

In the flesh

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Journal of Men's Studies
2022, Vol. 30(3) 331–339
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DOI: 10.1177/10608265221108203
journals.sagepub.com/home/men


Abstract

The author incorporates her creative writing to share her untold experience of what Carole J. Sheffield would identify as *sexual terrorism*. She then engages in a candid dialogue with co-editor Patricia Richards, demonstrating the power of conversation as a feminist method. Inspired by their feminist imagination, they explore ways to construct meaning and produce knowledge beyond conventional, mainstream frameworks in sociology. In this intellectual praxis, they explore themes such as the aesthetics of resilience, poetry and creativity, non-mainstream epistemologies across disciplines (including but not limited to Anzaldúa's theorizing on *el corazón con razón* and Fals Borda's *sentipensante* sociology), authenticity and intellectual vulnerability.

Keywords

sexual violence, poetry, intellectual vulnerability, aesthetics of resilience

it was a great day at the conference in a big Mexican city
it was packed and I got to share
activists and scholars, it was a nice crowd, and you among them
you thought I would shrink and feel small

then the night finally came along after a long and vibrant day
sleeping only one night at the luxurious and expensive hotel
only a few knew I was staying there
you thought I would not know who you were

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the hotel phone rang at 2 am to convulse my soul,
 lost in my deep, peaceful sleep, your obscene, repulsive words woke me up
 I would be able to recognize the pitch of your voice in a crowd
 you thought I would be scared

I felt it in the flesh, startled and in shock, it shook me up for a moment and I hung up
 I was still lost in my sleep but my feminist awareness kicked in to take care of me
 the operator could not identify your name or phone number
 you thought I would be paralyzed and afraid

I was ready to leave the hotel before the sun announced a new day
 obscene calls have an impact on a woman's psyche and flesh
 yet vulnerability became later a source of strength
 you thought I would give up

Do other women researchers go through the same as well?
 I was a novice assistant professor conducting my fieldwork back then
 almost 16 years ago and *Harassed* had not been published yet
 the stories of the women who gave life to it were in the making
 real testimonies being lived in the flesh as well.

To you and other self-proclaimed "feminist" and "pro-feminist"
 cismen who do not get it yet:
 do not hide in the middle of the night—or the day—and
 become sexual terrorists
 do not reinvent and use violence against women when you feel
 jealous, threatened or afraid
 keep learning about feminism
 it will help you become more authentic and less violent
 more kind and compassionate
 and eventually embrace freedom as a human being.

Austin, Texas
 June 22, 2021

Patricia: *Gloria, thank you for writing and sharing this poem. Why use poetry to share this story?*

Gloria: I think that exploring creative ways to tell an untold story about sexual violence, for example, writing a poem (or writing a set of stanzas with the aspiration of giving life to a poem), is a way to share a life event, in this case, an experience that would be difficult for a woman to share in a different way. In fact, creative writing gives, in my case, a ciswoman who is sharing her story the opportunity to transform any pain into beauty, a process that is perhaps rooted in some sort of aesthetics of resilience. Writing this kind of poetry on sexual violence reminds me of the lotus flower: a flower

that floats on muddy, dirty waters, yet the flower holds up its beauty, dignity, and respect.

Patricia: *That is an interesting concept. Would you please elaborate more on the aesthetics of resilience?*

Gloria: Yes, of course. Back when I first joined UT Austin in 2002, I was invited to join a group of remarkable feminist scholars who had established The Austin Project. In my shyness as a brand-new Assistant Professor, I found myself in a state of awe while witnessing the ways in which the leading voices of this group would engage with women of color—scholars, activists, and artists—to revisit and rewrite their life stories; they would do at times through performance, at times through creative writing, for example. Professors Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, and Lisa L. Moore, and artist Sharon Bridgforth were the beautiful spirits leading this inspirational project. In retrospect, witnessing the performances of some of the participants in this project gave me the idea of the aesthetics of resilience and a big life lesson: The human spirit can be incredibly resilient, and in the process, it has the potential to be expressed through acts of deep, special beauty. I think that is where the aesthetics of resilience comes from. Jones, Moore, and Bridgforth published a beautiful book, *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic: Art, Activism, Academia and the Austin Project* (2010). I had the honor of writing a short and modest essay for this collection; that was one of my very first publications, and it is very close to my heart.

I think poetry can be used also as an expression of these aesthetic of resilience. I do not know to what extent this is accurate, but I have heard that peacocks are able to transform the poisonous plants they eat into the colorful feathers many of us admire, so they are able to transform poison into elegance, poise, and grace. And I guess the inspiration for me is to transform pain and suffering into something beautiful, or at the very least—as with this poem—to claim some sense of dignity and respect, while coping and in the end continue learning to become resilient.

I would like to say that the above is mainly inspired by Buddhism. In my personal life, I have been studying Buddhist philosophy for a good number of years. For instance, *Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy & Liberation* is not only part of the title of a moving book by Buddhist teacher and author, Thich Nhat Hanh, but is also at the core of a non-Western philosophical perspective that offers a critical and life changing perspective on human suffering. So rather than avoiding it or running away from it, there are possibilities to use our suffering—individually and collectively—to *actually* transform our lives in radical ways. The book *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (2016) by three African American Buddhist scholars and activists, examines this philosophy from a perspective of racial inequality and injustice, which is inspirational and highly needed at this moment of our human evolution.

Patricia: *Thank you for sharing that, Gloria. The “aesthetics of resilience” also reminds me of that powerful street performance by Las Tesis in Chile – Un Violador en tu Camino. I know you and your students did a version of that performance in*

Austin, which I think speaks to this same commitment to use suffering to transform our individual and collective lives.

Gloria: Yes, thank you. If I may, I wrote an article on this performance, and *Ms. Magazine* actually published it in 2020, it is titled, “El violador en tu camino: The song that made transnational feminism go viral.”

Patricia: *Ahh, that is right! Returning to poetry, what affordances does poetry give us that traditional scholarship inhibits? Why is this important to you, to us, as a feminist community?*

Gloria: Poetry, as you know, has been used historically by feminists to document and make sense of their life experiences or to reflect about gender inequality. As a Mexican woman, I found inspiration in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz back in my adolescent years. Sor Juana was a Mexican nun, poet and scholar who lived in the seventeenth century. She is one the first published feminists and, she is frequently identified by scholars as an important literary figure of the Spanish Golden Age. Sor Juana, or Sister Juana, published a poem that became a classic in the Spanish speaking world, and it is an iconic landmark in feminist circles. What is so remarkable about Sor Juana is that a woman was making sense of gender inequality back in the seventeenth century; she is identified by many as the first feminist in the Americas. Her very famous poem, frequently translated as “Foolish Men”—*Hombres Necios*—is now a classic, it has inspired many feminists. As a Mexican woman, Sor Juana was there in my early journeys searching for truth. After migrating to the United States, I learned about Sojourner Truth. I have deep respect and admiration for her. In retrospect, I am now realizing: Sor Juana was my Sojourner Truth. And finally, I eventually learned about and discovered poetry by Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde, both have been an inspiration for me as well.

I have used poetry in my own personal journaling. But at the collective level, creative writing has helped me explore ways to connect with other feminist scholars, especially during difficult times. I am also co-founder of the *Feminist Writing Salon* at UT Austin, which is a group of feminist scholars on campus. We got together via Zoom on a periodical basis to create a feminist space so we could cope collectively with the pandemic, as well as the unfolding social and cultural events that have changed our lives right in the midst of it, for example, police brutality, anti-Black racism, among others. We got together at least once a month for a long time, and we did creative writing on a wide variety of topics, themes that reflected a particular challenge for all of us in any given time. Three themes that come to mind are, for example, uncertainty, restoration, and resting. I co-facilitated this group in collaboration with two feminist scholars of color on campus, Pavithra Vasudevan and Nnenna Odim.

So, creative writing has been an avenue for me as a feminist to engage in collective and individual care, to transform different kinds of emotionally challenging life experiences through free, creative writing. It is a way of coping individually and collective, with the aspiration of transforming pain into beauty, and nurturing our capacity of being more and more resilient. Poetry is, of course, always an expression of creative writing in these

feminist spaces. The poem that I wrote for this special edition of *Journal of Men's Studies* is a modest expression of the collective exercise I have engaged with since the pandemic hit and shook up our world and changed our lives forever.

I have also incorporated poetry and creative writing in my academic presentations and publications in Spanish, in Mexico.

Patricia: *Do you feel freer to write creatively at this point in your career than you did at earlier stages?*

Gloria: I took a workshop with Gloria Anzaldúa in Fall 2002, back when I was a brand-new Assistant Professor. I had a conversation (some sort of “consultation”) with her and asked for some words of wisdom for a novice professor. Her advice, I remember, was to “first get tenure”, then later I could have my “little revolution.” So I think that telling the story in the poem after all these years is a way of exploring that possibility of having my “little revolution,” which, from my perspective is about learning ways to become fear-free and more authentic as a senior professor. For different reasons, I could not tell the story right after it happened—when I did not even have tenure; now I can do it, almost 16 years later, and from a position of self-empowerment.

Patricia: *It seems to me that the social sciences, in particular, have a problem linking “knowing with the heart” to “knowing with the mind”? Do you agree? How can poetry facilitate this?*

Gloria: Poetry is abundant in feminist literature written by respected women of color, and we read it and celebrate it. Interestingly, there are only a few reflections about its possibility and power in mainstream sociology—that is not what we do, right?

Interestingly, Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx wrote and published their poetry, individually, at some point in their lives, something that seems to be rarely discussed in our sociological theories classes. Karl Marx in particular suffered from a painful skin disease called “hidradenitis suppurativa.” I heard about it for the first time when I watched a documentary about his life, and so I thought about the ways in which that might have shaped his intellectual work. I wondered about the extent to which that painful condition might have shaped his relationship with his own body and his theorizing, so I did some research. I learned that, in fact, some scholars have examined the connection between Marx’s illness and his theorizing and have explained, for instance, that “Marx flirted with alienation when he was refuting Hegel, but only developed it deeply as he wrote *Capital*, at the very time when his hidradenitis was at its worst” (Shuster, 2008, 3). In his examinations of the letters between Marx and Engels, Shuster found a powerful sentence in a letter dated on June 22, 1867: “the bourgeoisie will remember my carbuncles until their dying day.” So, I strongly believe that Karl Marx’s theorized, for example, on “alienation” *from* his body, *from* his skin in deep pain, and ultimately *from* his heart.

This reflection on Karl Marx reminds me of a paradigm that establishes a deep, fluid connection between emotion and reason, which is, needless to say, an embodied experience. Orlando Fals Borda, a highly respected Colombian sociologist, once

learned from a group of fishermen about the *sentipensante* perspective: “senti” from *sentir* (to feel) and “pensante” from *pensar* (to think). This paradigm informed Fals Borda’s inspirational *sentipensante* sociology, which places both dimensions of the human condition at the same level. Fals Borda is highly relevant in activist scholarship in Latin American sociology, which is frequently identified in Spanish as *investigación-acción participativa* (IAP). Incorporating both the emotional dimension as well as reason is with no doubt needed *to be moved* by different expressions of the social construction of inequality and human suffering and the need to think critically about it and *actually* do something about it. It is always interesting to see how great minds function in some sort of synchronicity. Many miles away, over here in the U.S. borderlands, Gloria E. Anzaldúa proposed a perspective that she identified as *un corazón con razón*—a heart with reason—based on her readings and analysis of Tibetan Buddhism. This Anzaldúan perspective actually informed and inspired my own sociological research on incest in Mexico and helped me give life to a couple of paradigms and publish about them, namely “epistemologies of the wound” and “mindful ethics.”

Patricia: *So interesting! I’ve been teaching Anzaldúa’s Luz en lo Oscuro recently, and also talking to my students about the sentipensante idea. I’d love to hear more about how you are mobilizing these ideas.*

Gloria: As a feminist, what matters in the end is to depatriarchalize, or *despatriarcalizar*, as feminists say in Spanish, both heart and reason—*el corazón y la razón*. And that is where I am, I am learning to explore ways to do it. Now that I am more mature and senior as a scholar, I am using creative writing to do it. I think this modest poem is one of those attempts to develop that skill as a feminist. I have been using poetry in my writing and also in my teaching. I have forthcoming book on all of the above in Spanish, it is titled, *Senderos feministas: Andares sentipensantes en la academia y durante la pandemia* [Feminist pathways: Sentipensante journeys in academia and during the pandemic].¹

And all of the above goes back to this idea of authenticity that I mentioned earlier. If I may elaborate here further, this idea of authenticity goes hand and hand with this possibility of becoming vulnerable, in particular, embracing intellectual vulnerability. And by intellectual vulnerability I refer to different things. First, what I mean is showing more of our humanity in our academic work, and this happens when there is some sort of synchronicity among the production of knowledge, creativity and risk-taking exercises, you know, producing knowledge while *being inside* that open heart, truly *feeling* the production of knowledge as it is happening, as it is in the making. I actually use this approach in my teaching, especially in my *checking-in* and *checking-out* exercises, at the beginning and end of class, respectively. I use this exercise to find out how students engage emotionally with the assigned readings, and after class discussion on challenging topics, such as sexual violence, for example. This exercise gives me the opportunity to know how they are reacting to readings that can be emotionally challenging and offer my support to them, while also helping them to *feel*

knowledge. This also facilitates the establishment of a feminist intellectual community aimed at promoting collective care practices rooted in honesty, respect, and true human engagements (González-López, 2015).

So, intellectual vulnerability is the mirror reflecting both the sentipensante perspective as well as the heart with reason paradigm. And I mentioned Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde earlier, their work is like the glowing moonlight reflected in the lake, both truly gifted, I respect and admire them deeply. So, the idea is to open up and become vulnerable, intellectually speaking, to explore non-mainstream pathways that can help us develop inner transformation, strength, and power, and again, to continue growing professionally and intellectually while also advancing and humanizing academia and our academic life.

And second, from this perspective, the idea of intellectual vulnerability also refers to the possibility of always being open to learning and being transformed by emerging knowledge. This reminds me of the potential of becoming intellectually humble; that is, nurturing what psychology scholars identify as “intellectual humility,” and exploring emerging knowledge with genuine interest and curiosity.² In the book *Senderos feministas* I use the idea of *ser enseñable*—meaning both, “teachable being” and “being teachable”—to highlight the idea of this ongoing, constant process of learning and growing intellectually, you know, the image of the teacher as the oldest student in class, as well as the senior intellectual who is open to being transformed by emerging knowledge produced by a new generation of scholars. I participated in a conversation about some of these and other related themes with a group of kind and bright scholars of color members of our Sexualities section at the annual conference of the American Sociological Association in August 2021; it was via Zoom, really interesting, and needless to say, I felt incredibly vulnerable! In retrospect, I am still learning from that conversation, professionally and personally.³

Anyway, authenticity and intellectual vulnerability may look contrastingly different if you are a doctoral student *or* if you just received tenure *or* if you are the senior professor who is already thinking about retirement. And as always, both authenticity and intellectual vulnerability are shaped by all the axes that organize social inequality, including, but of course, not limited to, gender, class, race, sexuality, body ability, country of origin and citizenship status, age and generation, language, and religion.

I am now thinking about the people who have helped me visualize this possibility of intellectual vulnerability along the way, especially in more recent years, and I would like to express my gratitude for the inspiration. I have had the privilege of working with doctoral students who write poetry and/or creative writing, and include it in their academic work. Four of them come to mind: Shannon Malone Gonzalez and Dominique Garrett-Scott in Sociology, and Nathalia Hernández Ochoa and Ana María López Hurtado in Latin American Studies. Shannon Malone Gonzalez is now a professor. I am also deeply grateful to all the people who participated in our *Feminist Writing Salon*, especially my esteemed colleagues and co-facilitators, Pavithra Vasudevan and Nnenna Odim. And finally, Pauline T. Strong and Phillip J. Barrish, both senior professors have nurtured a special space of intellectual creativity and inspiration,

the Humanities Institute, where I have had the opportunity to explore and develop my own experiences of humanity. I met all of them at The University of Texas at Austin.

I just want to close by saying that I do not claim any expertise in the study of vulnerability per se and I am far from being an expert in the subject matter, the way Dr. Brené Brown is, for example. I am simply exploring and learning ways to develop both authenticity and vulnerability as vital dimensions of my inner life cartography as a feminist scholar, and that has made a real difference for me, personally and professionally.

Finally, the text that I am sharing reminds me of the sophisticated ways in which feminist thought is always evolving, yet there seems to be a timeless core that remains intact—Sor Juana and Sojourner Truth's powerful words still hit a sensitive nerve in us, feminists across cultures. For instance, *The invisible intruder*, an article published by Carole Sheffield in 1989 helped me make sense of the experience I am sharing, something that happened in 2005, and in a different country. And you know, *Harassed*, the groundbreaking, revealing book you co-published with Rebecca Hanson in 2019, was incredibly validating and finally helped me put the experience within a larger, illuminating perspective. And well, the #MeToo movement has given me permission to finally share it. I think this poem is my very modest #MeToo moment, one among many shared by countless women.

Patricia: *Gloria, thank you so much for these thought-provoking reflections. Like all your work, they, and you, are a true inspiration.*

Gloria: Thank you for your generosity and kindness, and for the opportunity to share. I hope these reflections will be of benefit to future readers.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. A digital version of the book *Senderos feministas* was published in 2022 and can be downloaded for free. Visit: <https://libros.uaa.mx/index.php/uaa/catalog/book/116>
2. For more on intellectual humility, see <https://wisdomcenter.uchicago.edu/news/wisdom-news/what-does-intellectual-humility-look>
3. Here Gloria is referring to an ASA Sexualities Section panel in celebration of her having received the 2021 Simon-Gagnon Lifetime Achievement Award.

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