Speaking from and about Brown Bodies: A Personal and Political Story of Sharing Identities

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When I began studying the rhetorics of social activist Dolores Huerta, I was only vaguely familiar with her story. I knew she had worked closely with Cesar Chavez advocating for better working conditions for farm workers in California’s Central Valley. With this limited knowledge, I felt drawn to her. I quickly discovered we shared so much. I, like Huerta, grew up in the Central Valley of California. I, like Huerta, was never a farm laborer but am very close to many who were. I, like Huerta, am Chicana and a mother. I, like Huerta, fight for authority and credibility in a field from a body that, to many, does not exude either.

Through my dissertation research analyzing the rhetorical strategies Huerta utilized to construct her ethos, I found that Huerta’s most highly recognizable embodied identities—her gender, ethnic and racial identity—as well as her social class significantly impacted how she crafted her connections to her varied audiences. Huerta was often received and perceived as a mother-woman-Chicana before she was seen as the Vice President of the United Farm Workers Union or the chief negotiator for farm laborer rights.

This finding does not disrupt our understanding of composition and/or composition studies. In fact, it is in keeping with many theories of composition and rhetoric. It does, however, emphasize the importance of intersectionality. Kimberlee Crenshaw first coined the term, which calls attention to the challenges of negotiating multiple oppressions. I learned this word many years ago and felt I understood the theory, the meaning, and the implications. But one day, it was no longer just a theory. It was, indeed is, so much more.

Huerta’s life, her story, her ways of being, and her rhetorical strategies pushed me toward meta-awareness of how my own identities messed with my academic research methods, messed with my learning, messed with my teaching, writing, and growing. My research was no longer just about Huerta. My work “about her” became work about me and people like me. Like her.

As a Latina, I have a vested interest in understanding how my body influences my ethos, my credibility, my trustworthiness. My relationship to power.

As a Chicana and mother, I have a vested interest in how my motherly ethos affects my authority.
As a monolingual Latina, I have a vested interest in how the lack of a shared language with those that I share a heritage affects my credibility.

In other words, in researching Huerta, my intersectional identities and ethos became heightened alongside hers.

Both of my parents were farm workers. I grew up hearing stories of their hard childhoods and the backbreaking labor they worked so hard to keep us from enduring. I appreciate my parents for making certain we didn’t have to do the same. But that distancing from their roots and hardships came at a big cost for me, and my sisters, too. Because my parents worked so hard to get away from their impoverished beginnings—my dad, a college graduate, and my mother, a small business owner—we ended up in white upper-middle-class neighborhoods, which meant that most of our community spoke “clear” and “unaccented” English and practiced white middle-class traditions.

We were never taught
Spanish. Never had a quinceañera.
Never made tortillas.
Instead we learned “proper” English.
We attended high performing schools, and we tried not to get too tan.

Although born decades earlier, Huerta’s beginnings—much like mine—were forged in a middle-class home. Huerta’s mother, Alicia Fernandez, was a small business owner. She owned a 70-room hotel that often housed migrant farmworkers at affordable rates. Huerta completed high school and earned her provisional teaching credential from the University of Pacific’s Delta College. In her early career Huerta was a schoolteacher. It was after seeing many of the school children—often the children of farm workers—show up to school without shoes on their feet and without food in their bellies that she was moved to action. She began community organizing. Huerta was the inaugural vice president of the United Farm Workers union, and, at the time of this writing, she continues to champion social justice at age 87. Hers is a story of embodied sacrifice, of unrelenting service to others, and of breaking through boundaries and limitations often attributed to identity.

But, again, this isn’t the only story here worth telling. The story often left untold when researchers examine subjects with whom they share so much, especially researchers and/or subjects who embody oppressed identities, is that the work is deeply political and personal.

I find it difficult to position Huerta and myself within a culture that tends to privilege rationality and objectivity and that often does not support the passionate and subjective people we both are and represent. For so many of
us Huerta broke barriers, but critics and allies alike would often question her rationality. She’s been called a “dragon lady,” positioned as someone to fear, charged with being irrational. Delicate, fragile, contingent is the authority of a woman of color. Thus, I felt my heart in my throat when during my research, I encountered Huerta’s use of the disparaging term “wetbacks” to describe undocumented Mexican nationals in the U.S. I chose to avoid any analysis. In academia, steeped in canonical study and highbrow ways, I am her protector. She fought for equality from a compromised body. We continue to fight for change in institutions that think we are deficient because of our writing, our thinking, our inability to quack like ducks.

And now my multiple oppressions are showing.

Huerta’s intersectionality, her complex and varied identities, provided channels for both connection and distance to and from her audiences. My intersectionality offers channels for connection and division to and from my audiences.

This is a story of two Chicanas who built credibility one piece at a time from whatever resources were accessible. We are two Chicanas who built authority from bodies that carry with them many cultural symbols that place us in the margins. But our bodies are central to our lived realities; they are not actually “marginalized” or “othered.” They are not “somewhere out there” because they are ours.

Yet, this story is but a fragment of a much larger project investigating the challenges of doing scholarly work with figures of study who are traditionally marginalized and who directly affect the scholar both as researcher and as part of the community/identities being studied. Due to my own disciplining I would like to offer some “new” finding because that’s what “good” academics do; that’s what we need. But I offer you no conclusion, no solutions, no resolutions, and no interventions. Instead, I offer a story because our stories matter, and when surveying “where we are,” I see that we still need more stories that are by and about Latinx communities. We need to speak frankly and in familiar styles that demonstrate the power that comes from our stories. Indeed, our stories are not somewhere in the margins. They are stories of power and authority. Stories of a will to survive in unfriendly territories. And stories that are central to all of us.

Works Cited