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Celeste Montoya & Mariana Galvez Seminario

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Guerreras y Puentes: the theory and praxis of Latina(x) activism

Celeste Montoya and Mariana Galvez Seminario

University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

ABSTRACT

Latinas have long played a vital but under-acknowledged role in US social justice movements. The complexity of their hybrid racial and multi-faceted identities shapes but also obscures their activism, placing them at the juncture of or in the space between movements. Like others at the intersection of multiple marginalities, they have pushed back against marginalization in mainstream movements, forging their own way in hostile environments. Using their positional assets as the translators and bridge builders between movements, they have developed insights and practices for working across difference and addressing the multiple and interlocking forms of oppression that impact their communities. In this article, we first theorize Latina(x) activism in regard to their intersectional location and the development of a mestiza consciousness, placing the insights of Chicana feminism in conversation with the growing literature on social movement intersectionality in order to propose indicators of intersectional praxis. We then use a structured focused comparison of four distinct social movement organizations to examine Latina(x) intersectional praxis, illustrating its contributions to and its potentials for social justice organizing.

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If the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice, the journey is fraught – with setbacks, obstacles, and wrong turns. We are living in a political moment when multiple and interconnected forms of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and ableism) are increasingly apparent and where social justice movements are imperiled not only by the inhospitable climate they face, but by their tendency to mobilize along a single axis. Now, more than ever, social movements need to move beyond the mistakes of the past to form more dynamic and durable coalitions that work across difference to mount a comprehensive and sustainable battle against injustice. Ready to lead the way are those at the intersection of multiple oppressions. Pushing back against marginalization in mainstream movements, these warriors have forged their own way in hostile environments. Using their positional assets as the translators and bridge builders between movements, they have developed insights and practices that show a better way forward.

Often present, but rarely acknowledged, Latina activists are an integral part of social justice movements in the United States. Their varied experiences at the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation have motivated their participation in a range of social justice movements: labor, student, feminist, anti-racism, LGBTQ rights,

immigrant rights, housing justice, etc. (Ruiz 1998; Martínez 2008; Blackwell 2011). Like other groups at the intersection of multiple, interlocking oppressions, the complexity of Latinas' multi-faceted identities obscures but also shapes their activism. Located at the juncture of – or in the space between – social movements, they are nowhere and everywhere simultaneously. Within these *borderlands*, they have developed new and dynamic ways of understanding and confronting oppression that reflect the complexity of their lived experiences.

Rooted in Black, Indigenous and (often queer) women of color feminisms, intersectionality emerged in the overlap between social movements and academic politics, based on the critical insight that “race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2011, 2015, 2). Despite these origins, intersectionality has not been a central feature of social movement scholarship. This is, in part, a function of intersectionality's movement into the academy and its use primarily as a theoretical framework or paradigm, an important development, but one that is sometimes distanced from its application within movements. It is also a function of social movement scholarship that tends to emphasize mainstream single-axis mobilization. Maylei Blackwell (2011, 21) argues that “women of color political subjectivities have gone largely unhistoricized because they often occur between various and distinct social movements.” She argues that the feminist practices of women of color, lesbians, and working-class women are not clearly registered in dominant frames because they are more often engaged in multi-issue organizing or work on several political fronts, not all of which put gender at the center. It is problem replicated in research on race, class, and LGBTQ movements.

In this article, we return to intersectionality's social movement origins, emphasizing the importance of *intersectional praxis* – the theory put into practice. If intersectionality is a framework for social justice (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Hancock 2011), one we contend is *imperative* to building stronger movements, how is it deployed by activists and activist organizations? We focus on Latina activism as a potential site for intersectional praxis. First, we put Chicana/Latina feminist theories in conversation with the growing literature on social movement intersectionality to establish indicators of intersectional praxis. Here we explore conceptualizations of a *mestiza consciousness*, and of a new *mestiza* who navigates the *borderlands* between movements and *world-travels* across them, building bridges of connection. We then use a structured focused comparison of four distinct social movement organizations to examine Latina(x) intersectional praxis, illustrating its contributions to and its potentials for social justice organizing.

Theorizing Latina intersectional activism

Following the lead of Black feminist scholars/activists, Chicana feminists of the 1980s and 1990s challenged single-axis approaches taken to understand and confront oppression. Activist scholars like Gloria Anzaldúa, María Lugones, Cherríe Moraga, Emma Pérez, Chela Sandoval, Ana Castillo, Norma Alarcón, and Carla Trujillo echoed an active commitment to struggling against racial, gendered, heterosexual, and class oppression. While their work had many themes in common with and was often in conversation with other women of color writers theorizing what would later be coined as intersectionality, these

authors centered the distinct histories and experiences of Chicanas. Below we introduce some of this theorization as foundational to a framework of Latina intersectional praxis. In particular, we draw from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and her theorization of a *mestiza consciousness* and María Lugones and her theorization of world-traveling, putting these theorists in conversation with each other and with contemporary Latina political theorists.

Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* serves as a critical starting point for understanding the multiple and interconnected racial, gendered, and sexual identities of Latinas. Her body of work "stands as the most expansive and sustained Chicana meditation to date on the inner diversity of the self as it relates to social conflict and the potential for social change" (Barvosa 2011, 124). In her seminal text, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, she theorizes a consciousness rooted in the contradictions of the *new mestiza's* positionality at the "crossroads," a place of alienation but also of connection:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races). (Anzaldúa 1987, 80–81)

More than an essentialist construct, however, the *mestiza consciousness* is an agentic feminist orientation that uses *mestiza* positionality to bring people together and challenge systems of oppression (Barvosa 2011, 128). A *mestiza consciousness* takes the ambiguity of identity and positionality and turns it into potential sites for agency (Beltrán 2004): "The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity ... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode ... [Not] only does she sustain contradictions, she turns them into something else" (Anzaldúa 1987, 79–80).

To Anzaldúa, a *mestiza consciousness* is a mode of survival as much as it is a political orientation. In *La Prieta* (1981), she critiques single-axis movements, "they would chop me into little fragments and tag each piece with a label." In *Borderland/La Frontera*, she offers another way, arguing "To survive the Borderlands you must live *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads" (1987, 195). María Lugones (1987) reflects these sentiments in her discussion of *world traveling*. To Lugones, a "world" is a particular construction of a part of society or a person, and one might inhabit more than one of these worlds at the same time. Because of their complex, hybrid, and sometimes contradictory identities and experiences, Latinas might be constructed differently in each world. To Lugones, traveling between worlds and animating these different constructions becomes a powerful tool to navigate the single-axis constructions of society (and movements) while maintaining a fluid pluralistic sense of self.

This positionality in the borderlands, and the consciousness arising from it, becomes the basis for Latina intersectional praxis. What develops as modes of survival can, through the adoption of a *mestiza consciousness* as an agentic orientation, become what Barvosa (2008) describes as political assets. These include *interpretive assets* – to understand and incorporate various viewpoints; *positional assets* – in that their mobility among groups allows them to carry ideas from one group to another; and *motivational assets* – to address conflicts between groups so as to be able to claim and live their own multiple identities in peace.

Social movement intersectionality

Within the sparse but growing literature on social movement intersectionality, scholars have theorized two distinct albeit overlapping conceptualizations of social movement intersectionality: (1) *intersectional movements* and (2) *intersectional movement praxis*. The first refers to movements mobilized by those at the intersection of two (or more) forms of oppression (Broad-Wright 2017), while the second pertains to practices deployed by social justice groups (see Townsend-Bell 2011). This distinction is important for several reasons. First, it is important to recognize that while positionality matters, it does not automatically translate into intersectional praxis. Social movement organizations or actors at the intersection of multiple marginalities may vary in how, when, where, and to what extent they adopt intersectional praxis. For example, a group of Latinas might address issues regarding gender and race but fail to address relevant needs from other differences within the group (sexuality, class, nationality/citizenship, etc.). More dynamic conceptualizations of intersectionality see it not as a destination easily reached, but as an ongoing commitment to continually do better in recognizing and addressing power differentials. Second, the distinction is also important in that it allows any activist or movement/organization to adopt intersectional praxis. Movements that start in a more single-axis manner might develop intersectional praxis, thus making it all the more pertinent for them to learn from those already using it. Furthermore, if intersectional praxis is not inevitable, it is important to recognize how components within shifting political environments might motivate, enhance, or hinder intersectional praxis (Ayoub 2019; Irvine, Lang, and Montoya 2019). The political environment may inspire intersectional awareness and praxis, but it might also discourage or restrict it.

In Anzaldúa's work, being a *mestiza* was not the same as having a *mestiza* consciousness. Not all Latinas or Latina organizations will engage in intersectional praxis, or praxis may vary. But if a *mestiza* consciousness is present, what might Latina intersectional praxis look like? An important first step, and what we propose as the first indicator of intersectional praxis, is recognizing the multiple and intersecting dimensions of oppression in their constituencies. How do the organizations frame their mobilization, mission, and values? To what extent are intersectional understandings or goals expressed?

More important than recognition, however, is prioritizing and taking action to address group needs. For this reason, scholars have distinguished between *recognition* and *representation*, noting that intersectional praxis requires both (Lépinard 2014; Tormos 2017). Strolovitch (2007) argues for affirmative advocacy, where organizations work to improve the status of intersectionally disadvantaged groups through both descriptive and substantive representation, making sure they are in leadership positions and by prioritizing and allocating resources to the issues affecting them. These two forms of representation stand as our next two indicators of intersectional praxis. What does the organization look like descriptively? What type of issues are addressed in programming?

A fourth indicator of intersectional praxis we propose is the coalitional patterns both within and outside of an organization (Irvine, Lang, and Montoya 2019, 13). Coalitions can help organizations to better and more sustainably address the multitude of issues facing a community. While most organizations engage in coalition building, the pattern of coalitions might look different in an intersectional praxis. Organizations may exercise a transversal politics, shifting between multiple single-axis issue networks. This "world

traveling” allows organizations to focus on different modes of oppression so as to more holistically address the needs of a community. We argue that Latinas, like others at the intersection of multiple marginalities, occupy a “strategic group position” that can play a critical role in envisioning and facilitating new coalitions and collaborations (Barvosa 2008; Chun, Lipsitz, and Shin 2013; Irvine, Lang, and Montoya 2019). This includes the ability to more readily shift mobilization as political opportunity structures change in ways that are gendered, raced, or classed (see McCammon et al. 2001; Ferree 2009).

Methods and case selection

In order to explore Latina activism and its potential for intersectional praxis, we employed a structured comparative analysis of four social movement organizations with active Latina participation and leadership. A structured focused comparison is a qualitative method that uses a set of general guiding questions or concepts to help standardize data collection and allow for more systematic comparisons and analysis (George and Bennett 2005). It is an effective means of using case studies to generate theory, providing more breadth than a single case study and more depth than a large study.

Given the findings of scholars that have located and chronicled Latina activism across issues and on multiple political fronts (Martínez 2008; Blackwell 2011), we chose social movement organizations that are associated with different social justice issues that vary in regard to their explicit focus on race, gender, and class. The primary issues being addressed include voting/civic engagement, immigration, reproduction, and housing. Voting and immigration have traditionally been organized around and understood in terms of racial justice, reproductive rights as a feminist or gender issue, and housing as an issue of class.

Two of the organizations focus on the Latino/a community specifically: Voto Latino is a national organization focused on educating and empowering youth to be civically engaged agents of change and the Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR) is a Denver-based organization focused on reproductive justice. The other two organizations are cross-racial coalitions: United We Dream is a national organization focused on immigration justice, and Causa Justa::Just Cause (CJJC) is a Brown-Black organization focused on housing justice in the Bay Area. All of the organizations are relatively young. COLOR, founded in 1998, is the oldest and the only one not founded in the new millennium. The geographical variance, with two organized at the national level and two at the local level, allows us to explore how intersectional praxis might be impacted by varied political environments.

For our case studies, we draw on archival documents and digital media sources to provide an overview of the organizations. All four organizations have comprehensive websites that include important movement documents and reports, and they all use social media to promote their events and initiatives. Thus, we were able to utilize these online sources to examine evidence of the four indicators of intersectional praxis discussed above: (1) recognition of the interconnectedness of multiple forms of oppression; (2) descriptive representation within the organization; (3) substantive representation of issues in programming; and (4) the composition of coalition partners.

An additional discursive indicator of intersectional praxis, is the use of “Latinx.” It is a term that emerged from feminist and queer communities to contest the masculine plural

used in Spanish and articulate a more inclusive understanding of Latinidad (see Guidotti-Hernández 2017; Juárez 2018; Vidal-Ortiz and Martínez 2018). While the term has elicited public and scholarly debate, we see it as an intersectional intervention that signals not only gender but racial inclusion, a contemporary manifestation of a mestiza consciousness. Our use of the term is intended to intentionally reflect this understanding as we incorporate it within our analysis.

While the case studies provide a longer historical overview, part of our analysis includes a focus on the shift in political environment caused by the campaign and administration of Donald J. Trump. His presidency represents a reactionary shift in the policy agenda, one seen as repressive by a range of social justice movements focused on class, gender, race, and sexuality, and thus prompting intersectional motivations for protests (Fisher, Jasny, and Dow 2018). This has had a range of implications for these organizations, particularly given Trump's hardline approach to immigration and his negative treatment and characterization of the Latino/a/x community in general. Thus, these case studies provide insight into the ways in which a particular political environment might shape Latina(x) intersectional activism.

Voto Latino

Voto Latino (VL) is a civic media organization that seeks to “engage, educate and empower Latinos to be agents of change.”¹ VL was conceived as a public service announcement campaign, led by actress Rosario Dawson (whose is of Afro-Cuban and Puerto Rican descent) using celebrity voices aimed at encouraging Latino/a youth to register, vote, and get politically engaged (McGrath 2011). With the help of political analyst Maria Teresa Kumar (a Colombian-American), co-founder and current President and CEO, VL became a nonpartisan nonprofit civic engagement organization in 2004. Of the four organizations, VL is the least grassroots, but over the years, it has evolved into an influential social movement organization explicitly aligned with an array of contemporary movements (national and local) addressing issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

VL's primary and most consistent focus has been on youth civic engagement. In addition to their early get-out-the-vote social media campaigns, they also partnered with labor unions and local nonprofits in Colorado, Florida, and Nevada to register and mobilize young voters (Sampaio 2016, 225). Their youth focus is embedded within an emphasis on the larger ethno-racial community. In a 2011 interview, Pamela Morejón, then the managing director of Voto Latino Online stated,

We know that our demographic is underserved and we want to give them a voice. [...] We want to let them know what's happening. Here's what is being compromised. Here's why your community is not being represented, and here's why these people are creating things against your interest. (Quoted in McGrath 2011, 43)

VL's shift towards a broader conceptualization of civic engagement and political mobilization, beyond voting, started in 2012, when they hosted their first “Power Summit” at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. This two-day event included workshops putting 300 Latino/a youth in conversation with noted activists and community leaders, including Dolores Huerta (co-founder of the United Farm Workers). It created important networking opportunities for participants (and the organization) to connect with social

movement actors and organizations. Present at the conference were a number of student activists, including those involved in the DREAMer movement (Chavez 2012). This is notable because it highlights the potential importance of youth civic engagement programming for growing movement leadership, but also for the impact this might have on organizations as they help connect and are connected to activists across generational cohorts. Over the years, VL has hosted a number of summits on college campuses and in a variety of cities (e.g. Austin, Bakersfield, Las Vegas, Miami, New York, Sacramento, San Antonio, and San Jose). Alongside panels teaching various mobilizations strategies (fundraising, digital organizing, etc.), the summits have included panels reflecting VL's growing transversal (or world traveling) approach, covering an array of topics with presenters from organizations organized around gender, race, and sexuality (e.g. Emily's List, RAICES, GLAAD).

While VL began to expand their repertoire of action, media campaigns remained an important strategy of outreach, engaging youth through issue advocacy. The campaigns reflect the growing intersectional praxis of the organization both in terms of the topics addressed and the networks of alliances created. In 2013, they launched the "I'm Ready for Immigration Reform" campaign, demanding comprehensive immigration reform and a pathway to citizenship. They partnered with such organizations as the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the AFL-CIO, APALA, League of Young Voters, Human Rights Campaign, and the NAACP. A year later, VL started addressing issues of Latino/a health, including general public health concerns and resources as well as a particular focus on reproductive health. They launched a set of online panels, infographics, and hangouts to provide education and resources on the Affordable Care Act. The "Yo Soy" campaign focused on combating the stigma and silence around sexual education, birth control, abortion, and young parenting within the Latino/a community. Here they worked with a combination of national and local Latino/a and health organizations (e.g. Advocates for Youth, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights, the Hispanic Federation, and the National Latino Institute for Reproductive Health).

The issues VL addresses, the events they sponsor, and their coalitional partners, illustrate a growing intersectional praxis that predates the 2016 presidential election. It is within this context, however, that VL starts to regularly use the term "intersectionality." In a 2016 Power Summit in Las Vegas, one of their opening panels was titled "Hear Our Voices: Intersectionality and What's at Stake in 2016" and described as follows: "Latinos are not a one-issue community. We care about immigration, access to healthcare, LGBTQ issues and equal wage, etc. Hear about these issues and how they intersect."² It is around this time that the term *Latinx* starts appearing in their various texts. In 2017, as a part of a partnership in a Hispanic Heritage Month campaign, they released the mini documentary, "We Must Rise." The film focused on four "Latinx" young adults from different backgrounds. They spoke on what it meant to be a queer, to be Afro-Latinx, to be undocumented, and to be Mayan or Indigenous. The 2018 "Somos Mas – Together We Are More" digital and grassroots voter mobilization campaign continued with this type of messaging, as well as visually demonstrating the gender, race, and sexual diversity of the community. In 2019, VL added a link under "What We Do," which characterizes the organization as belonging within "An Intersectional Movement," stating "Recognizing that Latinx issues are American issues, and American issues are Latinx issues, VL is

active at the intersection of a number of other social movements, such as LGBTQ liberation, reproductive justice, access to affordable health care, and racial justice.”³

Under the Trump administration, VL has maintained their predominant focus on youth civic engagement, but their events posted on social media include a wider array of issues, action repertoires, and coalition partners. They have continued and increased their emphasis on voting rights and immigration reform to reflect the urgency of the political moment for the Latinx community but for communities of color more broadly. They have taken a more hands-on approach to voter mobilization, engaging in a partnership with Lyft to get Latinx voters to the polls across the nation. They have shown up at hearings and public forums pertaining to immigrant rights and hosted community events aimed at raising awareness or building solidarity. They have joined coalition partners in rallies, marches, and other forms of protest politics on an array of racial justice issues, including more recent mobilization against anti-Black racism and police violence. Their coalitional network shows a wide array of organizations, including those focused on immigration and racial justice, as well as environmental rights, women’s rights, healthcare, voting rights, labor/work rights, and economic justice. The intersectional awareness and praxis of the organization – the *mestiza* consciousness – allows them to see these issues as connected, and to move between them in a way that includes the whole community.

United We Dream

United We Dream (UWD) is a youth organization with strong roots in the 2006 wave of immigrant rights protests. It was founded in 2008, by a dynamic and diverse group of immigrant youth leaders representing seven immigrant youth organizations, with the help of the National Immigration Law Center (NILC). Until recently, UWD was led by Executive Director (and co-founder) Cristina Jiménez, who grew up in Queens, New York as an undocumented immigrant from Ecuador.

It is the largest immigrant youth-led network in the nation with an online reach of over 4 million, over 400,000 members, 5 statewide branches, and 100 local groups in 28 states.⁴

UWD is composed of and represents immigrants across race, national origins, and citizenship status. The Latino/a/x community is well represented, both descriptively and substantively, by the leadership. While restrictive immigration policies impact groups from a variety of countries and ethno-racial groups, undocumented immigration is often racialized as a Latin American issue (see Chavez 2008; Sampaio 2015; Zepeda-Millán 2017). The board and staff of UWD also reflect a variety of identities across gender and sexuality, reflecting the youth movement from which organization emerged. Intersectional praxis, is an important means of addressing the particular concerns of a diverse constituency (ethno-racial as well as gender and sexuality), while still maintaining a broader universalized discourse about immigrant rights.

Under the Obama administration, UWD focused on the passage of the DREAM Act. They organized the “Right to Dream Campaign,” holding dozens of actions around the country, mobilizing thousands of immigrant youth, and (like VL) conducting leadership training. When legislative paths seemed blocked, they shifted their focus to the Obama Administration, asking for the government to stop detaining and deporting immigrant youth. These efforts helped contribute to the 2012 executive action providing temporary relief for eligible undocumented youth through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

(DACA). With this partial victory, UWD shifted their emphasis to winning citizenship for the entire community with the “11 Million Dreams Campaign.” Like VL, their focus on youth constituencies is embedded in an emphasis on the entire community. The campaign helped to expose the harsh impact that excessive enforcement and detention has on immigrant communities and to mobilize Latino/a/x and immigrant voters.

A unique facet of UWD that has been attributed to the DREAMer movement more broadly, is the visible leadership of LGBTQ undocumented activists (Terriquez 2015; Cisneros 2018). Queer youth activists were at the forefront of many of the major protests and actions for the DREAM Act and played an important part in shaping the consciousness and actions of the movement (Morrissey 2013; Terriquez 2015; Enriquez and Saguy 2016). Here, experiences at the intersection of two stigmatized identities, helped to inform action. For example, the strategy of “coming out” as undocumented was inspired by its use in the LGBTQ rights movement. Activists saw the parallels between having to hide their sexuality and doing the same with their undocumented status. Cisneros (2018, 1429), a board member of UWD, discusses activists coming out as queer *and* undocumented simultaneously, creating “a hybrid culture and queer politics of immigration,” one rooted in the ideas and ethics of *mestizaje* and intersectionality and reflecting the fluidity of living *sin fronteras* or world traveling.

The Queer Undocumented Immigrant Project (QUIP) was one of the UWD’s most overtly intersectional endeavors, and a good example of how those located at the intersection of two communities and movements, have the positional and motivation assets to forge coalitions. The stated purpose of QUIP was to organize and empower undocumented LGBTQ immigrants and allies to address social and systematic barriers that affect themselves and the broader LGBTQ & immigrant community. QUIP worked to emphasize the recognition of queer undocumented youth, a much need intervention in both rights movements where they might otherwise be invisible. The identification with queerness was used to critique some narratives about DREAMers that overemphasized narrowly defined “good immigrants,” instead working to foster a more inclusive narrative of immigration rights (Cisneros 2018). QUIP also worked to bring the issue of immigrant rights to LGBTQ spaces and celebrations, including Pride events.

Among the four organizations, UWD was most profoundly impacted by the shift in the political environment brought on by the Trump administration. The swift and repressive action taken by the administration created a hostile and constrained environment for activists who now face greater risks in their mobilization. There were reports of DREAMers being arrested as a part of larger sweeps but also in a retaliatory fashion, with ICE detaining known immigrant rights organizers. This did not stop UWD from mobilizing; rather they shifted mobilization strategies to respond to the constraints as well as the immediacy of the current political environment. The tactic of “coming out” as undocumented has been less common and the organization has been more deliberate in the information it shares online, often protecting the identify of members/participants. Much of their time and attention has been focused on the defense of DACA as well as raising awareness and mobilizing against the administration’s inhumane detention practices. Since 2016, UWD has posted a number of events on social media focused on these issues, including rallies, marches, and protests (including those outside of public official’s homes and offices); attendance and testimony at public hearings and forums; press conferences and other media events; community workshops (i.e. “know your rights”); and circle of

protections around immigrants. They are a part of large multi-racial coalitions such as the “Home is Here Coalition” and “#DefundHate” – a campaign calling for the reallocation of funds from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to education, housing, and health care programs. These are both broad coalitions that include organizations representing other intersecting modes of oppression.

Through this all, UWD’s approach continues to extend beyond single-axis advocacy. While winning protections for immigrants is central, it is embedded with a focus on community empowerment and sustainability. Intersectionality is articulated as a guiding principle of the organization. In their “2020 Vision” document, they state a commitment to ensuring that the “people most affected are at the forefront”:

United We Dream is committed to ensuring that people who are, have been, or will be directly impacted by the immigrant experience are at the forefront of decision-making and throughout UWD. We may be farthest from the conventional levels of power but we are closest to the problems, and we are most able to create truly transformative solutions based in an intersectional analysis and the beauty and power of our whole selves. Youth, womxn, and LGBTQ people from different ethnicities are at the core of our work.⁵

Like VL, UWD’s intersectional praxis predates the explicit use of “intersectionality” in organizational documents. It is most evident in their framing of certain events and in their vast network of coalition partners. They have regularly participated in events focused on women’s rights and LGBTQ rights. They marched in solidarity with Jewish groups in Pittsburgh after the shooting at a synagogue and they have highlighted Black undocumented immigrants continuously, including in the 2020 mass mobilization against anti-Black racism and state violence

Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR)

COLOR was founded in 1998 by a group of Latinas “searching for strategies to overcome high rates of unintended pregnancy, increased rates of HIV/AIDS, and other issues impacting the Latino community in education, healthcare, civil rights, economic justice, and immigration.”⁶ Originally organized as a grassroots collective, they have evolved into an influential representative and advocate for the Latino/a/x communities of Colorado – in the statehouse as well as in the community. COLOR is Latina-led. Executive Director Dusti Gurule is a 7th generation Coloradoan – like others in the region, her family lineage predates Colorado statehood – and her parents were leaders in the Denver Chicano Movement. The staff, like the broader base membership, represents a range of backgrounds (e.g. national origin, language, sexuality, and age) within the community.

COLOR uses a *reproductive justice* (RJ) framework, an intersectional approach that informs their organizing. RJ is born out of a long legacy of resistance by Black, Indigenous, and other women or trans individuals of color facing systemic reproductive oppression by the state (Ross and Solinger 2017).⁷ It is defined as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”⁸ RJ understands reproductive rights as inseparable from racism, misogyny, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, and all other systemic oppressions. This is distinct from the gender-only approach of the mainstream

reproductive rights movement and an important example of how women of color have organized separately as well as in coalition with each other, in seeking to address intersecting forms of oppression. Although COLOR often focuses on the local Latino/a/x communities, they locate themselves within this larger network of women of color working for reproductive justice at the local, national, and even global level.

COLOR's use of a reproductive justice approach has shaped its intersectional praxis from its founding. Like VL and UWD, however, it has increasingly used the terminology of intersectionality to define its community-centered work: "COLOR's approach includes intersectionality (i.e. our work challenges all barriers keeping communities from leading successful, self-determined lives and furthers environmental justice, economic justice, racial justice, immigrant rights, LGBTQ liberation)." Also like VL and UWD, this shift has been accompanied by the increased use of the term Latinx.

COLOR's work blends advocacy, organizing, and leadership development. COLOR works on policy in Colorado and advocates for bills and policies that impact the Latinx community. Their work here reflects the intersectional commitments and praxis of reproductive justice. Over the years, they have organized around policies that address paid leave, homelessness, immigration, wage equality, mental health, sex education, multicultural education, maternal mortality, LGBT rights and protections, environmental protections, gendered violence, healthcare, and others. The broad range of policies that they support reflect their understanding that all of these things impact the reproductive lives of community members. To do this work effectively, they have built a broad range of coalition partners that allow them to engage in transversal politics that shift along the different dimension of more single-axis politics, but without losing sight of how all of the issues connect.

While VL and UWD's leadership development is youth centered, COLOR's leadership development efforts include youth leadership as only one component of their broader community focus. Latinas Increasing Political Strength (LIPS), founded in 2009, has been COLOR's primary youth leadership initiative. Through LIPS, COLOR mentors Latina/x youth (ages 16–21). Here, their intersectional praxis is best seen in their use of a reproductive justice based curriculum that teaches participants to center community learning and to understand community issues as intersectional. Participants in the program are assigned a mentor and trained in public speaking, fundraising, advocacy, lobbying, social media strategies, community organizing, networking, resume building, mentorship, anti-oppression, and resiliency. The program includes a trip to Washington DC where the groups meet with representatives and lobbies for their communities.

Similar to their work in LIPS, COLOR pairs their broader community leadership development with their policy advocacy. A prime example of this, that also highlights one facet of their coalition building, is their work in Colorado Reproductive Freedom Lobby Day. The annual event is a collaborative effort between COLOR and organizations such as Soul2Soul Sisters (a Black womxn-led reproductive justice organization), Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains, NARAL Pro-Choice Colorado, Boulder Valley Women's Health Center, New Era Colorado, the Interfaith Alliance, the Colorado Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and the American Association of University Women. COLOR spends the day educating their community on the policies related to reproductive politics that are being addressed in the legislative session. Participants then get to lobby their representatives on these issues.

COLOR has also taken a leadership role in the founding and planning of Latino Advocacy Day (LAD). Here, they partner with Latino/a/x organizations in Colorado, demonstrating a transversal shift from gender to race-based organizing. Their coalitional partners here include groups such as ProtégeTe, CLLARO (the Colorado Latino Leadership, Advocacy and Research Organization), Mi Familia Vota, the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition, and Servicios de la Raza. Like their collaborative work in Colorado Reproductive Freedom Lobby Day, COLOR works with their partners to educate participants on policies and to facilitate community conversations on why they are important to their community. In this way, COLOR puts important community issues on the legislative agenda, while facilitating community participation in that process. This allows issues to be understood in a broader, more intersectional way because they are rooted in stories and personal experiences.

Since 2016, COLOR has held and participated in events on a wide range of topics including racial justice, women's rights, labor/workers' rights, voting, environmental, healthcare, economic justice through community workshops, rallies, marches and protests, and lobby days. While the restrictiveness of the shifting national political environment has been somewhat moderated in Colorado, a purple state trending blue in the last couple of years, there is still much work to do to address racial inequality. At the same time, the state also has a long history of Chicano/a/x and Latino/a/x activism. In 2018 the Colorado General Assembly had the largest Latinx caucus in the state's history. This, alongside COLOR's commitment to intersectional praxis, has allowed them to address a broad variety of issues and do so rather successfully. Local opposition to the Trump administration has increased the number of potential coalitional partners, and COLOR has played a growing role in helping to organize that resistance. They have been growing their geographical focus, and during the pandemic have been working to connect Latinx communities across the state to resources and legislative representatives.

Causa Justa::Just Cause

Causa Justa::Just Cause (CJJC) is “a multi-racial, grassroots organization building community leadership to achieve justice for low-income San Francisco and Oakland residents.”⁹ They are a relatively young organization, formed in 2010, but one with longer roots in neighborhood groups aimed at protecting housing rights in the rapidly growing and gentrifying Bay Area. CJJC merged the St. Peter's Housing Committee, a Latino/a organization founded in 1985 in the Mission District of San Francisco, and Just Cause Oakland, an African American organization founded in 1999 in Oakland. CJJC explicitly represent themselves as a Brown-Black coalition building “bridges of solidarity between working class communities.”

Helping to lead the merger was Maria Poblet, self-identified as a “queer Chicana and Argentine” organizer, who served as CJJC's founding executive director. In 2015, CJJC expanded their issue focus and geographic reach by merging with another community-based organization, People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER), a group founded in 1997 to improve the living and working conditions of welfare workers, domestic workers, low-income tenants, and other working-class people of color. In 2016, Vanessa Moses, described as a “powerful Black leader in the Bay Area” in her website

biography, took over the Executive Director position, moving from her position as CJJC's Co-Director of Programming. Like the directors, the staff embodies intersectional leadership, with many who are women of color and/or queer identified. In fact, CJJC describes themselves as “a strong regional organization manifesting Black-Brown unity, queer leadership of color, and the intersection of common struggles across issues and geographies.”¹⁰

CJJC's primary and central focus is on *housing justice*, which understands housing as not only as an issue of socioeconomics – as is often the case – but as one that requires addressing multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. This approach is reflected in their vision statement: “Causa Justa::Just Cause envisions equal rights for people of color, immigrants, women, and all oppressed and exploited people. We envision an end to racism, and want to build a society based on self-determination, social justice, and solidarity.” Like the other organizations, the term intersectional increasingly appears in organizational documents in recent years (as does the term *Latinx*) and intersectionality, whether explicitly or implicitly, is consistently articulated in the messaging from the leadership, such as this quote by Moses in a 2017 report: “racial justice is only achievable in tandem with economic justice and gender justice.” Although CJJC has always mobilized on a range of issues, merging with POWER served to increase their organization capacity to do so. POWER, which was similarly committed to economic, racial, and gender justice, came to CJJC having waged more than twenty campaigns towards tangible living and working conditions (i.e. raising of minimum wage, free public transportation, workplace health and safety protections).

Like COLOR, CJJC works at the local level and with the community but locates themselves within larger national and global movements. At the local level they partner with a range of organizations that focus on housing justice in various ways: racial justice groups, labor rights organizations, and groups focused on women, families, and/or youth. They also participate in national and even global alliances and coalitions that reflect transversal politics, often using local direct action in concert and connection to larger movements. Nationally, they participate in the Right to the City Alliance and the Home for All (HFA) campaign. As a part of their Black Priorities Project, they have participated in the BlackLivesMatter# movement, and as a member of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and the San Francisco Immigration Rights Defense Committee, they participate in the immigrant rights movement. At the global level, they have worked on the Coordinating Committee of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ) and in 2015 sent a member to participate in their majority women of color delegation to the World Social Forum in Tunisia. They have also participated in the International World March of Women.

Like COLOR, CJJC is deeply invested in developing community leadership within their Black and Latino/a/x multigenerational base. They work with resident leaders (many of whom are women), training and supporting them in the development of the analytical and “hard” skills necessary to lead in their communities and in the broader movement for social, economic, and racial justice (Poblet and Phillips 2012, 8). CJJC's youth specific programming is newer and an important contribution of their merger with POWER. “Youth in Power” is a program that reaches out to youth in high schools and community centers. It helps participants to connect the conditions they see in their communities to a deeper analysis of gentrification and the broader economic structure of

which it is a part. The program emphasizes the role of organizing to create change and the need to build a movement for justice *on all fronts*.¹¹ Their programming includes a four week “Education 4 Liberation Summer,” where participants learn public speaking, outreach, how to make prints and posters, cultural production for social justice and more. This programming helps to facilitate a local youth network, but one that is embedded within CJJC’s larger network spanning geographical and identity borders.

Located in the relatively progressive California, a state often at odds with the Trump administration, CJJC is working in a comparatively more hospitable political climate than social justice organizations in other states or regions. Their work in battling gentrification and the oppressive policing that often accompanies it, however, has often puts them at odds with local political and corporate elites. While they have responded to the increased sense of urgency of the political climate, their work on multiple fronts is a continuation of what they have always done. They hold community workshops, canvas, participate in public hearings, do media outreach, and organize direct action. This includes their work on housing, but also on immigration, police violence, and worker rights. While much of their work more explicitly focuses on the intersection between race and class, their intersectional or mestiza consciousness manifests in a number of ways: in their leadership and leadership development, in the way they balance messaging on issues so as to emphasize both the broad and particular impact (especially on women and LGBTQ members of the Latinx and Black communities). They maintain a vast and diverse network of coalition partners and regularly show up for events focused on criminal justice reform, working women and women’s rights events, get out the vote organizing, and environmental justice action and awareness.

Discussion

The last four years of the Trump administration have highlighted and exacerbated persisting forms of gender, race, and class oppression; however, the call for intersectional organizing predates this administration. While signs of solidarity have emerged within the most recent waves of mobilization and resistance, the success and outcomes of these movements remains uncertain. The durability of this collective mobilization is imperiled by the tendency to fall back into single-axis modes of organizing that prioritize one form of oppression and ignore others, obscuring the experiences and efforts of those at the intersections of multiple marginalities. At the same time, it is becoming more apparent that these groups are leading the charge, Latina/x activists included. Exhibiting a mestiza or intersectional consciousness, they model a new and better path forward.

In this article, we explored the trajectory of four contemporary social movement organizations with active Latina (and Latinx) leadership and participation. Each organization represents a different entry point to social justice, but all of whom have adopted intersectional community-centered approaches that engage politically on multiple issue fronts at the local, national, and even global level. In regard to our intersectional indicators, all four organizations have articulated intersectionality as an important component of their mission, both implicitly and explicitly. All have a staff and membership that descriptively represents those at the intersection of multiple marginalities. All regularly address substantive issues in a manner that reflects the multiple and intersecting forms of oppression

at work. All engage in dynamic transversal politics that are reflected in their different coalitional partners.

Some of the more important distinctions come in examining the varied trajectories of intersectional praxis within the different organizations and the impact of the shifting political environment. For Voto Latino, the intersectional praxis has evolved over time and as they deepened their engagement with youth communities, becoming the strongest and most explicit in the current political moment. Intersectional praxis has been an effective means for them to achieve their goal, engaging with and increasing the civic engagements of Latinx youth. United We Dream started from a more intersectional social movement space. With a disproportionate number of women and queer leaders, UWD has maintained a consistent commitment to centering those at the intersectional of multiple marginalities. They have responded to the highly repressive nature of the Trump regime by narrowing their focus to address the uncertainty and urgency of immigration policy. Yet, they have been able to maintain a broad coalition as other groups have shifted their focus to offer solidarity. The two local organizations, COLOR and Causa::Justa, have exercised intersectional praxis most consistently, reflecting deeper ideological origins (of reproductive and housing justice respectively) that are inherently intersectional. While geospatially they operate in more hospitable political climates, they have remained active in responding to both local and national threats to the community and ramped up coalitional efforts to address the increased urgency of the current political moment.

This study represents a preliminary examination of the practices and possibilities of Latina/x contemporary intersectional activism. There is much to be done in uncovering and better understanding intersectional consciousness and praxis. Future studies should build on multiple methods and approaches. From larger studies, one might look for larger patterns and variation across Latina/x organizing. Thicker ethnographic studies can go deeper into understanding the positional assets of Latina/x activism and the development (or lack) of mestiza and intersectional consciousness and practices.

In Gloria Anzaldúa's (1981) writing, she wrote of "straddling the walls between abysses" and being pulled between the various movements to which she had held affinities. She, and other queer women of color feminists, wrote and enacted an alternative way of organizing through their work: one that resisted the single-axis impulses of social movements, creating new spaces and possibilities. The activists within these contemporary organizations reside at the intersectional of multiple identities, and they have adopted intersectional praxis that allows them to live *sin fronteras*. This praxis has preceded the current political moment, but in it these activists are finding solidarity with a wider array of organizations, some of which have traditionally been located within single-axis movements. While popular criticisms misunderstand intersectionality as fragmenting movements into infinitely smaller parts, we contend that intersectional praxis (like Lugones' world traveling) allows for dynamic avenues of cooperation and coalition and a more fluid and pluralistic unity (Collins 1993; Bickford 1997; Cole 2008; Roberts and Jesudason 2013; Tormos 2017; Irvine, Lang, and Montoya 2019). The success and endurance of social justice movements requires the broader adoption of intersectional approaches, such that there are less spaces between movement and tighter knitted solidarities that hold together those seeking to combat oppression in all its forms. Those at the intersection of multiple marginalities have long been leading the way, but it remains to be seen if everyone else is ready to follow.

Notes

1. <https://votolatino.org/about-us/#mission-history> [Accessed September 27, 2019].
2. <https://votolatino.org/event/vl-power-summit-2016/> [Accessed November 15, 2019].
3. <https://votolatino.org/what-we-do> [Accessed November 15, 2019].
4. <https://unitedwedream.org/about/> [Accessed October 2, 2019].
5. <https://unitedwedream.org/about/> [accessed June 1, 2019].
6. <http://www.colorlatina.org/content/herstory> [Accessed November 7, 2019].
7. The term was coined by a group of Black women gathered in Chicago before attending the international conference on Population and Development in Cairo.
8. <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice> [Accessed November 5, 2019].
9. <https://cjjc.org/about-us/> [Accessed October 31, 2019].
10. <https://cjjc.org/mediapress/transitions-causa-justa-building-leader-full-organization/> [Accessed November 15, 2019].
11. CJJC 2015 Annual Report <https://cjjc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/cjjc-2015-AR-web.pdf> [Accessed October 31, 2019].

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