

From Spirit Murdered to Spirit Re-Sisters

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An Episolar Offering/Love Letter for Adjunct Professors

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Even when they are dangerous
examine the heart of those machines you hate
before you discard them
and never mourn the lack of their power
lest you be condemned
to relive them.

—Audre Lorde, “For Each of You” (1997)

Dearest Dr. Garcia and Dr. Davila,

I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones well. As a mother, daughter, and educator in Compton, California, I acknowledge and honor the Gabrielino and Tongva peoples as the traditional caretakers of the land where my family and I reside. It is from these Indigenous lands that I write to you today.

This is not the manuscript I planned to write and that you expected to receive. A letter like this would be purged by most academic editors. For a myriad of reasons—my severe lupus, white supremacy, isolation, settler colonialism, unemployment, #45, anti-Blackness, knee-deep patriarchy, Covid19 closures, the criminalization of Critical Race Theory, and lack of child-care—I was unable to craft the manuscript I planned for your special issue on Spirit Murder. I am not asking that you include this letter in your special issue. Yet, I dare ask that you receive these words and include them as part of a larger tapestry of narratives that denounce the taxing labor conditions and vibrant collective triumphs among adjunct professors in academia. When the fever subsides, I

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From Spirit Murder to Spirit Re-Sisters

will be healthy enough to weave, theorize, and analyze the tapestry of narratives and testimonios entrusted to me by Indigenous and WoC (Women of Color) adjunct professors.

Spirit Murder. I am in a Spirit Murder moment right now. It is Spirit Murder moment in the Machine #900 or #1000. I have lost count and some of the wounds have not healed enough for me to distinguish if the machine's assault on my spirit is over. The most recent manifestation of Spirit Murder was brought on by the months of uncertainty over adjunct faculty layoffs across the university system and the lack of transparency from the highest administrative offices. The epigraph that opens this letter, excerpted from Audre Lorde's poem "For Each of You" (1997), imparts the exigency for audacious reflection and action against the systemic oppressions experienced by Black women across U.S. society. Historically, universities (referred to as the machine in the remainder of letter), have officialized the capitalist practices of land displacement and extraction, religious doctrines, and white supremacy's projects of enslavement and genocide (Grande, 2018). As a Chicana and Indigenous mother-scholar, I identify with the poem's rendering of racism and settler colonial aggressions against the spirit, as well as with Lorde's reminder of our pride and greater power over the machine.

Dr. Garcia and Dr. Davila, I offer these brief words as an act of gratitude to you for believing in me, as an act of daily survival, and as an act of abundant defiance against the elimination of WoC adjunct professors, writers, and mother-scholars such as myself. Alongside these words, I offer a bundle of sunflowers and sage in gratitude to Critical Race legal scholar Dr. Patricia Williams' (1987) conceptualization of spirit-murdering as a crime of racism and as an "offense so deeply painful and assaultive...victims of racism must prove that they did not distort the circumstances..." (p. 129) underscores the need for naming the apparatuses that do the wounding. Williams described how the policing of Black bodies and the devaluing of Black death has created a society that is synthesized to racism. Similarly, Black, Indigenous, and WoC professors endure an ongoing matrix of structural racist and colonial oppressions in academia (Gutierrez y Muhs, G., Niemann, Y.F., Gonzalez, C.G. & Harris, A. P., 2012). Many of us labor without equitable funding or job security, often succumbing to exhaustion and chronic illnesses influenced by environmental racism (Washington, 2020) along with other forms of systemic racism. These working conditions are the primary arrangement enabling academia's racist capitalist corporatization. Dr. Garcia-my dear Re-Sister- you have extended Spirit Murdering to name the wounding and slow deaths of spirit that occur when the physical, intellectual, and emotional work is stolen, appropriated and/or erased from Black, Indigenous, and WoC (2020). Your writing has offered

me space to unapologetically examine and name the wounds caused by the assemblage of machines we have worked in throughout higher education. The purpose of this letter, in the form of an offering, is to briefly illuminate how adjunct professors -many of the educators in higher education (Finklestein, Conley & Schuster, 2016)-experience and resist Spirit Murder to become Spirit Re-Sisters. This letter is also my attempt to contribute to the important dialogues on agency in academia that you are both facilitating with your upcoming special issue.

Spirit Murder is experienced by adjunct professors facing excruciating layoffs, draconian sexist teaching evaluations, and outright exclusion from tenure line positions in their universities. While the role of adjunct professors may vary across universities, adjunct professors are generally expected to teach and mentor students as well as engage in campus and department service opportunities. Adjunct professors earn less money than tenure-line professors, receive fewer benefits such as employer-provided health insurance, and do not have job security as they are offered yearly or semester teaching contracts. Many adjunct professors work at multiple campuses to cobble up dignified salaries (Finklestein, Conley & Schuster, 2016). A report by the American Federation of Teachers (2020) reveals that forty percent of adjunct faculty are not paid enough to cover basic household expenses, and twenty-five percent use public assistance programs. Adjunct professors with terminal degrees in their field that teach within the California State University System can get paid, at most, \$50-60,000 per year for a full-time teaching load, which can include teaching up to 200 students per semester. Universities are increasingly relying on adjunct faculty: Forty years ago, seventy percent of university faculty were tenured or on the tenure track. As of 2018, that figure has flipped: 75 percent of higher education faculty are not eligible for tenure, and 47 percent hold part-time positions. The majority of adjunct faculty self-identified as female (American Federation of Teachers, 2020).

Many universities are showing us their imperialist land-body extractive fangs in this pandemic as they cut the jobs of their lowest paid professors and continue to hire administrators with enlarged salaries. Many of the adjunct professors losing their jobs are Black, Indigenous, and Women of Color. Many of us are already traumatized by the racism, colonialism, and sexism we endured throughout higher education. Now we continue to be traumatized by poverty wages and predatory student loan debt we endure as adjunct professors. I have a PhD and my children qualify to receive reduced price lunches at their school. As an adjunct representative for the faculty union on my campus, I have witnessed how adjunct professors have lost health insurance benefits because their classes were prematurely cut as part of austere top-down decisions taken during the early months of the pandemic.

From Spirit Murder to Spirit Re-Sisters

This epistolary offering and the forthcoming narratives from Indigenous and WoC adjunct professors are also prompted by the intimate writings crafted by Chicana feminist, queer, artist, educator, and writer Gloria Anzaldúa. Anzaldúa became an ancestor in 2004, after 12 years of voyaging through diabetes-related complications. Anzaldúa's final essays reveal a candid account of her journey to accept, adapt, and re-frame her chronic illness experiences. She blossomed a variety of methods to manage her diabetes and respond to the changes in her body. Anzaldúa was an independent scholar, and in addition to her artistic commitments and spiritual transformation work, she continued with her writing and academic speaking engagements as these were essential sources of income when she could not secure quality medical care and insurance (Keating, 2015). Anzaldúa's theoretical, artistic, and spiritual work became central in many academic enclaves, yet she labored in the margins: "The spirit eating me from the inside was telling me I was being eaten alive by my responsibilities to others. The academy was not giving back to my spirit what I in my teaching images and words was giving it" (1999). Her words and the subsequent reflections she offered on the body, identity and spirituality urges us to examine the heart of the machine. I, like many other contingent academics with chronic illness, have turned to Anzaldúa's life and writings for strength and courage to view our health, bodies, and spirit within broader historical and sociopolitical frameworks. Anzaldúa's self-reflective essays can embolden us to name the wounds we experience in academia as well as name the methods by which we resist.

Importantly, for racialized and colonized women in the machine, managing these Spirit Murders in the current pandemic has hurled us into various states of transformation that Anzaldúa referred to as *Nepantla*. "Nepantla" is the Nahuatl word meaning "in-between space." Anzaldúa nourished this term and used it to represent the liminal, spiritual, and material points and spaces of embryonic transformation (1987). When Indigenous and WoC adjunct professors experience racial and gendered wounding such as loss of job or denial of our labor as educators and writers, we can be shifted into simultaneous states of mourning, heightened intuition, shock, disorientation, movement, insights and change. Laboring in academia is to labor on land and lives stolen from Native American communities. As Deborah Miranda (2002) reminds us, we share Indigenous wounds in academia. This means we are called to work through our place in the land-stealing and spirit murdering machine. This awakening also moves us to travel through the liminal spaces and confront the vortices of meritocracy, diversity, and individualism rampant in academia if we are to move toward a return of land, relationships, and renewal.

Nora Alba Cisneros

The letters and written testimonios offered by fellow adjunct professors for this project on Spirit Murder all disclosed similar states of Nepantla caused by racial and gendered wounds in the machine. The wounds-caused by racism, low wages, objectionable class cuts and cryptic tenure line hiring practices all led to disorienting and painful shifts in our physical health and in our writing endeavors. The following virtual letter exchange between Sol and Ale, two Chicana adjunct professors, renders the psychological and physical toll experienced by many contingent educators. Sol and Ale both teach at public universities in California. Ale and Sol hold doctorate degrees from prestigious universities and have been teaching full time as adjunct professors for the past 5 years. Sol and Ale, along with 8 other Chicana identifying adjunct professors and myself have engaged in a virtual writing collective since the beginning of 2020. We are also active on our campuses as union members.

Dear Sol,

The texts would get too long, and I know we are keeping these *virtual caritas/letters* for our own archives so here goes another quick one. The semester is two weeks away and I am getting that nervous belly ache again. It happens every Fall. My head and stomach hurt when I keep checking class enrollments. I know we mentioned how we should not check these so much, but I can't help it. I am not guaranteed classes, not even after all this time working full time at the university. Why are the class cuts happening so far only in the Ethnic Studies courses? My health insurance depends on keeping these classes. We cannot go without health insurance, especially in this pandemic. I loathe that I worry about this every year. My teaching record is top notch, I engage students as strong writers and change makers, and I somehow manage to publish, all while teaching almost 150 students every semester. Why doesn't the university convert lecturer positions as tenure line positions in Ethnic Studies departments as much as they do in Physical Science and English departments? The two-tier system in higher education must be done away with because it hurts our bodies. All of this makes my head and stomach hurt so much that I cannot write as I planned. I have no job security and I cannot afford safe childcare in this pandemic to meet my writing goals. I cannot write when my world is set ablaze and my health is deteriorating day by day. Maybe we can think together about how to get this changed once we resume our writing dates.

—Ale

From Spirit Murder to Spirit Re-Sisters

Dearest Ale,

I completely understand. The headache, the obsessive logins to check student enrollment, the fatigue from the mental math you do to figure how to attain health insurance if your classes do get cut. I know this all too well. I see how much you do as a professor, how long you have been teaching and writing with unparalleled regard for students, and it angers me that many of us are in this position. Indeed, there are so many of us lecturers, that in most universities, we carry the departments. We do the bulk of teaching for a fraction of what admin and tenured track profs get paid. We do so much mentoring of students, from within crowded offices or library cubicles. How do the universities get away with the stratification of faculty—most of them first generation former students themselves, or of immigrant backgrounds, or lower SES and Women of Color? Why do they get away with the pillaging of our knowledge, of our intellectual and emotional health and wealth? Our students' learning suffers when we suffer. I see you, Ale. I see your pain and rage. I also see the phenomenal writer that you are. Thank you for taking the time to write these virtual *cartitas*. Let us stay healthy. Let us stay rooted with those that we love and that love us. May these words, our *testimonios*, also be part of how we rage against the machine.

—Sol

I have quoted the letter exchange above at length because the writings vividly illustrate how, when enduring deep distress and trauma because of racist and obscure teaching employment processes in academia, both Ale and Sol have developed a practice of naming the wounding and shifting to supporting each other through empathy, rage, kindness, and, ultimately, collective action. Ale and Sol are, simultaneously, experiencing Spirit Murder and engaging in work as Re-Sisters. They have purposely looked to each other and to other Black, Indigenous, and WoC to embrace their intersectional experiences and to help each other navigate neoliberal corporate academic bureaucracies. Much like the narratives shared in the phenomenal "Pedagogy of Sisterhood (Burciaga & Tavares, 2006), our collective writings document our presence and health journeys impacted by our labor as adjunct professors.

Like Ale, I experienced illness and a deep inability to write when my summer teaching assignment was eliminated just a few days before the start of the summer term. The painful loss of my employment was exacerbated by the illness and loss surrounding my family and communities in the 2020 pandemic. I lost people I cared for to Covid19 and mourning took over any energy reserved for writing. I wanted to

be present with my children during these hardships and I could not toil away, writing, to appease an appendage of the settler state that is academia. I have managed to write as my soul calls for me to write: some mornings I can jot down a few words and sentences and other mornings the words are not yet words to be written. Like Ale and Sol, I managed to stay afloat through the solidarity and opportunities offered to me by Indigenous, Black and WoC within and beyond academia.

As is also illustrated in the above epistolary exchange, many adjunct professors engage in communal uplifting work- day and night- to support ourselves, our families, our students, and each other. We write, mourn, learn, create, rejoice, and resist alongside our students and each other. We write them letters of recommendation for jobs and graduate programs. We advise and fundraise to support student activism even as we live paycheck to paycheck. We make calls to community organizers, old college friends or to people with leverage in unfamiliar industries so that we can connect our students with the resources that some campuses often will not provide. We read every word they write for us, even when we have 200 students. We serve on campus committees because we know what our students need from us as educators. Our students inspire us to bravely move through and occupy spaces and borders meant to wound those that would examine the machine. Many of us purposely cultivate friendships and solidarities with each other that affirm our intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and artistic gifts. We rejoice in each other's growth. Indeed, through our participation in local organizations and community mutual aid groups as well as organizing artistic workshops, we are proud to stay connected to our home communities. The machine cannot claim nor diminish these relationships and collective achievements.

Whether we are discarded from or manage to, of our own accord, escape the machine, we must examine academia. We must look past the rust, within the bearings and the lathes, down to the very design and interconnected parts. Who, in the machine, decides to reduce salary and benefits to professors? Who, in the machine, decides it is acceptable to pay near poverty wages to dedicated educators? Who, in the machine, approves recurring tuition increases that burden the most vulnerable students? Who in the machine decides that empty campus housing and buildings cannot be used to shelter homeless families in a pandemic? The answers to these questions compel me to see that academia is not the future we need. I do not begrudge tenured or tenure-track professors, for some of them bravely face the colonizing apparatus as they subversively teach, research, and lead others toward decolonizing desires. I also do not resent administrators that work in offices of diversity, equity, and inclusion even when these offices are appropriated to serve settler colonial desires of accumulation. I do not resent these folks because some

From Spirit Murder to Spirit Re-Sisters

of them have stood with lecturers the past few months as we organized to protect our jobs and health. Many of these colleagues have shown me that the machine is not impermeable.

Questioning the apparatus makes it possible for us to prioritize empowering relationships and alternative modalities as anchors for survival and resistance. Our collective of adjunct Chicana professors offered the intimate writings we have engaged in during 2020, such as letters and poetry, to illuminate our circumstances and the solidarities we create. Yet, for many of the adjunct professors, we experienced great trepidation and trauma as we lingered through the writings for a manuscript. Most writings are too intense, intimate, and painful to share in conventional academic publishing modalities. We have struggled to protect our writing and we reclaim a communal agency in rethinking publishing while we engage in creative work that honors our different journeys and aspirations. It is these ongoing conversations that led to the changes in the manuscript and resulted in an epistolary offering to your special issue. None of this was easy for us as emerging scholars, but we remain firm in our intuition to rethink how our writing can serve transformations beyond the self.

That said, dismantling academia's oppressive structures that wound the spirit is but one component of the transformation to Re-Sisters. I am not writing this letter to advocate for more tenure-track lines or transparent hiring practices because these changes alone will not save an expiring machine nor the most exploited workers. Grande (2018) prompts us to recognize that the university is beyond reform and, therefore, we should pivot towards refusal of the university. Grande (2018) explains that refusing the university requires strategies of departure from the goals of recognition, inclusion, and equity that many universities use to dispossess lands, resources, and knowledges from Black, Indigenous and WoC. Kelley (2016) reminds us that there is a long history of alternative collectives and projects that have worked for transformative changes outside of the machine, such as the work of the Combahee River Collective, the Mississippi Freedom Schools, the Standing Rock Syllabus collective, Semillas Sociedad Civil in Los Angeles, and the Black Liberation Collective. Thus, we can engage in the dismantling of the machine's wounding practices and engage in the co-creation of alternative spaces and modes that will facilitate our transition beyond the decaying university. I believe that writing with our colleagues and students, in subterfuge and beyond the imperatives of the machine, as many Black, Indigenous and WoC have done, can move us toward becoming Spirit Re-Sisters. In addition, Keaton (2015) reminds us that Anzaldúa bridged activism and creative work to usher in a healing of the self and others. Among Anzaldúa's activism and creative work practices was her regular

communication to her writing *comadres*. Anzaldúa's exchanges with her writing *comadres* throughout her final essays illuminate their relentless agency and ongoing examination of the historical, political, social, cultural, ideological, material, and economic contexts in which they lived. Similarly, the uplifting relationships and writings between adjunct professors compels us to look beyond the university to reinvigorate our bodies and spirits. These various forms of collective resistance and agency is what changes structures and heals us.

In closing, I share that a few weeks ago when I was in bed breathing through the waves of high temperatures and body aches, I kept turning to my writing journal with the following words from Savannah Shange (2019) written on the first page of her book: "Writing is ancestor work" (p. ix). Shange's words, along with the distant laughter of my children and the letters waiting in my inbox, reminded me that love, rage, fearlessness, joy, and collective solidarities can be nurtured through our writing and manifested in our homes and communities. By sharing our experiences as adjunct educators, we can create a future right now where we can uplift and rebuild relationships that change our material conditions and heal our spirits. Thank you, Dr. Garcia, and Dr. Davila, for taking the time to read this letter and for inviting me to be part of this generative reckoning.

With radical kindness and solidarity,

—Nora Cisneros

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From Spirit Murder to Spirit Re-Sisters

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