie Colón likes to define our cultural obligations.

At this juncture I must make something clear, life as a transformative intellectual, who is also employed by the university, is quite difficult. It is no great surprise that most of us exist at the margins of the university. And while I do not care to romanticize or glamorize marginal spaces, I have fully accepted and cherished this fate, so well described by Edward Said in *Representations of the Intellectual*: “But there is no dodging the inescapable reality that such representation by intellectuals will neither make them friends in high places nor win them official honors. It is a lonely condition, yes, but it is always a better one than a gregarious tolerance for the way things are” (1994:XVIII).

Like many progressive artists and writers whose work is devoted to search for the truth, to challenge dominant knowledge and discourse, Willie Colón has been criticized for being “too political,” for standing up against those who want to represent the Salsa music tradition and its people without having earned the “right to represent.” Many of us have faced similar criticisms. Because of our commitment to help students develop an eye for critical examination, because of our commitment to work with students to help them with the development of a critical consciousness with which to oppose domination, we have been accused of politicizing the classroom, of student indoctrination in particular.

The real issue here has very little to do with student indoctrination, but rather, it concerns the way our pedagogical practices tend to include moments for examining and analyzing students’ struggle for gaining a liberating education, oftentimes requiring to be in solidarity with faculty members. Shouldn’t all professors and administrators be responsible for contributing to the well-being of Latina/o students? As a marginalized population, as an embattled community, Latina/o students need to receive support from faculty, administrators, staff, and from one another. They not only need to be assisted in developing academic skills that will get them through school and help them in developing into critical human agents, but their humanity must be defended as well. Latina/o university students are burdened by the same affirmative action stereotype which African-American students believe to be continually held against them. Latina/o students are generally viewed in the university as academically unprepared and inferior, as receiving an undeserving “free ride.” There is one special report by correspondent Lesley Stahl of *Sixty Minutes* on racial relations on campus which I show in my different classes. In the report Lesley Stahl brought together a group of African-American and White students to discuss their feelings on how the two groups were getting along on campus. One female African-American student’s description of the difficulties of being a Black student in a predominantly White university applies to most students of color in every university in the United States: “I feel like I have affirmative action stamped

on my forehead. Everyone seems to be staring at me, questioning whether I belong here or not.” And in John Singleton’s most recent movie, *Higher Learning*, the main African-American male character, Malik, a track athlete made the following observation about the way Black students believe they are perceived by White students on campus: “It is not about what you say, it’s about what you think. And in my head, you’re walking around here calling me a nigger in your head.”

Latina/o faculty are constantly subjected to the demands of students who view them to be in a symbolic relationship with them. We, as Latina/o professors, are viewed as central to the uplifting of *la raza* (translated literally to mean race but actually meaning “our people”). We, as Latina/o professors are expected to represent, to speak out against injustices carried out against Latina/o students. This is my belief. Further, it is also true that many of us would not be working in different university campuses, had it not been for the time and energy Latina/o students and their allies-in-struggle committed in the development of Puerto Rican, Chicano/a and Latina/o studies programs. Latina/o students are very aware of this fact, and they are highly critical of how little reciprocity there has been on the part of Latina/o professors.

In “Racism and the Model Minority: Asian-Americans in Higher Education,” Sucheng Chan and Ling-Chi Wang provide a good example of faculty commitment to the needs and interests of students at the University of California-Berkeley. Sucheng Chan and Ling-Chi Wang describe the “new racism” being waged against Asian-Americans, other people of color, and women (poor skills in English and feminine irrationality become the primary justifications for discrimination) on university campuses in the form of a backlash toward the increase in Asian-American university student enrollments. Sucheng Chan and Ling-Chi Wang show how even the “moderate Asian-American faculty, who for two decades wanted nothing whatsoever to do with the militant, anti-establishment stance of their colleagues in ethnic studies” (1991:62), have demonstrated a willingness to fight against the injustice Asian-American students are experiencing.

“The effort to curb Asian-American enrollment — including denying admission to students with high school GPA’s of 4.0 (straight A’s or higher, i.e., A+) — struck at the very heart of what Asian-Americans, regardless of their political persuasions, hold most dear: upward mobility through education. As a result, some of the Asian-American faculty in the natural sciences, engineering and other professional schools who had hitherto eschewed campus politics started to speak out and, more important, to show a willingness to serve on campus committees — not just administrative ones appointed by the chancellor’s office to deal specifically with minority affairs, but also standing committees of the academic senate, through which faculty formulate university policies and govern themselves. In short, a small Asian-American presence finally appeared in Berkeley’s structure of power, and it did so in the form of collegial power which had thus far eluded the grasp of most minority faculty” (1991:62).

For me, being a Latina/o professor is extremely challenging on many fronts, in particular in the way we relate to Latina/o and other progressive students. For the most part, the conventional expectation is to enter the university and begin following the path which we believe leads to tenure and promotion. And indeed in most universities today, research and publication continue to comprise this path, which in a very real way defines, students as objects of intrusion. So, the real challenge continues to be: how do we manage within the context of multiple university expectations and responsibilities? In other words, how do we develop our professional careers, put out the publications, carry out excellent teaching, and not lose sight of students’ needs? For sure there is no “one” answer, we do it in different ways, but it is of great significance that we recognize and make a serious commitment to our intellectual work, which includes contributing to students’ academic development and growth and personal well-being.

I recall my first university job, coming out of graduate school with no administrative experience or skills. I was hired as Director of a Latino Studies program. This was not a tenure track position, in fact the sociology department at the university did not show any interest in me until three years later when I had published my first two books. I had been named director of this program because the university was looking for a legitimate reason to shut it down: I was incompetent and inefficient. To a large degree I had been set up without knowing it; the program, I would find out later, had caused the university a great deal of difficulty and embarrassment, something that never sits well with university administrators.

Upon my arrival, I immediately began to work with students and a small number of Latina/o faculty and staff to define and shape the present and future course of the program. I became the faculty advisor to the Latina/o student organization and some of them in turn became part of our program’s advisory program. Before long the university had developed a very different view towards our efforts, supporting our ideas for the development of a student cultural and academic support program, with its own director and staff, which would be connected in different ways to the Latino Studies academic program.

I was now a tenured track faculty in the department of sociology. But the truth of the matter is that I never abandoned my involvement with students in their struggle to create a more just university environment. I was even more involved, attending their weekly Thursday meetings, meeting with the organization’s board members before every meeting to help them develop sound and progressive agendas for their meetings and work effectively as a student organization. During the meetings, I would offer advice, always stressing the importance of accepting their struggle as an indication of their own liberation.

A final comment on the charges of student indoctrination: A Latino student said to me recently, “Man, Felix, your class is doing something to my head. I’m thinking now so differently. You’ve made me look for things that I simply did not know existed. That’s powerful. Like you put it, I’m interrogating things and what people do.” These comments affirm that my oppositional pedagogy can help students with the decolonization of their minds, that our classroom is a

space for the realization of freedom. I speak of this incident not to be self-serving, but rather to provide countertestimony to the accusation of student indoctrination. I guess I can also defend myself by saying that if my students do experience freedom through our pedagogical activities, if they achieve a particular level of mind decolonization, then I want to be blamed for the indoctrination charges.

In many ways, Willie Colón's *Por Eso Canto* represents a counter-hegemonic cultural production, an oppositional, progressive, cultural politic that is about illuminating and enriching our understanding of Puerto Rican and Latina/o life and a dedication to improving that life. Willie Colón uses a sharp tongue to name the conditions which are eating away the livelihood and humanity of those considered as "Others." Willie Colón's politics do not hide behind an acceptable mainstream language or discourse which never names real suffering and pain directly. For me, Willie Colón's convention of critical naming is so encouraging, another reason for my identification with his cultural practice.

With one exception, I have worked in universities located walking distance from communities of working class people; communities where poverty and its debilitating, non-material affects like psychological insults, humiliation, and insecurity are obviously apparent. I have worked near communities where human existence has actually become a practice in individual and collective day-to-day survival. I have worked near communities where individuals have been forced to seek psychological escape in alcohol, in drugs, and in crime. Most of us know that conditions in these communities arise from the hidden practices of major social institutions and structural events which weigh on people from day to day, distorting their relations with one another and often leading to fatalism.

To step outside the protected shelters of our university classrooms and offices is to confront this world of poverty and survival strategy. As is true for Willie Colón, it is this world of suffering and injustice which has become the force behind my practice as a liberating teacher. Because of this world of working class people, the world of origin for so many of us and which played such a major role in transmitting to us our values and sensibility, our ways of life

and struggles, it is my duty to be a critical teacher — to use my classroom and teaching as forms of emancipation and to use an explicit critical language for naming it. When I speak to my students about concepts like inequality and injustice, I usually point outside our classroom windows — "there lies," I tell them, "the actual concepts of inequality and injustice. There, out there, injustice and inequality do not represent concepts to people. There is nothing conceptual in injustice and inequality, except for professors who treat them in scholarly, academic terms and who make a living writing about them. But for working class people, there is an enormous amount of oppression embedded in inequality and injustice; inequality and injustice represent the very same forces they must struggle against every day of their lives."

Following these comments I then ask my students if they can now understand why I teach from an oppositional pedagogy. The pains and sufferings of Latina/o people, of people of color and women are in me, in my heart. How can I not teach from an oppositional pedagogy?

I let students know, through this and similar examples, that there is a short distance between the classroom and the streets; that there is a short distance between the intellectual and the real lives of people; that there is a short distance between a synthesis of the two worlds; that we should be motivated and devoted to such synthesis.

Like Willie Colón, *yo soy maestro porque nací para enseñar* (I am a teacher because I was born to teach). And I was born to teach for our community, for individual and social empowerment. I came into the position of teaching already truly committed to my role as a service provider. I came to teaching with an ethic of service, one who was and will always be committed to giving back to his/her community. Our people, our community of courageous individuals who never hesitated when "giving" their lives for us, expected from us, at the very least, a pay back, not for them directly, but for subsequent generations. And these subsequent generations have been integral parts of my life for nearly eighteen years, as students, first while I was a high school teacher for almost four years and for the past fourteen years at the university level. My pay-back to my community of past and present struggles, the community which Willie Colón

describes so accurately as “suffering from hunger and misery” but never giving up, comes through the form of sincere mentoring and nurturing to its young people. To be a mentor to our young people — *Por Eso Soy Maestro!* I hope to always be directly connected with the young people of our communities, teaching and learning together with them, struggling together, dreaming together, envisioning together with them a liberated humanity.

For three consecutive spring academic quarters (1993-95), I was the most fortunate of all educators, at least I like to believe so. I worked with three classes or groups of Latina/o students who agreed to engage in a critical learning process of self-recovery, a reclaim of their individual and social understanding and history — the kind of knowledge denied to them by prior education experiences. For me to witness Latina/o students pursue and enjoy education for freedom was (and will always be) the most exciting and stimulating personal and intellectual moment. I was truly touched by the experience. I watched as students came to express a sincere eagerness toward critical learning, a sincere desire and commitment to continue, beyond our class, engaged in critical dialogues we had developed together in our classroom.

I observed as students begin to examine their attitudes and practices more critically. They were recognizing more and more the importance of defining who they are in their own terms; they were learning to shape their new identity. They were becoming more aware of the politics of their realities as Latinos/as inside and outside the university. Their individual experiences in conjunction with their social and political histories were soon viewed as central to their education. In other words, as they began to develop a new and critical way of knowing, they understood this to mean becoming vigilant of their education. This awakening to critical consciousness would not accept their prior uninformed experience. On the other hand, they were beginning to understand their historic unawareness, the fact that they lacked critical knowledge of self and the past and present conditions of their people, as the outcome of domination.

These students, I really believe this, left our classroom experience knowing the importance of reclaiming self. They were understanding this practice as resistance to domination, to dehumanization. Their new found sense of identity was helping them to become liberated from the sufferings that come from the colonization of the mind. And again, I feel terrific knowing that because of our intellectual journey there are some students fighting, challenging the university curriculum to recover their histories; that they are taking the risks which accompany every struggle against conditions of domination.

To take students to this level of critical consciousness, to get them to understand the importance of education as a practice for liberation, is how I define my role and responsibility as an educator. What this means is approaching the classroom as it represents a very significant site for developing a pedagogy, an oppositional pedagogy for critical understanding for freedom, for self transformation, which is the same as saying to end the domination of self. In our classroom, it is the experiences of students along with mine which informed my pedagogy. My pedagogical approach does more than simply endorse, or celebrate student experiences. It is geared to contribute toward students' capacity to question, to examine what they do in interaction with others. The idea of education as a practice of freedom was being reconfirmed. I have come to believe more and more in the transformative power of teaching, pedagogy. *Por Eso Soy Maestro! Por Eso!*

Finally, to be a good teacher, a liberating educator, one who teaches for student and social empowerment, serves as confirmation of well-being and empowerment in my own life as an individual, as a human being. To recognize my own well-being and empowerment, to know that I am being true to myself, to my personal world, to my work, are preconditions for engaging in true association and solidarity with my students. If I cannot be a liberating educator if in my own personal life, I do not practice liberation and freedom.

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