

Critical Feminista Dimensions to Informal Writing Groups for Women of Color Pursuing Doctoral Degrees

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A doctoral dissertation is the final and culminating project for a graduate student and doctoral candidate. Under the best of conditions, writing the dissertation challenges doctoral students. However, students rarely experience dissertation writing under the best of conditions. Factors like the tension between ethnic and culturally diverse students, Western conceptions of knowledge and meritocracy, and a global pandemic can exacerbate the already-difficult conditions of dissertation writing.

The COVID-19 pandemic contributed additional layers of stress for college students in general, and they certainly added to the challenges of the dissertation process for doctoral candidates. For instance, the pandemic limited and often prohibited opportunities for any in-person advising and collaboration with peers in commonly shared academic spaces, like university lounges, libraries, and coffee shops—increasing the sense of isolation for many.

In this piece, we explore how four Latina doctoral candidates found healing in making time to write during their final year of doctoral program requirements while they navigated employment, raised children, fought off imposter syndrome (Holden et al. 2), avoided burnout, and maintained well-being. Scholars of Color and those with marginalized identities and varying intersectionalities are increasingly documenting their journeys through academia, and such literature ranges from understanding the challenges that single mothers face in academia and the support structures to combat them (Hanson) to scholars of color coming together and creating a family that provides support beyond graduate studies (Browdy et al.) and into the job market and tenure track careers (Espino et al.). Reflecting on their experiences, the Latina scholars here realized that our approach to surviving the dissertation and creating an informal, culturally responsive Women of Color (WoC) Ph.D. writing group was embedded in *convivencia*. *Convivencia* involves acknowledging how Latinas utilize their lived cultural experiences to learn, teach, and support each other socially (Delgado Bernal “Disrupting Epistemological Boundaries” 159). Within each writing session, we provided trusted refuge, academic resources, dedicated writing time, and positive peer pressure to persist to completion of the Ph.D. This piece is centered on communal knowledge creation and exemplifies the seven Rs at the forefront of Indigenous and Chicana Feminist research

methodologies: respect, reciprocity, relationship, responsibility, regeneration, resistance, and resilience (Gonzales xiv; Rodríguez 202).

Trojan Mulas- How We Came to Be

In the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa, we introduce ourselves as Trojan Mulas (Keating 207), making our way into academia but redefining how we holistically and collectively survive on our terms. The anti-colonial struggle against literary assimilation and the claim to our linguistic space in validating our own stories as WoC, first generation college students, first generation college graduates, and caregivers to dependents, elders, and extended family members requires an activist spirit. This spirit dares to transform and disrupt processes in order for us to survive graduate level experiences as Ph.D. students. We exist as navigators of higher education institutions, not only as students but also as staff members, future employees, and wayfinders with hopes of uncovering a way to reach our own goals while leaving clear trailmarkers for others. Our educational privileges didn't provide a recipe on how to succeed, nor were we primed to ask for one. Instead, we were handed the ingredients, and we eagerly began cooking up our own experience with the hopes that our own intuitions kicked in and that we would hear our ancestors whisper "that's enough." Our collectivity gave us strength to stay inside the *mula* as we pushed into and breached new areas. As individuals, we experienced both microaggressions and microaffirmations, and these in an academic space where we were learning about who we wanted to be, not just who we needed to be. Meanwhile, we were carried forth the experiences from before we could see the finish line where we would be called "*Doctoras*." Needless to say, we are *mujeres* who constructed a way in and sat with each other to bide the time before deciding to emerge together. Here, we arrive in a space where we can tell this story.

To understand how this informal writing group came to be, it is helpful to understand one of our individual experiences immediately prior to its foundation:

I had no idea what constituted a writing group, what I would need to contribute, and how much I needed it. Throughout all of my schooling, I had always completed projects independently. I would sit on the couch, throw on some music, focus for a brief period, and get the assignment done. At some point, I must have started to compartmentalize responsibilities, because once a physical barrier ceased to exist between work, school, and motherhood, there was an immediate and intense overwhelmed feeling. "I need to write." "I NEED to write." Multiple Zoom work meetings, many snack breaks, online

elementary and middle school assignments to check, and unfolded loads of laundry later, I'd be so exhausted that I would fall asleep without writing or reading anything for my dissertation, yet my brain was still stuck on the screen that said, "I NEED TO WRITE."

Fortunately, Mothers of Color in Academia (MoCA), a collective of caregivers—specifically mothers—pursuing higher education degrees, was already doing work. A branch of MoCA was established at The University of Arizona during the 2019-2020 academic year. The group met one time on campus in February of 2020, right before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. MoCA members shifted the way they supported each other, especially those heading into the dissertation phase, and established a group chat to share resources, connect, and offer one-on-one support during a worldwide crisis. Through this group chat, it became evident that some of us needed validation: that it was OK to need time to write and that we were not alone in this process. Finally, someone posted that they would be hosting a virtual writing group on Saturday mornings. A few text messages, utilization of social capital to invite non-MoCA members and a few electronic RSVPs later, we had commitments from the four of us. We titled our new group chat "Motivated to Write." No blood pact was needed as we had *culpa* ingrained in our hearts; nothing bonds like trauma and guilt.

Pláticas and Convivencia

Within weeks of establishing the informal writing group, our community felt familiar. We carved out an hour for each meeting and spent a few minutes checking in each time. Those few minutes turned into *pláticas*, or roundtable discussions that helped us declutter our minds, feelings, and souls in preparation to write. Within these conversations, a circle of co-workers, classmates, and friends naturally emerged. It became a sanctuary where we found refuge from the academy and the complex process of finishing a doctoral degree. We received validation that we did belong, that we were capable, and that the higher education system was not streamlined and made user-friendly for us. That camaraderie became fortifying fuel to face the next steps in our doctoral programs and gave us a communal mindset that we belonged in the academy. Together, we honored our cultural values gaining wisdom from *pláticas* rich with storytelling, insight, and healing; the *pláticas* became a place where members could be vulnerable through informal talks conducive to sharing ideas and giving advice (Delgado Bernal, "Disrupting Epistemological Boundaries" 159). For our group, *pláticas* were synonymous with check-ins. The group's shared mission was not only to write but also to provide insight and guidance about navigating doctoral processes.

In practice, this meant flexibility and a hyper-focus on rehumanizing the dissertation writing process by shifting our focus to well-being instead of productivity. We were not only writing but also acknowledging each other as holistic and caring experts in life as we experienced it. This praxis of care created a safe place amidst others full of fear and angst.

Being genuine and vulnerable through *convivencia* allowed us to place extreme care and attention on building social relationships while tearing down the conventional power structure often found in groups. When applied in research, *convivencia* tears down the hierarchy between researcher and participant and acknowledges the shared desire to live, learn, and teach together (Delgado Bernal, “Disrupting Epistemological Boundaries” 162). By engaging in *convivencia*, the members recognize their mutual humanity, including insecurities and triumphs of surviving the academy (Villenas 273; Trinidad Galván 13). Using *convivencia* in our writing group meant that we challenged Western notions of productivity and focused on the humanity of caring for each other. Nurturing and building social relationships aligned to the seven Rs became the group’s foundation without defining it (Gonzales xiv, *Red Medicine*; Rodríguez, *Our Sacred Maiz* 202). Tearful interactions required nurturing and straight talk, which had nothing to do with our writing, yet everything to do with the well-being necessary to finish the immense terminal assignment of a dissertation.

Our WoC Ph.D. group propelled us forward in our programs and was a conduit for dissertation writing and respite. Participants chose how often to participate, ranging from one to five times per week for two-hour blocks. When working, we used the pomodoro technique, a practice of timed work sessions and break times, but we made sure that checking-in was done before putting words on a page. We acknowledge that the pomodoro technique can be criticized as a practice grounded in Western ideals of efficiency and productivity—values that are incongruent with our ontological and epistemological orientations as Chicana Feminists. So we used this Western method of productivity, but on our terms. To embody the identity of dissertating graduate student, along with our other numerous roles, is to navigate the reality that deadlines and expectations for productive writing are constant and, at times, extremely inflexible (Lea and Street 163). Further, a life in academia is often one that is rife with the shame and guilt associated with deficient performance (Shahjahan 790) even though Western ideals do not identify shame and guilt as dysfunction because both can motivate achievement (Turner and Schallert 322). Our approach to using the pomodoro technique was not a subscription to Western logics. We utilized timing devices to create boundaries for our writing sessions but incorporated humanizing flexibility throughout—holding space for whatever emotions or levels of productivity that we brought to the table.

During our Zoom sessions, we would allocate fifteen minutes to check in and set a writing goal, then set a timer, share it on screen, and repeat for the two-hour allotment. This practical approach progressed during a challenging time as we navigated employment, raising children, imposter syndrome (Holden et al. 2), doctoral processes, coping with the pandemic, various mental health issues, and maintaining well-being. What we accomplished in this informal group was both ordinary and extraordinary. The navigational capital we provided each other was foundational to our persistence, as was the spiritual joy of finding belonging, community support, and healing (Yosso 43). This support occurred with every check-in and was intuitively aligned with critical feminist epistemology (“Critical Race Theory” 229, “Chicana Feminist Epistemology” 556) while creating anti-colonial space (Calderón et al. 523) free of expectations to solely produce volumes of writing. By embracing embodied ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal, “Disrupting Epistemological Boundaries” 161), we supported each other as holistic scholars and disrupted the Western demands of productivity. Incorporating cultural intuition and spirituality (Delgado Bernal, “Cultural Intuition Then, Now and Into the Future” 2) into the pomodoro practice humanized the process and addressed our needs to heal from everyday pandemic and doctoral study demands. Redefining the writing sessions on our terms led to the social support mechanisms required for us to persist.

Implications

Our group connected, and not just on an academic level: we are WoC, we identify as Latina/Chicanas, and we understand how, like *trenzas* (Gonzales 83), our multiple identities are interwoven, inextricable, and central to how we support one another throughout the dissertation process. Like *trenzas*, we were established as a protective measure. We come as we are, and we are loved and held by others who respect and understand that.

Connected to our cultural intersections and ways of knowing, we also organically leaned into a non-hierarchical approach of conducting our gatherings—we equally took turns beginning check ins, setting pomodoro timers, scheduling Zoom rooms, gathering materials to share, and all the other small, numerous duties. This lateral style of leading seemed natural to us, and, in hindsight, was important in sustaining our group. We led together. Checking in with each other also taught us to value checking in with ourselves. It was an iterative process throughout our journey together, asking and answering questions like: How do I have patience and grace for myself on days where it is difficult to find motivation and on days where it is difficult for my *comadres*? How do I accept help and acceptance from others, when so many of us have been taught to feel shame and guilt for not producing at the levels prescribed

in academia? Supporting one another at a deep level inherently included a deep exploration of positionality and self.

This exploration was at the heart of how we transformed the dissertation experience from one that is widely accepted as isolating, emotionally taxing, and traumatic to one that facilitated intellectual, spiritual, and academic healing and growth. In community with other groups such as Chicana M(other) work, our relationships are cherished: “We are the *ofrenda* to ourselves. We are the *ofrenda* to each other.” (Castillo, et al. 14)

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