



# First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience

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Volume 5  
Issue 1 *New Vistas*

Article 15

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February 2016

## Twisted Little Braids: Rage and Resistance

Alexia F. Pineda  
*Loyola Marymount University*

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### Recommended Citation

Pineda, Alexia F. (2016) "Twisted Little Braids: Rage and Resistance," *First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First-Generation College Experience*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/fgv/vol5/iss1/15>

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“With twisted little braids in their hair...they throw pebbles and stones...”

—James Vincent McMorrow

November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Dear Alexia,

I write this letter to you for reasons that I will attempt to explain. These reasons, to many, are invisible, are angry. Not many feel them, but many oppress them. You see, gradually, these reasons have embedded themselves into a larger “discussion [that has] gone way off course and/or rather wayward” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 100). It is your curiosity and responsibility to help redirect that conversation. It is your curiosity—and the curiosity of others—your responsibility—and the responsibility of others, to liberate those who have been silenced, oppressed, and made invisible. Tell truths that are your own for you hold a “beast, an angel, and a madman” inside you (Dylan Thomas).

Alexia, there is something you must do before you continue reading. I ask you to “pay attention. Be astonished [, and then go] tell about it” (Mary Oliver)—it is the only way to acknowledge the centuries of “invisibility [women of color have been subjected to] in...the larger” sphere we are attempting to question: higher education (Griffin, 2010, p. 139). For it has been centuries that women of color have “furiously contested injustice in education” with little to no progress (Ibid). For it has been centuries that women of color, specifically first-generation, Chicana women, have been silenced, oppressed and made invisible, have been “socialized to believe [that we are nothing but]: [angels, putas,] hot mama[s]...money-hungry whore[s]...and public charge[s]” (Griffin, 2010, p. 145). Here is where I tell you that my argument attempts to combat that silence, oppression, and invisibility, for it is through strategies of resistance—anger/rage, resilience, and the development of a Chicana feminist identity—that we will reach the empowerment we need to break those barriers.

Let me trace my anger for you.

### **Part I: Tracing Our Anger: The Relevance and Presence of Silence, Oppression, and Invisibility in Higher Education**

There are *muchas razones* why women like us are “so damn angry” (Griffin, 2010, p. 146). It is the kind of anger that is “implanted [in] the roots of systemic [injustice]” that is caused by the many instances of first-generation, Chicana women being forgotten and blurred (Ibid). This “damn anger” is relevant and present each time we peer into the “absurdity of our absence...[at the absurdity of] my silence and yours; at [our] complicity and yours; at [our] world

and ours” (Griffin, 2010, p. 147). And when we peer, Alexia, when we peer into this absurdity we come to find that this oppression, invisibility, and silence are the devastating results of an *honest* truth that history has come to reveal: that we are victims of “erasure and loss” (Griffin, 2010, p. 146); we are victims of a false education—an education that never considered “the works of women who [look] like [us]” (Ibid). We are victims of a kind of oppression and invisibility that is propelled by institutions who “are not designed to include [women] from different racial, class, gender, and cultural backgrounds” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 105). And when our history, our identity, and our dignity is unrepresented and neglected we come to “sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted” (Lorde, 1984, p. 42). The relevance and presence of these crippling barriers, however, can be matched by strategies of resistance, for “speaking about [and resisting] these issues can serve as a means to empower ourselves” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 105). “Ignoring [the] struggles in the larger academic culture only works to exonerate educational institutions from the responsibility of addressing issues of inequality, further marginalizing people” that look like you (Ibid). It is by presenting your anger and rage, your resilience, your Chicana identity, that you and other *patojas* (women) will be enabled to name your experiences. After all, it is “in naming these experiences [that] we hold institutions accountable [for formulating] solutions” to our silence, oppression, and invisibility (Ibid). It is “in naming our experiences, [that we will gain the empowerment needed to open up] dialogues that focus on such struggles and actions and make social transformation within the larger political, educational, and social structures of power in the academy and beyond” (Ibid).

## **Part II: Strategies of Resistance**

“Resistance consists of loving the unlovable and affirming their humanity”  
—Collins, 2004, p. 250

### ***Anger and Rage:***

Chicana women, from the moment of their conception, come “into a society which breeds contempt for what is Black, Brown and female, we bear the scars, the anger, and the pain of living in a fragmented state” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 450). From this fragmented condition, women who look like you, are you, and are becoming another representation of you have come to accept rage as a normality, because “women of color have learned to use our anger...as a means to survive everyday racism in the White academy” (Ibid). Our anger, our rage has transformed into a strategy of resistance because “we are ‘outsiders-within’—pry to the most intimate details of White lives but largely invisible in their world,” in their books, and in their conversations (Ibid). This invisibility, however, does not get funneled as a “negative emotion (Lorde, 1984)” (Boahene

& Rodriguez, 2012, p. 451). This form of resistance, this rage, is “considered as potentially healthy, serving as a way to heal from oppression and exploitation (hooks, 1995), as a means to decolonize our minds, serving as a catalyst, and inspiring courageous behavior” (Ibid). It is this “courageous behavior” that can lead you, Alexia, into recognizing yourself as a woman, as a human being, instead of feeling the pain that we “have been cursed and blessed to both witness and experience in our own” lives (Ibid). Anger is the beginning.

Anger is the root of our efforts. A force whose very foundation can be deemed as political. A force that occupies “multiple margins, shifting often times, colliding between worlds and realities” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 450). This collision, as hegemonic norms keep assuring, is what “claims [that] we are doubly invisible—that is marginalized as women and as people of color; an unfortunate [collision] which [began] with childhood, and continues on through adolescence, and adulthood” (Ibid). Our adulthood, our innocence, our creativity, our professionalism is funneled through a series of collisions. Our survival? Defining our resistance as rage. Our survival? Defining our outspoken anger, our written anger, our “silent rage as a space...that inside space in which women of color define the self...a place in which we make ourselves subject, determining who we are spiritually, emotionally, a space in which rage can work to decolonize ourselves...a space in which we refuse to concede with White dominance” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 451). A space in which first-generation, Chicanas can uncover the veil that has been silencing our success. Rage is a “reminder as to why [we] remain in the academy”—we, Alexia, cannot be silenced (Ibid).

### ***Resilience:***

For first-generation, Chicana women in academia, “writing about our collective histories and experiences, or writing about ‘theory in the flesh,’ is a means of survival (Moraga and Anzaldua)” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 451). *Hearing* the latter was **more**—it became **more**. Do you remember, Alexia? Do you remember the *consejos* (advice), the histories, the not-so-myths that made you conscious, aware? Did you ever realize what resulted? I hope you did—you call it resilience.

Because you belong to a “subpopulation of [individuals that] experience the lowest levels of educational attainment of any population group and score lower on several indicators related to attainment, including achievement tests, completion of high school, and participation in and graduation from college (Ginorio and Huston, 2001)” you are accustomed to hurdling over barriers (Ceja, 2004, p. 339). Because not “much has been written about the educational experience of Chicano and Chicana students in the United States” in higher education, you are accustomed to building your own kind of educational

resiliency—a form of resistance (Ibid). Considering “the educational conditions and challenges experienced by many Chicana students throughout [our] schooling process...this [form of resistance] can help us understand how [we] manage to [surpass silence, oppression, and invisibility]” in our spheres (Ceja, 2004, p. 341). This resistant lens not only becomes “a certain kind of consciousness that goes beyond buffering [us] from ecological forces which carry the potential to arrest [our ability] (Stanton-Salazar and Spina, 229),” but it also enables us to “manipulate and shape [our] environment to deal with...pressures [and demands] successfully (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, and Pardo, 103)” (Ceja, 2004, p. 341). Because we combine the latter together, our definition of resiliency “[suggests] that [we] develop a certain consciousness or mental outlook that [has allowed us] to form a critical perspective of [our] surroundings and lived experiences that, in turn, allows [us] to cope, survive, and in many cases thrive within” our current realities (Ceja, 2004, p. 342). Our lived stories, our countless retold histories, and relentless, never-ending *consejos* aimed us, directed us to **more**. We attained our *magis*—our more—by not falling back. By resisting what marginality said we couldn’t surpass—resiliency sheds a light.

#### ***Development of Chicana, Feminist Identity:***

The moment we begin to form an identity, we begin to push boundaries. With each push of our true selves, Alexia, we become resistant. Unrelenting.

Given “the need for information and research to improve educational...[and] career opportunities” for Latina/Hispanic women transitioning to Chicanas, there is a void that can no longer endure unrecognized: the development of our Chicana, feminist identity (Vera & De Los Santos, 2005, p. 103). This development of identity is one that considers many elements—it is a “body of conceptual work” that involves a *whole* conversation (Vera & De Los Santos, 2005, p. 103). It is a conversation that “primarily [uses] Chicana as an indicator of how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation affects [our] identity [and resistance] formation process” (Ibid). Most importantly, however, embedded in this *whole* conversation lays the true essence of our resistance: a constant push and pull of formation, a constant “overlap between who [we] think [we are] and what others perceive [us] to be” (Ibid). It is in this constant submersion and immersion of our being that we begin to play tug-of-war with silence, oppression, and invisibility. With each question, with each lived experience, we begin to push the barriers that once told us that is was inessential “to acknowledge and explore the unique issues that affect and shape the lives of Chicanas” (Vera & De Los Santos, 2005, p. 105). Instead, we begin to use our developing resistance to adopt the “Chicana ‘triple lens of oppression’ [that] places [our] race and ethnicity, [our] class, and gender, as well as the unique experiences that arise out of...specific social [locations], as central factors” (Ibid). However, amidst finding

your voice, Alexia, there is something you must remember: for as long as you fight, you will constantly be battling the suspension “between traditional values and feminist ideas, [there will be times when] you [won’t] know whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate”—use your resistance here (Vera & De Los Santos, 2005, p. 106). Use it with all force, because you cannot be silenced, oppressed, and/or be made invisible before, during, and/or after your development. You cannot, for other Chicanas need you to express “notions of female empowerment, [female development, female resistance,] rather than [a] passive acceptance of an inferior status” in higher education (Manago, Brown, and Leaper, 2009, p. 771). Our resistance in development lies in redefining our past, present, and future as a kind of spirituality that places our Chicana identity “as protest, resistance, and r/evolution” (Comas-Diaz, 2008, p. 13). It is in that way of knowing, being, and accepting that we will attain the collective survival and liberation we need to affirm our “cultural strengths...[and extreme need for] social justice” (Comas-Diaz, 2008, p. 14). It is in that way of identity, resistance, and development that we will come to attain the collective commitment we in order to heal and fight against the educational institution that has silenced us, oppressed us, and blurred us.

### **Part III: Empowerment—The Result of Our Resistance**

“Don’t let mouths full of doubt and coiled tongues threaten [you].”  
—D. Antoinette Foy

For so long, we have kept our words and courage tucked inside. Alexia, for so long, we have been denied the raw potential to demonstrate our raw potential. But let me try to show you what your resistance has created, for you have the right to wander and know. For you have the right to become the light you have already found.

Anger/rage, resistance, and Chicana identity formation has, without relent, become our catalyst to and for more. These forms of resistance contain the ability to remind you of a simple truth: your worth exists. Your worth is what keeps and will continue keeping you as “whole” in the sector of higher education; it is what will help you walk away the moment someone asks you to prove yourself. Empowerment, you see, is what lets us walk away, is what keeps us from denying “our own rage, for doing so will only keep us from recognizing how we have been and continue to be marginalized in the academy” (Boahene & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 456). The empowerment you have gained through your forms of resistance is what has fueled and will continue fueling “our motivation to refuse any feelings of powerlessness we may have when dealing with” silence, oppression, and invisibility (Ibid). For as women of color, as Chicana *mujeres*, we have the social

capital needed to create the kind of empowerment, the kind of influence that can challenge the unnatural nature of our current position in higher education. Therefore, no matter how “exhausted [you may be] near the end of [your fight Alexia, you must remember that your empowerment] is accompanied by the realization that what [we] want is for people to acknowledge with a sense of urgency that [Chicana women—all women—] matter” (Griffin, 2010, p. 150). Use your anger/rage, your resistance, and your Chicana identity “to acknowledge the struggle that systems of oppression necessitate for women of color to endure, succeed, and even just breathe” (Ibid). When you acknowledge that, when you acknowledge your empowerment, and when you acknowledge the trifecta of knowledge, language, and power you hold at the tip of your lips, you will be able to mark “our determined presence and rich contributions within and beyond the academy; document our strength amid the grind of imposed struggles...; and perhaps most [importantly,] preserve the collective wisdom of our lived experiences” (Ibid). For our fight for freedom is never over. For our fight is geared with weapons of resistance that will, one day, “be used to build humanizing alliances at the intersections of marginalization and privilege” (Griffin, 2010, p. 151). For when you empower yourself, Alexia, you empower those around you. And when the latter is fulfilled, you will come to notice that an army starts with you, but it ends with many. You will come to notice that an army starts with accepting your anger, fueling your rage; it begins with your resistance; with your ability to transition into a Chicana that is able to “pay attention [and] be astonished” (Mary Oliver). It begins with knowing that you are, in every form, a “beast, an angel, and a madman” (Dylan Thomas). It begins with knowing that silence will never shut you, oppression will never bind you, and that invisibility will never blur you. You are empowered beyond that.

## Conclusion

Alexia, there are many words that I failed to say. Many words that I failed to articulate, many words that were left in darkness. But as you continue, remember that your voice is external wind that remembers. As you continue, remember that your stance is firm, that your feet are planted, and that you—with all tools and weapons—can serve a platter of wisdom to every nay-sayer. As you make your way, you need to hold yourself still while moving forward, because with every strip of skin you lose, there will be a need to replace it. Replace it with what you know. Seal it with what you need to find.

Dear Alexia, I wrote this open letter to you in order to perform a selfish action. You needed you. I needed this. For the presence of our kind, *me*, has always been objectified and muted. For the presence of my rage/anger, my resistance, and my Chicana identity is too tired and too exposed to the silence,

oppression, and invisibility that festers in this field. For it is our chaos, our force, and our hearts that can only tell the stories of our experiences. For it is our breath, our hurricanes, and our madness that can tell the stories that lay in my mind's mind. I wrote this to argue that specific forms of resistance—anger/rage, persistence, and Chicana identity formation—can lead to the kind of empowerment that tears apart barriers, and it is my hope that I have, you have, and we have seen why. For the importance of this matter can no longer be pushed aside. For the importance of this matter can no longer be dispirited. For if we do not consider the need of our voices in this academic future the future intends to build, all we will ever know is a single a story. A single version. A single letter. I have written mine. Tell others to write theirs.

“Finish. We are like roses that have never [been let to bloom] when we should have blossomed, and it is as if the sun as become disgusted with waiting.”  
—Charles Bukowski

Let's not wait, *patojas*.

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