Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA
Research Briefs

Muxerista Portraiture: Portraiture with a Chicana/Latina Feminist Sensibility

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Moved by Gloria Anzaldúa's (1990) call for nueva teorías[1], in this research brief I outline what I refer to as muxerista portraiture. As a meXicana[2] (pronounced me-chi-cana) scholar who examines Mexicana/Chicana mother-daughter pedagogies, I argue for the partnership of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) and Chicana/Latina feminist theory (CLFT) (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011). My goal is to offer a thoughtful and deliberate methodology that borrows from these two theories and not an alternative or replacement for one or the other. I begin by briefly discussing what portraiture and CLFT are and how I bridge the two, I then highlight the five contours of muxerista portraiture, and conclude with areas for future research.

BRIDGING PORTRAITURE AND CHICANA/LATINA FEMINIST THEORY

Portraiture and CLFT are committed to telling stories that challenge us to think more deeply about ourselves and the world we live in – how they do this is what differentiates them. The methodology of portraiture came about from Lawrence-Lightfoot's experience of having her portrait painted, when she realized how her connection with the artist mirrored that of a researcher and research participant. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) define portraiture as "a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life" (p. xv). Chicana/Latina feminist theory is concerned with the knowledge production of Chicanas/Latinas, it centers its analyses on the experiences of Chicanas/Latinas in the United States through a critical, social, economic, political, and cultural perspective and is dedicated to showing how Chicanas/Latinas do not passively accept intersecting forms of oppression (Delgado Bernal & Elenes, 2011).

To show the connection between portraiture and CLFT, I highlight how they address political and ethical issues involved in research. When it comes to the role of research participants, they both situate them as integral to the collection and analysis of the data. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1994) calls participants "collaborators" to acknowledge the importance of detailed interactions. Similarly, CLFT includes research participants at all stages of the research process (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The researcher's positionality is also important; while Lawrence-Lightfoot's (1997) idea of voice and Delgado Bernal's (1998) concept of cultural intuition[3] are similar, CLFT focuses more closely on the unique insights Chicana/Latina researchers embody. Most notably, they both use an asset framework looking for what Lawrence-Lightfoot calls the "goodness" in research. The search for goodness

is an intentional process that seeks to illuminate what is affirming and vigorous, yet always assumes that expressing goodness is tied with imperfections. As such, they both resist research that focuses on pathology rather than resiliency.

MUXERISTA PORTRAITURE

The pairing of the words muxerista[4] (womanist) and portraiture does not signify the merging of CLFT and portraiture, but instead refers to the notion of being in between these two sets of theories – the ability to be able to draw different ideas from each one. This methodology is based on the realities and lived experiences of Chicanas/Latinas and aims to paint portraits committed to social justice and challenging all forms of subordination. It incorporates the portraitist's cultural intuition in the co-construction of the portraits. It is a dynamic and ongoing interchange between process and product, dedicated to searching for the goodness in the lives of Chicanas/Latinas. It encompasses the elements of portraiture (context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole) but with a Chicana/Latina feminist sensibility; below I explain these five elements.

The Borderlands as Context

When using muxerista portraiture, context must examine the different markers of discrimination that Chicanas/Latinas experience like race, immigration status, religious affiliation, sexuality, and language, to name a few. This means that the muxerista portraitist acknowledges how systems of oppression affect the everyday lives of Chicanas/Latinas, but also accounts for the ways they have resisted and constructed third spaces (Pérez, 1999), where they can recreate possibilities and opportunities. Thus, muxerista portraiture uses Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the borderlands as context. Theoretically, the borderlands challenge binaries and instead focus on capturing the complex way Chicanas/Latinas negotiate their multiple and contradictory positions (Elenes, 2006). It is a useful conceptual tool because it centers the experiences of Chicanas/Latinas in a way that accounts for their physical, geographical, metaphorical, historical, and cultural setting.

Translating Voice

Unique to the muxerista portraitist is the conflicting process of translation, both literal from the Spanish to the English language (and vice versa), but also figuratively in the process of translating community voices for academic spaces. As Chicana/Latina scholars, we are translators and interpreters of many cultures, however we must be cautious in deciding how much we choose to interpret our communities for academia (Flores Carmona, 2014). Thus, the muxerista portraitist should negotiate and reflect on how to translate voice, keeping in mind how some things may not be translatable, and that participants may not want certain aspects translated or disclosed.

Relationships and Spirituality

In muxerista portraiture, spirituality is central to the development of relationships. I use Anzaldúa's (2015) concept of spiritual activism to consider spirituality not just as a relationship between a God or a Creator, but as a call to action. If we frame relationships as rooted in an ethic of interconnectedness, this recognition can transform us and motivate us to work actively for social change. To create authentic portraits, we must nurture relationships that allow for openness, vulnerability, and intimacy.

Cultural Intuition in Emergent Themes

During the process of identifying emergent themes, the muxerista portraitist draws on her[5] cultural intuition to guide her (Delgado Bernal, 2016). It is significant to recognize the role it plays in gathering and analyzing the data. When listening for metaphors,

poetic, and symbolic expressions she must consider facets that are often distinctive of the Chicana/Latina experience like dichos, corridos, and religious/spiritual symbols. She should account for community memory and collective history and understand the significance of cultural rituals.

Aesthetic Whole – Piecing Together Coyolxauhqui[6]

The muxerista portraitist draws on what Anzaldúa describes as the Coyolxauhqui imperative to create the aesthetic whole. To create whole portraits, the muxerista portraitist must put together the fragments of identities and spirits that have been dispersed through the data analysis process. A Coyolxauhqui imperative adds this significant layer of healing and spirituality in the process of creating the aesthetic whole. She acknowledges the troubling tension of "dividing" and "selecting" themes to weave stories together, and shifts this tension to focus on a process of healing, of putting Coyolxauhqui back together by creating stories of "wholeness" and "goodness."

CONCLUSION

Muxerista portraiture is born out of an ability to be "in between" and an effort to heal the divide between the personal and the academic borders that often

disempower us as Chicana/Latina scholars. Future research should examine: 1) the process of writing muxerista portraits, 2) the pedagogical opportunities of muxerista portraiture, and 3) the self-care of the muxerista portraitist. This last recommendation is especially important given the critical role of building authentic relationships. We must ask ourselves, how can we genuinely care for our collaborators without losing sight of our own well-being in the process?

NOTES

[1] Anzaldúa (1990) encouraged us to consider "new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods…[to] create new categories for those of us left out or pushed out of existing ones" (pp. xxv-xxvi).

[2] Rosa Linda Fregoso (2003) uses the term meXicana as a metaphor for cultural and national mobility; it is a way to draw attention to the process of transculturation, hybridity, and cultural exchanges. I identify as a meXicana because of my immigrant, transcultural, political, and muxerista sensibility.

[3] For more on cultural intuition see Delgado Bernal (2016).

[4] Like Cherríe L. Moraga (2011) who often spells Chicana with an "x" (Xicana), I spell muxerista with an "x" to indicate that a womanist awareness encompasses a political consciousness grounded in indigenous belief systems and

identities.

[5] Although I use the gender pronoun she/her to refer to the muxerista portraitist, this does not mean that you must identify as such to use this methodology. I am more concerned about one's commitment to search for the goodness in the lives of Chicanas/Latinas, rather than limiting who can or cannot use muxerista portraiture.

[6] In Aztec mythology Coyolxauhqui tried to kill her mother Coatlicue in order to kill patriarchy and war, but in the process she was killed by her brother Huitzilpochtli and torn into over a thousand pieces.

RESOURCES

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