

# Advocating *Comadrisimo*: A Feminist Mentoring Approach for Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition

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**Abstract:** *This article outlines comadrisimo as a culturally specific mentoring approach for Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition. The authors discuss the value of mentoring practices based on a kinship relationship and explore seven themes—kinship, fuerza, networks of care, empathy, collaboration, paying it forward, and tangible support—that constitute comadrisimo mentoring. Grounded in the literature on mentoring in Rhetoric and Composition, this article draws on the experiential knowledges of Latina academics to argue that scholars must attend to the specific needs of Women of Color in order to recruit and retain diverse voices in the discipline.*

**Keywords:** *Latinas, mentoring, retention*

In *Presumed Incompetent*, the groundbreaking collection about Women of Color academics, Angela P. Harris and Carmen G. González argue that despite the increasing diversity of the US university student population, white men and women continue to occupy the overwhelming majority of full-time faculty positions at colleges and universities (1). Furthermore, they state, the numbers of Women of Color decrease with rising academic rank, with only 3.4% of full professors in 2007 being Women of Color (2).

Unsurprisingly, we can see these national trends reflected in the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition. While our discipline is exceptionally inclusive of white women, Women of Color continue to be only minimally represented, as a cursory look at our major journals and conference programs can attest. Indeed, taking membership in the Conference on College Composition and Communication as a measure (a data set that is not without its limits), it appears that in the last 20 years Rhetoric and Composition has become less—not more—diverse. In his 1999 article in *College Composition and Communication*, Victor Villanueva admonishes the discipline's dire representation of People of Color. He writes, "We can do better than 7% among our teachers and scholars of color, better than a representation that is statistically insignificant in our journals" (552). By 2017, the number of CCCC members identifying as

other than “white—non-latino/hispanic/Spanish” had decreased to a staggering 5.23%. The breakdown among different demographic categories was as follows: .32% identified as “American Indian or Alaska Native”; 1.09% identified as “Asian, including Asian Indian or Pacific Islander”; 1.72% identified as “Black/African American”; 1.47% identified as “Latino/Hispanic/Spanish”; and .63% identified as “two or more races.”<sup>1</sup> While these demographic data are not intersectional (for example, they do not show what portion of those 5.23% identify as female, queer, etc.), we can infer that the number of Women of Color in the discipline is quite low.

As Latinas in academia, we live these numbers every day. At our universities, we are often the only Latina in the room and one out of just a handful of Women of Color in the department. We are very aware that we may be the only Women of Color professors that our undergraduate and graduate students will ever meet. This lack of diversity reproduces itself, with fewer students of color choosing the discipline, fewer scholars of color entering the profession, and fewer faculty of color publishing articles and monographs that address issues of race and racism. Consequently, Latinas in academia may feel alone, with little to no culturally relevant guidance on how to succeed in graduate school and on the tenure-track. Without many allies in tenured and administrative positions, Women of Color in academia may also “find themselves ‘presumed incompetent’ as scholars, teachers, and participants in academic governance” (Harris and González 1).

This article, a collaboration between two Latina feminists in Rhetoric and Composition, contributes to the conversation about how to increase representation of Women of Color in the discipline. While we agree with Villanueva that we need more representation of writers of color in our journals, as well as a continued critical engagement with race and racism in our conferences and publications (652), we add that more purposeful feminist mentorship of students and junior scholars of color is also a necessity.

Fatima Chrifi Alaoui and Bernadette Calafell argue that even though mainstream research on mentoring in academia shows the importance of mentoring relationships to academic career success, the assumption of a white middle-class mentoring model leaves the needs of Women of Color academics unattended. They write, “Specifically, women of different historically marginalized groups may have different needs and expectations from a mentoring relationship than other women may have” (62). As a discipline, we therefore need better mentoring practices for Women of Color, inasmuch as we care about recruiting and retaining diverse academics. In this article, we forward *comadrismo* as a feminist mentoring practice that attends to some of the

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1 These numbers are unofficial but otherwise accurate.

needs and expectations of Women of Color academics. With a long history of practice (Camacho, Scholz, de Hoyos Comstock), *comadrisimo* refers to a feminist reciprocal relationship among women. As a mentoring model, *comadrisimo* is built upon a trusting kinship relationship and functions among women with deep commitments to anti-racist work. We argue that *comadrisimo* as a culturally specific mentoring model can help provide Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition with the holistic support they need to succeed in academia. Furthermore, *comadrisimo* can help diversify our discipline, not only by helping retain Women of Color in our field, but also by encouraging those women to center anti-racist feminist work in their teaching and writing.

In what follows, we ground *comadrisimo* in the conversation about mentoring in Rhetoric and Composition and demonstrate that we have much to learn from how mentoring is discussed and practiced in other disciplines. We then provide a brief review of the concept of *comadrisimo*, a term rooted in Latin American feminist community practices. Finally, we outline the characteristics of *comadrisimo* as a mentoring model. We base this model of mentorship on our personal experiences as Latina scholars in a purposeful move to value the experiential knowledges of underrepresented populations and dispute the hegemony of objectivity. In an attempt to avoid essentialism, we frame our discussion of *comadrisimo* as a dialogue in order to highlight the diversity of our perspectives and experiences as Latinas in academia.

We hope this article provides some specific ideas about what mentoring Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition can entail. We have also written this article in a way that readers may take from it what works best for their particular circumstances. In other words, while we present *comadrisimo* as a mentoring model among Latinas, we also believe that some or all of what we propose here may be useful to people of different positionalities. Our aim is not only to provide practical tools, but also to engage the discipline in a conversation about how to better mentor Women of Color—an important piece in the work of diversifying and decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition.

## Understanding Mentoring Relationships in Rhetoric and Composition and Beyond

Mentoring has long been a concern for Rhetoric and Composition scholars, with some attention to mentoring women and People of Color. Overall, the scholarship illustrates the variety of approaches to mentoring in the discipline, as scholars have argued for mentoring that is contextually situated and attentive to the inherent power dynamics in this complex practice. For example, Jenn Fishman and Andrea Lunsford problematize the idea of mentoring, expressing their ambivalence to the concept as it replicates structures

of power and requirements for assimilation (22). They propose that mentoring is sometimes practiced as a form of control, with even the ways that we talk about mentoring—for example the use of the clunky “mentee” to describe those being mentored—invisibilizing the agency of students and junior faculty (28).

Indeed, mentoring can often seem bent on shaping the scholar to the white dominant academy and not on transforming the institution into a space that values minoritized ways of knowing and being in the world. For example, in *Women’s Ways of Making it in Rhetoric and Composition*, which is often referred to as the landmark text on women in the discipline, Michelle Ballif, et al. recommend that junior faculty “pursue the study of languages, especially Greek and Latin,” “learn more classical rhetoric,” “publish like crazy,” and “act professional at all times, be confident and assertive, yet gracious and collegial” (86-89). This advice takes on an assimilationist stance that can be particularly devastating for women and academics of color who feel that they are unable and/or unwilling to perform the “meritocratic” competitive academic culture. To challenge assimilationist models of mentorship, scholars of mentoring in Rhetoric and Composition have theorized feminist, critical, and activist mentoring in order to advocate for underrepresented scholars in the discipline (Kynard and Eddy, Okawa, VanHaitsma and Ceraso).

Pamela VanHaitsma and Steph Ceraso provide a possible alternative to power-laden mentoring through horizontal mentoring—a mentoring strategy that embodies the ethos of “making it together” (215) through the rejection of the traditional hierarchical relationship of “mentor and mentee.” Yet, the authors also recognize the limitations of horizontal mentoring, or of any individual attempt to remedy the structural inequalities of the university: “Many of the challenges facing early-career academics are the result of structural and material forces that individual strategies simply cannot undo” (228). Their research highlights the reasons why structural critique, advocacy, and activism should be part of any critical mentoring practice.

Kathryn Gindlesparger’s and Holly Ryan’s reflections on their “failing” feminist mentor group illustrate how conflict and change can be important parts of feminist mentoring. They write, “Feminist mentoring is acute, rhetorical, and must be carried out on a variety of fronts, with different mentors for different projects (there are different mentors for different needs). We must be adaptable and open to change and even dissolution if that is to the advantage of those involved” (67). In their article, the authors make a distinction between mentoring with the goal of fostering professional advancement (e.g., publishing) and mentoring for professional identity development (e.g., going from the position of graduate student to that of writing program administrator), implying that these two realms of an academic’s life are mutually exclusive.

This separation, however, seems to stem from their positionality as white, middle-class scholars—a position that the authors acknowledge. For academics of color, however, professional identity is closely related to professional advancement. As Ersula Ore poignantly describes, “From the moment I step into the building I am marked an outsider. Regardless of external signifiers of a teacherly *ethos*... I am still assumed to be a student. My black body in these clothes, in this space, denies me any other identity” (9). As Women of Color minoritized in and out of academic spaces, our abilities to teach and research are directly affected by the ways in which our bodies and identities are perceived.

A mentoring model for Women of Color in the discipline must account for the obstacles along intersecting lines of race and gender that we face in white dominant academia. On this there is much to be learned from scholarship on mentoring People of Color in Rhetoric and Composition. For example, Carmen Kynard and Robert Eddy forward “critical mentoring” as a vital retention practice for students and academics of color and as a practice that helps “[undo] the toxic effects of racism on individual students and on ourselves” (W35). Critical mentoring teaches students and academics of color that there are various paths to success in academia and that assimilation into white hegemonic norms is not the only option. Diverse models of success can be particularly valuable for Latinxs in academia (Cavazos). In her doctoral dissertation<sup>2</sup>, Alyssa Guadalupe Cavazos suggests that mentoring can help students to trouble dominant narratives about what it takes to succeed in white dominant academia. Rather than a singular trajectory, Latinx graduate students and junior faculty must see many and diverse examples of Latinx success in academia that move beyond assimilation and adherence to white normative academic culture. Mentoring of Latinx students and junior faculty must reflect that Latinx academics can succeed on our own terms. For this to happen, Cavazos argues, it is important for there to be more Latinx faculty in our discipline, rather than a tokenized few.

Mentoring of people of color in Rhetoric and Composition can be the sort of activist practice that works against the hegemony of whiteness in writing studies and in academia. Gail Y. Okawa notes that advocacy must be an important part of mentoring as activist practice. It is not enough to mentor students on how to enter the white academy. Activist mentors must intervene in the name of their students in cases of injustice and help them navigate the white institution with the goal of transforming it into the type of structure that does not privilege whiteness. This sort of mentoring, however, is time

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2 Cavazos’ dissertation is the only text that specifically approaches mentoring of Latinx academics in Rhetoric and Composition, yet it does not deal with issues of gender identity or other intersections.

consuming and laborious, and it creates an undue burden on faculty of color who may themselves be struggling to survive as professionals in the white institution (Kynard and Eddy). Because of the invisible emotional labor that mentoring programs create, Ballif, et al. call on Rhetoric and Composition scholars and administrators to consider who is taking on a disproportionate amount of the labor in mentoring programs aimed towards underrepresented populations. Additionally, they ask scholars and administrators to create practices that remedy the disproportionate distribution of labor along lines of race and gender.

While much can be gleaned from scholarship on mentoring People of Color and other underrepresented populations in Rhetoric and Composition, an intersectional approach to mentoring in the discipline remains largely underdeveloped. Specifically, the discipline needs to theorize an approach to feminist mentoring for Latinas. We now look to scholarship outside our discipline, particularly in education, that discusses successful Latina mentoring in higher education and addresses the conditions that facilitate Latina success at the PhD and junior faculty levels.

The importance of interconnectedness is evident in scholarship about Latina mentorship. For Latinas, success in higher education comes *with* community and *for* community. Moreover, mentoring relationships provide support by valuing personal experience as epistemic. The work of education scholar Juan Carlos González demonstrates these points by analyzing the academic socialization experiences of Latina doctoral students to understand how support systems aid student success. González found that while Latinas were negatively and positively affected by a variety of factors (e.g., earlier schooling experiences, institutional support systems, financial support, tokenism, assimilation, and cultural isolation), their success often depended upon finding and creating “networks of resistance” that allowed them to “integrate with similar minded scholars who supported and encouraged their resistance” to normative academic socialization (359).

One such network is described by Lucila Ek, et al., who illustrate how Latina junior faculty in education formed a pre-tenure support group that provided a space for transformational resistance and “*muxerista* mentoring” in preparation for promotion and tenure. Ek, et al. describe *muxerista* mentoring as a process that values Women of Color epistemologies and lived experiences, and as a result, validates the difficult experiences Latinas face in academia (545). Additionally, in facilitating the retention of Women of Color, *muxerista* mentoring “establishes a feeling of cooperation instead of competition” and facilitates professional support and growth (548). *Comadrisimo* as a mentoring practice echoes the *muxerista* ethos of resistance and cooperation, as we see networks and connections among Latinas as crucial to our success

in predominantly white institutions. Cooperation among Latinas ensures that our experiences and knowledges are valued and that our successes also benefit our communities. *Muxerista* mentoring demonstrates how we work in solidarity with other Latina academics and non-academics for the welfare of our community and to lift each other up as we labor in a society that continues to bring us down.

Mentoring among Latinas always involves a practice of resistance, and critical consideration of intersectional identities is key to building mentoring relationships. In other words, Latina mentoring relationships are necessarily political and personal. For example, Rebeca Burciaga and Ana Tavares discuss a pedagogy of sisterhood, which they define as “a purposeful friendship rooted in political activism” that eventually evolves into a “pedagogical strategy that sustains [Latinas] in academia” (133). They claim that the relationship they developed working together on an anthology challenged the isolation and individualism valued in academia, which is why they see creating sisterhood as an act of resistance and survival (138). Moreover, Burciaga and Tavares look to and learn from Women of Color in academia who have challenged patriarchal structures: “Our learning in this supportive environment among feminist scholars is organized differently from that of the classroom—we become central to the curriculum in creating our own pedagogy” (138). Such a sisterhood created and influenced by Women of Color provides a learning approach to facilitate Latina success.

Scholarship on mentoring outside of Rhetoric and Composition offers tangible solutions to encourage Latina retention and success in higher education. For example, González calls on policymakers to facilitate change and address institutional climate concerns. He proposes that academic leaders and institutional change agents need to realize that to sustain higher education for an increasingly diverse student population, they must address the difficulties Latinas and other Women of Color face succeeding in institutions of higher learning (362). Similarly, Ek et al. argue that universities need to focus on retaining faculty of color and offer specific approaches such as prioritizing cluster hires and increasing the number of Latina recruiters. They also suggest providing financial support, institutional legitimacy, and space to mentoring groups that focus on faculty of color. Lastly, they suggest engaging in formal and informal dialogues with Latinas about their experiences in academia (550). Each one of these scholars argues that mentorship and institutional change are crucial for the success of marginalized and minoritized populations in higher education. In the next section we provide some context to the concept of *comadrisimo* on which we base our mentoring model for Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition.

## Comadrisimo: a Brief Framing

"[Comadrisimo] encompasses some of the most complex and important relationships that exist between women. *Comadres* are best friends, confidants, coworkers, advisors, neighbors, godmothers to one's children" — Nora de Hoyos Comstock (ix)

The term *comadre* comes from the Latin *commater*, which means female sponsor or godmother. Traditionally, children baptized in the Catholic Church are given a '*comadre*,' a godmother who is supposed to guide them through their young spiritual life. Outside of the religious context, Paul Allatson defines *comadrisimo* more broadly as "the complex set of relationships, reciprocal duties and dependencies, and mutual support networks and friendships between women that are not necessarily determined by the obligations of traditional godmother status or familial ties, but which nonetheless confirm a place in a constructed community of women" (76). Whether the term is used within a religious or secular context, *comadre* clearly refers to women whose relationships have strong kinship.

Additionally, the term *comadre* can imply a relationship based on political awareness and attention to social change. Melissa Camacho explains that in Puerto Rico the term refers to a "feminist icon" and "empowered leader" who advocates for her community through her activism (124), while Cristina Herrera describes "*comadrazgo*" as an "adopted sisterhood" and more importantly as "a strong female alliance used to combat the cultural and familial strains placed on [Latina]<sup>3</sup> women" (52). Both Camacho and Herrera acknowledge the key role *comadres* serve for one another and their communities in surviving colonial and patriarchal challenges.

Building on this general understanding of *comadre*, we draw from Teresa Maria Linda Scholz's notion of *comadrisimo*, an intersectional feminist framework that attends to asymmetrical power relations and challenges hegemonic forces to consider the agency of Women of Color. Scholz proposes that *comadrisimo* functions "as a way to highlight the complex relationships between discursive and material counterhegemonic practices, and between victimhood, voice, and agency, within transnational communities" (83-84). *Comadrisimo* is an intersectional approach to social justice that complicates the binaries of "agency and victimhood" and "discourse and materiality" to account for the diverse lived experiences of Women of Color.

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3 Here Herrera says Chicana because she is discussing a Chicana fictional character. However, her work includes the larger Latina community. For the purposes of this article, we inserted Latina.

In our work, we build on three main points of Scholz's *comadrisimo* framework: *comadrisimo* embraces the complex, collective actions of Latinas, values the political potential of counternarratives, and challenges feminist work that universalizes women's experiences. The key here is that the *comadre* paradigm moves beyond the "maternal and Western neoliberal individual" to focus on those who are "communally connected" (Scholz 88). In our experiences as Latina academics, community is key to sustainable and effective mentorship practices, as we always see ourselves working collectively for Latinas and Women of Color and not just for ourselves.

Additionally, Scholz claims that counternarratives from *comadres* "can provide the richest theoretical insight into women's discursive and material resistance and self-representation" (89). According to Aja Martinez, counternarratives, and more specifically counterstories, highlight "that the experiential and embodied knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices" (69). In an academic context, counternarratives can highlight university practices that are unjust and harmful for Latinas. Moreover, the power in sharing stories of injustice can create "a space of support and nurturing" because as "stories are recounted, women's experiences with repression are understood within a broad relational system" (Scholtz 92). In other words, when we share our stories, we understand how systems of oppression operate, and we are then in a position to challenge those systems and advocate for political change.

Perhaps most importantly for the field of Rhetoric and Composition with its substantial tradition of feminist scholarship, using a framework of *comadrisimo* can help feminist scholars to challenge models of feminism that reproduce universalized ideas of women's experience. As Latinas, we are often made to feel too sensitive or too angry when we experience microaggressions and often our peers do not believe or address the grievances we bring to superiors. *Comadrisimo* challenges hegemonic feminism by creating a framework that reveals how Latinas "respond to overlapping systems of oppression" (Scholz 96). *Comadres* call out feminists who are not intersectional or who are not actively working towards justice for all women. Here the concept of *comadrisimo* disrupts individualistic actions and promotes collective work among Latinas.

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4 In Scholz's work women share their stories with other *comadres* in prison to understand the sexual and physical violence they experienced. We are not comparing experiences but focusing on the importance of sharing of stories.

## Comadrisimo as Model for Mentoring Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition

In the remainder of this article, we present *comadrisimo* as a framework with which to create mentoring relationships in Rhetoric and Composition that challenge hegemonic models of feminism while supporting the success and development of Latina academics. Harris and González emphasize that in order to survive and thrive in white dominant academic environments, Women of Color must “recognize and honor the connections among body, mind, culture, and spirit—connections that are denied by the rationalist and masculine-dominated culture of the academy” (7). Accordingly, we draw on our experiences with mentoring as connected to body, mind, culture, and spirit to propose seven themes that facilitate the practice of *comadrisimo* mentoring.

In this section, we use a dialogue format to discuss *comadrisimo* as a mentoring model in order to illustrate that even though we are both Latinas in Rhetoric and Composition working in R1 public universities, our backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs differ, so it would be inappropriate for us to speak in a single voice. Therefore, we use a first-person dialogue format to structure this section in order to work against singular narratives of identity and experience and to avoid essentializing one Latina experience through academia.

The format of a dialogue framed by seven key themes emerged organically in our collaborative process. In order to effectively convey our dialogical and dynamic relationships to one another and with other mentors and mentees, we knew the format of this article must be different from a typical academic genre. We initially wrote about our individual experiences as mentors and mentees. Then we exchanged those writings and discussed the salient points and experiences, some having to do with one another and some having to do with common mentors and mentees. We identified the most prominent themes that emerged and named them according to their contributions to *comadrisimo*. We decided to present these themes in a dialogue format in order to emphasize the relational characteristic of *comadrisimo* as well as each of our individually nuanced perspectives on our mentoring experiences. In the final part of this process, we revised and expanded those initial writings, taking time to respond to each other in writing in order to create a dialogue. Each part of this collaborative process was incredibly organic; the themes came from the experiences we had in common, and the dialogue seemed to be the best way to show how we each experienced the mentoring that was happening. Our experiences shaped the themes and dialogue of the article so that we could highlight our individual experiences, together.

*Theme 1: Kinship*

**Comadre 1:** For me, kinship is an essential part of what demarcates *comadrisimo* from other mentoring approaches. Here, I would define kinship as chosen family whose connectedness is founded in social relationships. For Latinas, academia can be isolating in two ways: we are geographically separated from our families who raised us—and we are often, but not always, very close to these families—and we are in a predominantly white environment that at times contradicts some of our cultural values. Therefore, we often attempt to build relationships with other Latinas seeking cultural commonalities, and sometimes those relationships grow into a new chosen family.

The chosen families that we nurture grow from a genuine desire to see other Latinas be successful. To paraphrase Afro-Latina rapper Cardi B, instead of adopting a competitive “why her and not me?” mentality, kinship advocates a “how can I get next to her?” mentality that is genuinely invested and personally involved in the success of other Latinas. Just as my successes belong to my family as much as they belong to me, my successes also belong to *comadres* that have provided not just mentorship, but kinship. Additionally, in my experiences, the chosen families we build in academia overlap with our families who raised us, which makes the kinship rhizomatic. I've attended weddings, visited newborn babies, cared for children overnight, and even gone on family trips with *comadres*. My interactions with other Latinas in academia almost always necessarily mean interactions with their partners, children, parents, siblings, etc. This deep and intimate level of involvement with one another demonstrates how kinship addresses the whole person.

Of course here I want to reference our relationship because it epitomizes kinship to me. Very early in our friendship you demonstrated a personal commitment to me as a person. You were one of the first people I told about my mom's cancer diagnosis, and your continued support through the most difficult experience of my life, losing my mom, made me feel less alone in this already isolating journey as a Latina in a PhD program. You understood my familial obligations as a Latina that are specific to our cultural expectations. For me, this experience established the practice of confiding in you, a mutually respected person with whom I've built a long-term, trusting relationship, a relationship that enables me to sustain myself and that continually facilitates my successes. I also attempted to provide this same personal support when you were navigating the job market and pregnant. I went shopping with you for job market clothes because I knew how much you didn't want to go. And when your child was born and I was gone for the summer, I offered up my house for your visiting relatives in hopes of supporting you in any way I could, even though I couldn't physically be there.

Because academia does not often offer enough support to graduate students (and even faculty) who are experiencing family changes, academics often have to depend on networks of friends to provide help during such times. In fact, academia continues to operate in a manner that challenges women who are caregivers and mothers by having meetings, classes, and other mandatory service or informal yet important socializing outside of 9-5 work hours. Both of our life-altering experiences—a death in my family and a birth in yours—demonstrate that when academia falls short of understanding the particular responsibilities that fall on Latinas in such instances, we must rely on one another, *nuestras comadres, para ayudar*.

**Comadre 2:** I remember the night you told me about your mom. We cried together outside of our Critical Race Theory classroom. I also remember the kindness with which your mom and dad always treated me and my husband. Getting to know your family has made our friendship stronger, and I believe it has contributed to our ability to be honest and trusting with one another—qualities that academic collaborations depend on.

Kinship and care do not mean that *comadre* relationships are always without conflict. Disagreements and disappointments are often part of the important relationships of our lives, and with *comadres* it is just the same. You and I have had some difficult conversations, yet we trust each other enough to be able to see that our conflict comes from a place of care. The kinship that we've built over the years has allowed us to become more than colleagues and more than friends. We are *comadres*.

This kind of kinship can be built through an effort to get to know and to mentor the whole person. *Comadres* should create space for conversations about issues outside of academia. What is going on in your *comadre's* life? What are the external factors contributing to or hindering professional success? How can we help *comadres* to reach the ever-elusive work-life balance? What are the emotional obstacles in the way of completing a dissertation, an article, or a book manuscript? These are important questions to explore in mentoring the whole person. Now, I'm not insinuating that *comadres* pretend to act as mental health professionals or life coaches. However, without making space to address personal issues that might be going on, any other sort of advice, feedback, or mentorship can falter. Making space for personal conversations that may make *comadres* vulnerable may require that the senior *comadre* open up first about her personal life. A few words about family, hobbies, or even weekend plans can change the dynamic of the conversation so that the junior *comadre* feels safe in sharing some of her own experiences.

*Theme 2: Fuerza*

**Comadre 2:** To be a Latina in academia—to be a Latina in general—you need a lot of *fuerza*. When you are trying to navigate an institution that was not created with you in mind, it is easy to feel weighed down by the intersectionality of oppression. This is an obstacle that many of us continue to face when we are one of the handful of People of Color in our departments. We can either be marginalized or most often tokenized—used to provide the “much needed” diversity to an otherwise white faculty. Both of these result in the disempowerment of Women of Color in academia.

Latina academics need *fuerza* to not only persist and survive, but also to be able to turn the negative into positive. What I mean here is that in order to not just survive, but to actually thrive, we need the skills to be able to take the anger and discouragement that comes from being a Latina in academia and make it the driving force of our anti-racist practice. For example, if I am angry that my department’s history of rhetoric curriculum does not incorporate any minoritized voices in a significant way, instead of swallowing the anger, I must have the *fuerza* to speak up about it and fight for its change.

A good *comadre* to me is an example of *fuerza*. They have turned the racism of the academy into the motivation for their anti-racist scholarship. They are a model of how to fight back and avoid complacency, despite the risks that we take as graduate students or junior faculty of color when we confront the academic status quo. A *comadre* is an example of how to turn obstacles into opportunities for critical work. She can teach me how to have the *fuerza* to push past the pain, to be productive through the tears.

**Comadre 1:** Being confidently outspoken in spaces that make me feel unwelcome (like academia) does not come easily for me. I have found that it’s necessary to have this behavior modeled for me and to in turn model it for others. I learned not to accept the inequities I experience by listening to other *comadres* and watching their actions. I have seen many fearless *comadres* fight against injustices—sometimes for themselves and other times on behalf of those in more precarious positions—and stand up to powerful people and institutions. This is an important aspect of *fuerza* because I have also been told to keep my mouth closed and my head down in order to survive the tenure track. However, seeing that such actions only benefit the individual and not the community, I’ve taken the advice of and modeled myself after *comadres* that have demonstrated *fuerza* to thrive despite the relentless challenges of the university.

Additionally, *fuerza* provides an impetus to continue to be vocal and visible when challenging negative forces in academia and to work on scholarship that reflects my political commitment to anti-racist work. I know that younger or more junior Latinas are watching and listening to learn from me as well. I

want to be the *comadre* that demonstrates we will not stand for mistreatment and the *comadre* whose work overtly states my commitments to social justice.

*Theme 3: Networks of Care*

**Comadre 1:** When you are a first-generation college graduate, like myself, graduate school can be a complicated maze. Networks of other Latinas can help facilitate success for those of us who are new to navigating what can be a very traditional institution. Or when Latinas face hardship, they can provide advice for other Latinas so that they do not experience similar hardships. Such networks are rhizomatic: they function multidirectionally.

For example, a group of Latina professors at my current institution maintains a non-university email group to not only share good news, events, and everyday life experiences, but also to ask where to turn and how to deal with troublesome situations. Within the past week, members of this group, which only has eight people, have asked for resources concerning a hiring discrimination incident in a Latina's department, discussed how to deal with a white colleague who expressed frustration about a Latina professor's medical leave taken to receive cancer treatment, and strategized approaches to a meeting called by a Latina's chair with all white colleagues (asking if she should attend with a union representative). Because the members of this group span various departments across the university, varied titles and positions of power, and many previous experiences at other universities, the group is a hive mind of knowledge to help others navigate difficulties. These networks help *comadres* navigate academia to survive and address the material conditions we face, often at predominantly white institutions.

**Comadre 2:** Networking among Latinas can be difficult, particularly when a graduate student or junior faculty is the only Latina in her entire department. Structured networking possibilities, like an email group, make it easier for Latinas to connect with other *comadres* and share knowledge. There are also less structured networks of support that more advanced *comadres* should help build for their junior *comadres*. For example, one of my graduate school mentors connected me with the woman who helped me negotiate my job offer, and this connection has not only opened up opportunities to engage with communities of color in my current institution, but has also introduced me to supportive people in my new town who have become dear friends. A *comadre* is a nexus, creating a network of Women of Color who look out for each other.

*Theme 4: Empathy*

**Comadre 2:** When graduate students come to my office hours, they are often looking for someone who will understand how they feel as young women and young Women of Color in a white male dominated institution. (It is

interesting, yet not entirely surprising, that male students don't often seek me as a mentor.) These women want to talk about experiences of exclusion and marginalization. They share with me the crushing weight they feel, especially as new graduate students with heavy course and teaching loads. They fear the university will force them to assimilate into the normative academic culture that mimics capitalist, heteropatriarchal, Euroamerican cultural norms.

What I have to offer these students, at least initially, is empathy. I nod my head. I tell them that I understand how they feel. I assure them that I have been in a similar position and that I made it through. As a *comadre*, I try to put myself in their shoes. I think this can be very valuable and encouraging for female graduate students of color. In my empathy, I become an example, not of bootstrapping my way through academia, but of shared vulnerability and strategic perseverance. By sharing my own experiences with, for example, the incessant microaggressions of the institution, I show them that I am also vulnerable, that academic life also gets me down. A *comadre* commiserates with her fellow *comadres*, not as a way to show pity, but as a way to show understanding. But the empathy of a *comadre* should not be understood as passive inaction. Empathy comes with the urgency to persevere, not through assimilation but through strategies that sustain the soul.

I remember one of my graduate school *comadres* telling me, when I feared that a conference presentation on immigration and neoliberalism would not be received positively, that as a Latina academic standing in front of a room of fellow scholars and speaking my piece, I was already bound to upset some folks who are not accustomed to Women of Color taking the lead. My *comadre* helped me to reflect about my place in academia. She helped me to realize that I was probably always going to feel like an outsider; but instead of being discouraging, this thought reaffirmed my purpose. I, like the Women of Color that I now mentor, need to persevere in academia because academia is in dire need of dissenting voices. I see my place in academia as the perpetual outsider, not the tokenized minority who will bring unthreatening diversity to higher education, but the one who will ruffle some feathers. I still must remind myself of that when I am feeling doubtful about my place in academia or when I think how much easier it would be to just keep my head down.

I echo the words of my *comadre* and remind the young Women of Color that I mentor that their presence in academia is already a radical move, since academic spaces are not often designed with them in mind. By helping them see the important role of dissent and difference in academia, I hope to encourage them to persevere while holding on to their critical values and beliefs.

**Comadre 1:** Empathy really gets at what makes *comadres* special in our lives. A common understanding of the challenges we face is a necessary foundation for the urgency we feel to persevere. Just as I talk with senior colleagues

about the challenges I face, I also listen carefully when other women come to me with their stories that need to be heard. Your comment about graduate students coming to you resonates as I look back at my graduate student experience. This interaction was common between my mentor and me; simply listening and acknowledging that she understood my frustrations and struggles was significant.

As there are few Latina PhDs, it's quite difficult to find Latina professors (and even Women of Color professors) in our field at primarily white institutions. I constantly recognize that simply encountering me is important for students. As you mention, just being in this space is a radical move. I was in my PhD before I encountered a Latina professor, so I know that I may be the only or one of few Women of Color professors students encounter. With this in mind, I consider how my empathy can be expressed when I interact with students. One way I do this is by normalizing conversations about race and racism in the classroom. Not only do I assign readings that address issues of race and other intersections but I also take the lead in talking openly about race and racism, usually in a gendered way. In doing this, I attempt to open the door between myself and Women of Color students so that they feel comfortable coming to talk with me.

#### *Theme 5: Collaboration*

**Comadre 2:** I think you and I have been strong *comadres* who not only support each other emotionally but who are invested in each other's success in academia. Collaboration has been key to our *comadrisimo*. I think I have presented in more panels with you than with any other person, starting with that first panel presentation that we did together at the TYCA West conference in Mesa, Arizona.

A *comadre* looks for ways to collaborate with her *comadres*. While collaboration makes sense between *comadres* at different points in the academic track (for example, between graduate student and faculty mentor, or between junior faculty and senior faculty), collaboration is also valuable when done horizontally, between peer *comadres*. In today's hurried academic environment, many faculty members are not willing and/or able to collaborate with students. In my seven years of graduate school, I never had a real opportunity to write with a faculty member, not even with some of my most dear and influential *comadres*. Women in academia often take a disproportionate portion of the service and administrative work. This leaves very little time for them to work on and publish their own research, let alone to mentor and collaborate with graduate students. Horizontal collaboration (VanHaitsma and Ceraso) fills the gap when collaboration between junior and senior *comadres* is not possible.

Of course, the senior *comadre* may have connections that the junior will not have, and that's one of the benefits of this sort of collaboration. While this may not necessarily be the case in horizontal collaboration, fellow *comadres* can still draw on each other's strengths when collaborating, even if they have equal amounts of political capital.

**Comadre 1:** I would say you and I have engaged in a mutually beneficial professional relationship. Very early in our friendship we gained trust in providing thoughtful, thorough, and critical feedback to one another's work and writing. We've rehearsed countless conference presentations for one another in hotel rooms. We've provided rounds of feedback on seminar papers, grant applications, conference proposals, job materials, and publications. We've collaborated on conference presentations, as conference organizers, and on publications. I trust that your feedback will ask tough questions with the intention of improving my argument, not to needlessly poke holes in it.

Because the academy is a place with a white middle class model of mentorship, it's important to receive feedback from other *comadres* who understand not only where you are coming from and the premises upon which you build your arguments, but also from *comadres* who value the type of knowledge production you are engaging in. Mentorship from white peers on writing can steer Latinas to use concepts from only white scholars or delegitimize non-traditional epistemologies. Importantly, the intersectionality of our various subjectivities has been crucial in this process. For example, as a Colombian immigrant, your feedback continually decenters my non-immigrant, Mexican-centric viewpoints and challenges me to be more inclusive in my scope. To feel comfortable giving and receiving that type of feedback, *comadres* must trust one another and know that we have our professional well-being in mind.

*Theme 6: Paying it forward*

**Comadre 2:** An imperative for me as I think of how I mentor other Women of Color and female identified graduate students is the idea of paying it forward. Drawing on the National Association of Colored Women's motto of "lifting as we climb," paying it forward denotes the importance of helping other women as we learn to successfully navigate academia. Paying it forward also implies the debt that we as Latina academics owe to other women, Latinas and others, who have helped us along the way. Like you, I was fortunate enough that I had a really strong network of *comadres* during graduate school. Of course, I consider you to be one of these *comadres*. These women were a support network for me emotionally, academically, intellectually, and professionally. The fact that I was lucky enough to have *comadres* makes me want to pay it forward. I have not climbed these walls of academia by myself. Other women lifted me and now it is my turn to lift those who come after me.

**Comadre 1:** I love the NACW's concept of "lifting as we climb" because I feel so lucky to have had others do that for me throughout the years. I try to do this in any way I can, whether it be providing feedback on job materials for my peers, helping with childcare when single mom *comadres* need help, or advocating for other graduate students who were in more vulnerable positions than I was. I particularly remember mentoring a first-generation Latina undergraduate student when I was in my PhD. We were paired through a program, and we met once a month for lunch to chat about her classes and life in general. Although I didn't feel like I was doing much, I reminded myself that I would have loved to have someone—anyone—help me navigate the university as an undergraduate student because I had no idea what I was doing as a first-generation college student. She worked a lot and had trouble in her writing classes, but by the time I graduated, she was talking about going to graduate school. I tried in all the ways to pay it forward so that she would know that she belonged at the university just as much as the next student.

Additionally, I pay it forward with other women and Women of Color colleagues who are graduate students. I've advised friends on searching for an academic job, collaborated with others on writing projects and conference panels, and helped with grant applications that I've previously won. I am always eager to share my successes to facilitate the successes of others. I've heard stories of other academics being protective of their materials and not wanting to share their work. However, you provided me with a perfect example of how a *comadre* pays it forward. As you were a year ahead of me, you shared your dissertation proposal and your job search materials with me. You were successful, so I followed your model, and I was successful as well. For this, I am grateful.

#### *Theme 7: Tangible Support*

**Comadre 1:** As academics, we often like to think of what we do in abstract terms: contributing to knowledge production, effecting change through teaching and scholarship, and engaging with the community. However, we often fail to address the fact that this is a job, just like many others, where we have to meet certain criteria to ensure job security, where we are often paid unequally based on our race and/or our gender, and where we have to consider our health insurance and retirement benefits. In other words, we do not talk often enough about the material conditions of academia. For me *comadrisimo* does not only support the scholarly self, but also considers, recognizes, and facilitates the material self in the world. *Comadres* have helped me significantly in tangible ways, and such tangible support is worth consideration when focusing on mentoring the whole person.

One concrete way to support *comadres* is to help with the cost of conferences. Conferences are important professional development opportunities, especially for graduate students and junior scholars (who also tend to be the least financially able to attend multiple conferences a year for various reasons). Sharing hotel rooms with graduate students or covering the cost of a meal can do a great deal to lower the costs for other *comadres*.

Many times during graduate school, a tenure-track *comadre* invited me to share her hotel room that was paid for with her annual travel funds so that I didn't have to pay for lodging. This particular *comadre* even rotates the various graduate students she offers to share a room with so that she can help as many people as possible. She made me understand that this was an important part of mentoring: easing the financial burden for those who are in more precarious financial positions than yourself. While there are many discussions in the field about how senior faculty can help junior faculty and graduate students, there is not much discussion about how Latinas and other Women of Color especially benefit from tangible support.

**Comadre 2:** You are right in saying that we don't talk about the financial and material conditions of labor in academia. The first time that I read Villanueva's *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*, I was surprised at how candid he was about the financial difficulties that junior faculty of color can face. I had never heard academics talk about money in this way. The unstable job market in academia is such that when a recently minted PhD gets a job, she is supposed to be grateful, no matter the labor conditions. Not to mention, we are so accustomed to being underpaid and overworked as graduate students, that any income above what we were making as GTAs seems like a winning lottery ticket. But the conditions of labor—whether they be teaching load, service expectations, pay, benefits, cost of living—can help or hinder success in academia.

A *comadre* is aware of these aspects of the job, does what she can to help ease the strain on graduate students and junior faculty, and works to make these labor conditions visible. When I was on the job market, I was told by the department head that salary for my position was not negotiable. One of my *comadres* helped me to figure out what *was* negotiable, to outline what conditions of labor would help me to succeed (e.g., summer pay, research funds, pre-tenure course release), and to negotiate for those conditions. Without that mentoring, I would have never known that I should be negotiating. In fact, I've spoken to many female junior faculty who have told me they did not negotiate at all.

## Conclusion: Living Comadrisimo

Within the context of academia, Sara Ahmed refers to diversity work in two ways: “the work we do when we are attempting to transform an institution” and “the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution” (91). We see *comadrisimo* as embodying both types of diversity work. By employing *comadrisimo* in our interactions with others, we are attempting to transform the institution so that it is a space that welcomes, serves, and retains Women of Color. By employing *comadrisimo* in our mentoring practices, we are not only recognizing that we don’t always inhabit the norms of the institution, but we are also trying to help others who don’t inhabit these norms. This difficult work takes dedication, passion, and vulnerability, but has the potential of transforming our institutions, our disciplines, and ourselves.

By committing to *comadrisimo* as a feminist mentoring practice—through kinship, *fuerza*, networks of care, empathy, collaboration, paying it forward, and tangible support—Latinas can provide holistic support to one another as humans, teachers, and scholars who are committed to anti-racist, feminist work. Together, the seven characteristics of *comadrisimo* create a mentoring approach that is culturally specific, that values the ways of knowing and being of Women of Color, and that recognizes the importance of community for academic survival. Advocating for such culturally specific mentoring models will help Rhetoric and Composition to support and retain Women of Color, thereby diversifying the field, the students we attract, and the research we do. *Comadrisimo* can also influence the discipline’s hierarchies of knowledge by making salient the ways of knowing and being of Women of Color and other underrepresented communities in academia. Insofar as we care about valuing diverse contributions and supporting people of color in our field, we must consider mentoring models that reject a white middle class status quo.

Finally, practicing *comadrisimo* injects a much-needed feminist ethos into academic life. The ability to be vulnerable and to recognize the connections between our personal and emotional lives and the academic work we do can be deeply fulfilling. As we reflect on our diverse paths in academia, we feel fortunate to have had *comadres* who have helped us along the way. We also acknowledge the spiritual satisfaction that comes from mentoring a *comadre* in ways that do not attempt to silence her truth. Practices of *comadrisimo* seek to feed the soul as well as the CV. Ultimately, it is our belief that academia at large would benefit from discouraging assimilation to white middle class norms and would benefit immensely from encouraging, highlighting, and valuing the ways of being and ways of knowing that Latinas bring to academia.

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