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A Conversation with Susana Muñoz

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The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Susana Muñoz, whose work focuses on Latinx and undocumented students in higher education.

Susana Muñoz is an assistant professor of higher education in the School of Education at Colorado State University and co-director of their Higher Education Leadership Program. She was recently named by Diverse Issues in Higher Education Magazine as one of the 25 most influential women in higher education. Her first book, Identity, Social Activism, and the Pursuit of Higher Education: The Journey Stories of Undocumented and Unafraid Community Activists, was published in 2015.

Q: What drives you to do this work surrounding social justice, racial justice? Where did it start for you? Why is it so important to you? Was there some experience you had that motivated you to become an activist for those who have been marginalized?

I think this really stems from my own upbringing and personal experiences. Moving from Merida, Yucatan, Mexico to Cincinnati, Ohio and not having the ability to have a humane language acquisition experience. It was just a sink-or-swim experience where it was you're just there and absorb the language, and all throughout that experience I was not grasping English like I should have. I had teachers stating, "Don't have her speak Spanish because then that's going to delay her speaking English" is communicates that your language is deficit.

But I didn't intellectualize my upbringing until later. Having reflected upon that now, taking out a native tongue is like taking out your heart. I didn't realize how that impacted me until later on.

Coming to Iowa State I really grappled with my own identity and who I am and what does it mean to be Chicana, Latina in this predominately white space. During the middle-

*Tyanez Jones interviewed Susana Muñoz for this special issue of the Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis. Inquiries regarding Susana Muñoz's work can be directed to jctp@iastate.edu

late 90's, California Proposition 187 was producing anti-immigrant rhetoric as they were trying to ban immigrants from working and they were talking about me. I felt like I needed to understand my immigrant identity in more meaningful ways, to understand what that meant for me.

I have citizenship privilege. I came to this country in a very privileged way. My mom came on a fiancé's visa and my stepdad was able to get us citizenship in four years. I came as a six year old and I got citizenship when I was 10 and I don't recall any struggle. There was no interruption of my family dynamic or unit. So I think about, that is such a privileged way to obtain a citizenship compared to what immigrants have to endure now.

By understanding the privilege that I have as a citizen and humanizing this issue for folks that are anti-immigrant. We don't call folks who are anti-immigrant ... We don't call them racists. But because our laws are rooted in White supremacy in terms of our immigration policies, it is racist. We have historically constructed immigration policies based on who belongs and who doesn't, which is based on race and class.

I feel we need to nuance immigration in complex issue and humanizing ways and making it more accessible for the public the argues towards a moral imperative. Again, just legacies of our history. Slavery was legal. Internment camps for Japanese Americans were legal. Let's think about the moral imperative about this issue. That's where I think as a country we have lost our compassion in many ways.

While my immigration experience is a privileged one, I own the fact that I wouldn't be here without assistance, I have pride in my immigrant identity, and I strive to work for and with this community.

Q: As a woman activist, how has your perspective been shaped by the gender norms in the U.S.?

I think I enter spaces where I become this really unexpected voice. Nobody expects me to talk intellectually about my research. Nobody expects me to be an expert in my field. It can be really frustrating to be in spaces where they see me but not expect me to have a PhD or have this expertise. I think what frustrates me the most is that they focus on their own surprise and that to me is really dehumanizing.

I think as a woman there's tons of gender stereotypes that I have to break through because of my visibility as a public scholar in terms of this issue. I feel like in many cases it's about working through other people's low expectations of me that often get transported to the community I belong to. I have had folks claim that I'm only speaking out in favor of the immigrant community because I too am an immigrant. Yes, and I also have the research to back the claims I make about undocumented communities

That's been a little frustrating. The academy can be a very vicious place. I think that's all I'll share right now.

Q: Is it harsher for you as a woman and as a Latina? More than you would see for ... Well, we know White males wouldn't, to some degree they may experience some hardship in the academy and criticism but ...

Well, I think part of it, and this is what going through the tenure process now in terms of submitting my materials and the feedback that I've gotten throughout my whole experience

in the academy, is that they always view my service as optional, "You're doing way too much service. Just focus on publishing." That's not an option for me". For them not to see that, I can't be engaged with this community as optional but rather an important aspect of my research vantage point.

It's kind of this tension that I think I have with the academy, is that, yes, it is about the publications, it's about the teaching. But, for me, working with communities not an option. I can't turn my back against my community and be like, "I'll see you after tenure." That's not how it works. That's not the researcher that I want to be. That's not the scholar that I want to be.

I think as a female activist, it's always this tension to justify the activism part even though my activism in and outside of the academy has made the most impact and scholarship makes an impact in my activism work. It's hard to translate that to the academy at times.

Q: Talk about the connection between your scholarship and advocacy and activism. What have you learned or advice would you give to a scholar-activist about persistence in the academy?

The connection to my scholarship and advocacy work is about passion and purpose. I can publish in all these journals and it appeases the academy, but my people can't access those journals. So, it's really important to me that I disseminate my scholarship and what I'm doing in ways that translate into policy or translate to different audiences.

I have just as much blogs and op-eds as I do articles because it's important to me that that scholarship reaches activists, parents, students, and to other individuals outside the academy. I feel like that's how my research can make an impact in meaningful ways.

The advice that I have learned to stay sane in this process is to understand what is the intent that you want to make but I have learned not to place emphasis on tenure and promotion but rather on the intent and impact I want to make with and for undocumented communities. Yes, I am also employed by this institution and they certainly benefit from the work I do with immigrant communities. If they I earn tenure, great, if not, I will be fine.

I've been very successful at not being afraid of the tenure process. I've taken risks because at the end of the day I can leave the academy and say that I lived my true purpose. I fulfilled my true purpose of what it means to be in this academy and I didn't let tenure, I didn't let other colleagues deter me into a different direction. I think being true to my purpose and to my intent is what really has sustained me.

The other thing that has sustained me is my safety net. I can't talk enough about my sister-scholars. These are women have been through the good, the ugly, and the bad through this process and they're all still in the academy. There are times where all of us have hit a low point or a wall of "I can't". So, we lift each other up in ways that I feel enables us to rest and have somebody else take the wheel for a little while.

Q: Were these sister-scholar's women that you met in academia, conferences, or in your grad program? Did you meet them in spaces that other scholars connect?

We met when we were all in our doctoral programs, but we met in different ways. One of them is my sorority sister, who I've known forever. Another one was in graduate school

with my sorority sister at the University of Arizona and another one we met at a conference. So, we've been each other's academic soul mates for the last seven or eight years.

There's few people that I can be very vulnerable with and cry and just release. These are the women that I do that with. There's also very few people that will tell me how it is like, "No, you need to get your butt back to writing" or "You need to stop and do this" or "You've traveled quite a bit and why don't you think about going to a yoga class."

These are the women that will be honest with me even when I don't want to hear it.

Q: What have you learned about the history of discrimination in this country toward Latina and Chicana students or communities? Explain how oppression and issues of power still manifest themselves today?

We don't have to look very far but to Puerto Rico, to know how this country feels about brown people. We see who the majority of the folks that are incarcerated right now for minor infractions to know that Jim Crow laws still exist. To me, institutional racism continues to be sustained but perhaps packaged differently.

For immigrants, it's not that we have these laws that blatantly exclude immigrants, but its acknowledging that our foreign policies and government involvement aided in the influx of immigrants. Take corn for instance, when you take away the number one exporter out of Mexico caused by the NAFTA trade policy, you're taking away people's livelihood, so where do they go? They come to the U.S. and we exploit them for their labor.

We also capitalize on the fears of people in this country by reproducing narratives about immigrants which depict them as criminals and villains., when in fact, immigrants decrease crime in communities. Our current administration is painting a highly distorted image of undocumented peoples in the U.S. by focusing on one isolated event and not using research and other policy institutes to understand the economic and social impact immigrants have made in the U.S. Instead, the administration uses militarized forces (ICE) to instill fear and control movement of immigrants. The majority of terrorism or mass shootings are caused by white cismales yet we are not paying any attention to their race or gender.

I talk about the notion of legal violence in my research, which is how our policies, laws, and practices serve to derail immigrants for incorporation in U.S. society. We see legal violence throughout our history and whether we like it or not, it's being perpetuated in how we frame the immigrant conversation. For instance, 80% of the American public are sympathetic to "DREAMERS" and youth who were brought to the U.S. at a young age, but we also can't vilify their parents. We often frame immigration conversations based on deservingness. Who deserves citizenship and who doesn't is rooted in racism and classism.

Our president, not my president, the president - 45, is not helping matters when we propose building a wall to stop the influx of immigrants. The slogan "Build the Wall" has now become a racial slur because underneath the slogan is an element of racist nativism. Like slavery, like Japanese internment camps, like Mexican Repatriation, 50 years from now, this country will be once again apologizing for another historical tragedy.

Q: What can colleges and universities do to be more supportive of DACA students?

I talk to many colleges and universities and part of their concern is their own fears. One of the things that I think is very helpful for colleges and universities to do is to ask "where are

your fears rooted in? Where do they come from?" What I am finding is, it's more personal than systemic. I think leaders have the capacity to direct the university in one way or another. They're able to justify that and position themselves in a way that is directly tied to their mission and principles of community.

I think what colleges and universities need to do is be more action-orientated around this issue, but that commitment needs structure, planning, assessment, and resources. More often than not, working to support undocumented students is not directly noted on someone's job description. So, institutions need to be mindful in how to institutionalize support so its not dependent on the expertise of existing individuals. That's also important, but what happens to these efforts when these individuals leave.

I also have a concern when campuses are declaring themselves sanctuary campuses because you can say you're a safe space. You can say that, yes, we will protect immigrants but what are the things that you're doing to support these students financially, emotionally, legally, what is there? Don't declare yourself a sanctuary campus if you aren't willing to put resources and policies to create humanizing spaces in and outside the classroom... That's a badge of honor for me.

I think institutions need to be leading this effort. I think about my own campus and what I have learned is that putting the right people at the table is key. And people that are willing to push the envelope. Students need to demand more from their universities. Students can say, "This is what we need. You invited us here. You welcomed us here. Now that we're here. Here's what we need to feel like we're human on this campus." They need to demand for it, ask for it, because I think that's what's driving the directives from our institution is that students are saying, "Look, this is what we need. How do we make it happen?"

That's really guided a lot of our initiatives. We happen to have some pretty good, courageous leaders. At the same time, we're not perfect. No institution is but, at the very least, there's got to be more conversation followed by action.