
Rev. Dr. Trinity Ordoná, A Queer Filipina American Activist Scholar

Her Journey from Political Revolutionary to Human Evolutionary

ABSTRACT This essay includes an interview with Rev. Dr. Trinity A. Ordoná, a recognized revolutionary political activist, community organizer, college teacher, and spiritual adviser. The interview highlights the political, academic, and spiritual paths of her journey as it relates to Ethnic Studies—past, present, and future. **KEYWORDS** KDP, Filipino American Studies, Queer Activism, LGBTQ+ people of color, Trinity A. Ordoná

INTRODUCTION

Rev. Dr. Trinity A. Ordoná is a recognized revolutionary political activist, community organizer, college teacher, and spiritual adviser whom I have known for two decades now. I first met Trinity when I enrolled in the “LGBT 50: Queer People of Color” class that she created and taught at the City College of San Francisco (CCSF). Thereafter, Trinity served as a mentor and friend, offering timely advice and guidance as I navigated the challenges of academia. Over the years, we stayed connected by participating in educational and activist spaces throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Our most significant critical conversations were on social movements, intersectionality, spirituality, social justice, and decolonization. It is not often that I encounter a veteran Queer activist scholar of color, like Trinity, with a lifelong history and commitment to grassroots organizing who is also rooted in nontraditional spiritual and healing practices.

In the five-decade span of her activist life, Trinity has been a co-founder, board member, and leader of numerous local, national, and international initiatives and organizations. She has also received scholarships, grants, fellowships, and awards, such as the Lesbian of Achievement, Vision and Action Award (1996), Northern California GLBT Historical Society Award for Individual Historic Achievement (1998), UCSF Chancellor’s Award for Public Service (1998), and the Phoenix Award for Outstanding Community Service (2008). Curve Magazine named Trinity among the “20 Most Influential Lesbian Professors in the US” in 2008, and her scholarship includes several publications (see references at the end of the interview). Now retired from college teaching, Trinity continues to offer spiritual guidance and training in psychic healing along with her sister, Francesca Ordoná Hollingsworth, through their private practice.¹

1. See Inner Beauty Healing® (www.innerbeautyhealing.us).

The transcribed interview below covers highlights of the political, academic, and spiritual paths of Trinity's journey as it relates to Ethnic Studies—past, present, and future. Throughout 2018–2019, Trinity and I virtually communicated or met in the San Francisco Bay Area. Given the fiftieth anniversary of Ethnic Studies in 2019, our conversations often addressed this topic, including the socio-political context in which the field originates and develops. In addition to Trinity's community activism, I learned that she not only benefited from taking Ethnic Studies courses at UC Berkeley in the early 1970s, but also served as an instructor for Asian American Studies at Laney College shortly after graduating. Given Trinity's decades-long intersectional trajectory as a scholar activist and now spiritual practitioner, an interview was appropriate. Thus, I met with Trinity on April 13, 2019, in the South Bay to conduct and record the dialogue. After Christian Fine—an Ethnic Studies program research assistant at my campus—transcribed the interview, I edited the transcription and consulted with Trinity for the purposes of transparency and coherence. Below is an edited version of the interview.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *Can you discuss the socio-political context of late 1960s and early 1970s that influenced you?*

TRINITY ORDONA: I was a young teenager during the Civil Rights and Anti-War Movements of the early 1960s and graduated from high school in 1969. This was a very formative decade for us post-WWII “Baby Boomers.” It was a constant up and down of young idealist highs and deeply dashed hopes—the Peace Corps, the Moon Race, with race “riots” throughout, then topped off by the assassinations of several leaders: President John Kennedy; Malcolm X; Martin Luther King, Jr.; and, finally, the “last great hope,” Senator Bobby Kennedy. My head and heart were spinning.

However, by the time I was in college at UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) (1971–72), when the US was napalm bombing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, I saw “me” in the faces of these Asian people being blown up. I was not alone. The Vietnam War stirred us, clarifying political consciousness and catalyzing the Asian American student movement, where, for the first time, large numbers of Asian Americans got involved in the antiwar movement. Political education and organizing followed. Overnight, students my age or a few years older became activists. The tide turned and I went with the current.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *Which cultural/political experiences shaped your identity or consciousness?*

TRINITY ORDONA: In April of 1972, I attended my first Filipino-American Identity conference at San Diego State University (SDSU). It had a major impact on me. I grew up in an all-white working-class neighborhood where my family were the only Filipinos; we knew all the few other people of color in our parish. Although I always knew I was Filipino, I had no positive identity as one. This started to change at the SDSU conference where about 300 of us Filipino American students went through a collective awakening. It felt like one massive “teach in,” led by former students-now-activists of the San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley Third World Strikes, the International Hotel struggle, and the Nationalist Liberation Movement of the Philippines.

There, I learned about the Philippine Liberation Movement against US military imperialist and corporate domination of my parents' home country and the

neocolonial Filipino politicians, such as President Ferdinand Marcos, who made it possible. I also saw Filipino American student and community activists give speeches, read poetry (like Al Robles), and articulate ideas that explained what I felt in my heart but could not say in words. With this flood of information surrounded by a new, awakening pride, I could not sleep; I stayed awake the whole night.

I got a ride back to Northern California on a bus full of Filipino high school and college students from Oakland. I remember we did a pit stop somewhere and the lead organizer, Terri Bautista, brought back bagfuls of food. While the bus was moving, she passed the loaves of bread down the rows; everybody took two pieces. Then came peanut butter and jelly jars, then slices of cheese and bologna. We made sandwiches; we ate and shared. Since I grew up in a big family of thirteen children, this experience felt very much like home: we did not have much money but we took care of each other. It was an overwhelmingly positive experience.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *How did the conference and other similar experiences influence you to get involved in organizing?*

TRINITY ORDONA: After the conference, I realized there was a lot that I did not know; I wanted to learn more. Still enrolled at UCSC, I used the “independent studies” option to take Ethnic Studies classes at UC Berkeley, which were now available as a result of the Third World Strike. I took Tagalog and Philippine and Filipino American History. I was finally studying subjects that were relevant to my life and, for the first time, I had the history, politics, and concepts that explained myself and my family to me. As a result, I eventually transferred to UC Berkeley.

I had always been a good student, gotten good grades, and studied hard, spending much time in the library throughout my youth. As a child, my family would often find me somewhere in a corner of the house, reading books. My parents proudly bought me a “little pocket dictionary” that I carried in my school uniform sweater pocket. In college, however, I found that one had to “speak well” in order to be heard and taken seriously. With immigrant parents who had taught themselves English, I spoke a broken, pidgin version of the language that my family understood but not by anyone else. With Ethnic Studies, however, I finally had material that explained and helped me understand my cultural background and experiences; it was liberating.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *What did you do after you finished your studies at UC Berkeley?*

TRINITY ORDONA: Combining all the classes that I had taken, I created an independent studies degree in “Asian American History” and graduated from UC Berkeley in June of 1973. Many of my instructors, such as John Silva, Cynthia Maglaya, and Bruce Occena, were young leaders in the emerging Filipino/Filipino American Movement, so my evenings were easily filled with attending meetings, study groups, and social events. I was twenty-two, my hair was long, and I wore tie-dyed T-shirts, wire-rimmed glasses, sandals, patched-up jeans, and I lived in “collective houses” with other “comrades” in Berkeley. For money, I worked at Dreyer’s Ice Cream Fountain part time as a dishwasher because, back then, the cost of living was cheap. For example, bread cost 15 cents, cigarettes were 25 cents, the bridge toll was 35 cents, and I rented a studio apartment in Berkeley for \$75 a month.

It was easy to connect to people and politics, do something personally meaningful, politically relevant, and live affordably. There was an easy flow between the personal

to political in life. For example, we had heard about the Filipino farm workers of Delano, California—participants in the original grape strike that led to the formation of the United Farm Workers of César Chávez. Back then, Chávez had promised to build these now-old Filipinos a retirement home, so we pushed him to follow through. I helped organize weekend work brigades that went to Delano to do just that. We first built the foundation, then the following weekend another group would lay the bricks, and go on to do the roofing. The *manongs* (Filipino word of respect for your elders) were grateful and happy to have young people in their lives, so they feasted the work brigades with *lechon* (roasted pig), which took them all day to prepare. “History” was not something old and lost to the past; we were “making history,” together. Thereafter, community organizing projects followed the same collectivist, consequential approach. From the I-Hotel to organizing high school or college student projects, it was one plan, many hands, working together.

I taught Ethnic Studies at Laney College in Oakland, California from 1974–77. The field then was new, but since I had a degree in Asian American Studies, the college granted me a conditional credential, which is how I was able to teach. I taught what I learned in my Asian American Studies classes, using Teodoro Agoncillo’s *History of the Filipino People* and *Philippine Society and Revolution* (like China’s “*Little Red Book*”) by Amado Guerrero, Chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines. I also incorporated community trips in my classes, such as going to San Francisco, Oakland, or Delano, and featured guest speakers on organizing labor, youth, senior citizens, farm workers, and such. Since we talked about people’s lives; these topics were very relevant to students.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *While you taught, did you involve yourself with activist movements?*

TRINITY ORDONA: By then, I was already involved with community (I-Hotel) and student (Pilipino American Alliance) organizations. The most significant membership in my future political development was in *Kalayaan* (Freedom). We were Filipino revolutionaries who, along with other Asian leftist activist groups, such as the Chinese Progressive Association and Kearny Street Workshop, had a storefront at the I-Hotel. The rent was cheap and the space was open, fraternal. We had our meetings, activities, political gatherings, and study groups there.

After this, I became involved with Filipino nationalist activist opposition to President Ferdinand Marcos, who had declared martial law in September of 1972. In response, we formed the National Committee for the Restoration of Civil Liberties in the Philippines. In July of 1973, a large group of young, left-winged activist from around the country gathered at a retreat in the Santa Cruz Mountains. There, the group founded *Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino* (or KDP), which means Union of Democratic Filipinos. The KDP was a mass revolutionary organization modeled after similar groups in the Philippines Nationalist Movement where, eventually, thousands of students organized for revolutionary change, not just in the university, but also the countryside, the factories, and poor districts.

I became actively involved in the KDP and was the first editor of the organization’s newspaper, *Ang Katipunan* (see figure 1). Even though I had no formal training as a journalist, I just figured it out, along with everyone else who had no experience either. Self-determination was a part of the times. It was a period of change,



FIGURE 1. First issue of the *Ang Katipunan*, biweekly national newspaper of the KDP, Oct. 1–15, 1973. The AK was named after the original Katipunan (Union) that led the 1896 Filipino independence struggle against Spanish colonialism. Beginning with the second issue, Trinity Ordoná served as editor, writer, and production manager from 1973–77. Image courtesy of the author.

optimism, and openness to go out and try new things. If someone wanted to start a childcare center, a people’s garage, or a women’s health clinic, they would. People would even travel to other cities to help with some of these community projects. And when the Vietnam War was finally over in 1975, we felt “we won” and it was time to “remake the world.”

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the US government surveilled many leftist organizations. Did KDP experience similar challenges?*

TRINITY ORDONA: Our biggest problem was from the Marcos side of the Philippines. Because of our explicit anti-Marcos position, we were well aware of their government agents. For example, in the editorial box, by-lines, and photos of the newspaper, we would use the names and faces only of people who were American citizens. Name-wise, everyone else used pseudonyms. Our biggest fear was Marcos because, at one point, in Seattle, Washington, two of our members who were labor organizers, Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes, were murdered right there in the union office. The trial eventually revealed that the Marcos government supported the person behind the murder. We also knew that the US supported Marcos, so this also meant being on the FBI watch list, too. We knew we were not safe.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *When did you express a Queer identity in organizing spaces?*

TRINITY ORDONA: In 1973, I lived at the national headquarters of KDP. We had an office off 32nd street in Oakland between Telegraph and Shattuck streets, where they merge and form a little “V” intersection. It rented for one hundred forty dollars a month; I paid half and the organization paid the rest. Then, Melinda Paras, who was one of the three members of the National Executive Board (NEB), moved into the headquarters too. Melinda is hapa (meaning half); her father’s Filipino and her mother’s white. She grew up in Wisconsin and her grandfather Ricardo Paras was Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in the Philippines. She had travelled to the Philippines and joined the resistance well before President Marcos declared martial law. Once Marcos declared martial law, the government arrested and detained Melinda and soon deported her back to the US. Melinda first moved back to Madison, then after KDP was formed, she moved to the Oakland headquarters. We shared a double bed and eventually became lovers. It was the first time for both of us to have a lesbian romance.

We had no shame and didn’t want to keep our relationship a secret. So, I followed Melinda’s lead and she told the other two NEB members that we were together. Perhaps I was naive, but it just did not occur to me to hide our sexuality. I soon learned, however, that conservatives—and even some leftist activists—considered homosexuality as decadent, a product of the bourgeoisie, the scum of society, and that it was a vice, like prostitution, and would “disappear” with socialism. However, we did not match any of those descriptions, and, as this was a time of not following rules, letting the board know about our relationship was the most natural thing to do.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *How did the other board members react?*

TRINITY ORDONA: The reaction was not negative, but they thought it was best that we keep it within the organization. So, we became a “well-known secret.” Many years later, when I interviewed a closeted lesbian from the Asian American movement, she told me she had heard that the gay people were in the KDP, but no one believed it because the organization had a good reputation. Gay people were supposed to be “bad,” so how could those rumors be true? For them, a “good” organization meant that it did not have homosexuals. In KDP, when anyone “came out,” I would just find out about it, but no one talked “bad” about it. KDP did not punish or hold anyone back for their Queer sexuality. As a result, former lesbian and gay members of KDP became leaders in the HIV/AIDS movement in Honolulu, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *Concerning Queer sexuality, would you say that KDP was not the norm?*

TRINITY ORDONA: Yeah. Many activists faced homophobia and misogyny in their organizations or the broader movement. Since the late 1960s, activist organizations—including leftist and people of color—would kick out or not welcome Queer people. For example, longterm, dedicated activist Bayard Rustin was pushed to the side of the Civil Rights movement for being gay, and later, under Black Power, openly and publicly shamed. Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver, in his book *Soul on Ice*, said inflammatory homophobic comments about James Baldwin’s homosexuality. Helen Zia tells her own “coming out” barriers in her book, *Asian*

American Dreams. As an organizer, she became good friends with activists in the Women's Movement. Suspecting, therefore, that she was a lesbian, her leadership confronted her in a closed meeting, saying, "We don't do that." Fortunately, she was "safe" because, at the time, she wasn't sexually active, had no romantic relationship, and didn't know she was a lesbian yet. Don Kao, who later became active in the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, is a gay Chinese American male who knew Melinda from their Madison days together. In the '70s, he came out to the Bay Area to meet activists in the Asian American Left. The organizations he visited, however, never invited him to join. Then in the '80s, a group called Bay Area Gay Liberation Front (BAGLF) formed, taking its name from the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) of New York, which led in the early years after Stonewall. Some BAGLF leaders met with KDP leaders, since we were one of the only Left groups that were even open about the subject. They talked about how in white anti-war and Left movements they couldn't be gay and that, on the other hand, gay and lesbian organizations failed entirely to address race and class. (This was exactly the dilemma of the New York GLF when its people of color members wanted to fundraise for bail money for Black Panther Party members. The GLF voted three times—back and forth and back again—and ultimately "lost" because the majority white men were not interested in "race" issues. The GLF broke apart over it.)

I think one of the reasons KDP accepted us was because Melinda was one of the principal leaders. If the two other NEB members did not approve of our sexuality, it would mean that they would have to kick Melinda out of the organization; that would never have happened. Also, Melinda and I defied the typical stereotype of gay people (as decadent, immoral), so our sexual behavior was not an issue in the organization. At the same time, we knew that the rest of society would not accept us either. To avoid smearing the KDP's name and undermining our legitimacy, we were out in the organization but in the closet to the rest of world. At the time, other gay people were in the closet in their organizations and the world. Of the leftist revolutionary organizations, KDP was probably the only one that allowed Queer people to join. As a result, I stayed with KDP—which later became Line of March (LOM), merging Marxist-Leninist ideologies—for thirteen years. I gained substantial political organizing experience that other Queer people could not access.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *Why did you leave KDP/LOM?*

TRINITY ORDONA: The mid-1980s were very challenging times for me. Like our Left counterparts in the Philippines and other parts of the Maoist world, KDP practiced democratic centralism, a Marxist-Leninist organizational principle in which leadership, while democratically elected, had ALL authority. This created a high level of discipline but at the cost of almost total personal sacrifice and subordination. For example, to maximize all time and effort to the organization, we worked part-time in non-career jobs and took little to no time off. Materially, this meant a poverty lifestyle and receiving prior approval for everything we did, politically and personally, including relationships and children. How this befell us came from following the lead of Communist China's Cultural Revolution who used CSC (criticism–self-criticism) to evaluate, analyze, and improve each activist and our political efforts. While our enthusiasm for revolutionary change motivated us, our high expectations were

idealistic and we held ourselves to unrealistic political goals and organizational outcomes. Many of our goals were not achieved, so CSC easily became group shaming sessions where members were accused of or self-confessed to ambiguous, indeterminable failures due to “*petit bourgeois* mentality,” “careerism,” or “commandism”—whatever any of those things were. Only the very few in top leadership escaped criticism.

It came full-circle back to me shortly after Melinda and I broke up. In 1976, I was reassigned from the national newspaper to local organizing and regional leadership—neither of which I had done before. My newly assigned efforts, however, were constantly criticized. Now with “the shoe on the other foot,” I was treated as a “bad comrade” for “failing to meet standard expectations.” Similar to others before me, I was removed from leadership. But because of my former status as a “favored, leading comrade,” I underwent grueling, multiple levels of mass CSC shaming group sessions. I felt both guilty and angry at the same time. My physical and mental health collapsed. Like the excesses that many later acknowledged in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, which was our model, the organization eventually stopped these punishing treatments, recognizing them as “ultra-leftist.” Although I was allowed back in the organization, I was never fully restored nor received apologies from those responsible for my punishments.

But I did not leave the KDP then. I stayed in the organization with the hope of understanding what and why such excesses happened, not only in our group but throughout the Left. That hope went out the door, however, when in 1985 the police arrested my eldest brother for molesting his daughter. When my family told me about my teenage niece, I called around to different organizations, such as San Francisco Women Against Rape, for resources and support. As I talked to them about my niece, I wanted to share that I and my other sisters had also experienced sibling sexual violence from our brothers. However, I kept the secret to myself, until I could not anymore. I fell apart, inside and out. I didn’t want to go to meetings anymore and my activism stopped completely. I was in support groups and in individual therapy, but I couldn’t focus and made many errors in my day-to-day life. For example, I constantly lost my car and house keys and went to work two hours late every day. I was lost and dysfunctional for months, suffering inexplicable panic attacks and a constant, low-grade anxiety that took many years to quiet and heal.

Sadly, the LOM organization expected that I would return to my political responsibilities after giving me six months off. But I connected the dots between the earlier, excessive CSC sessions over failed expectations with this other, again unrealistic expectation, of “gutting it out” to move past trauma. This time, I knew it was unhealthy to stay. This is when I resigned from LOM and quit the Left entirely.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *What happened next?*

TRINITY ORDONA: I had been working at UC San Francisco since the early ’70s and had become a manager by the time I left KDP/LOM. So, I started my life—started over—and eventually came out openly as a lesbian. I could no longer be in any closet of any size, anywhere. I wanted to be myself, all the time. I became personally and politically engaged with LGBT organizing in Asian American and Pacific Islander communities in San Francisco, but this time focusing on the politics of

one's personal life challenges, which the Left had so dogmatically dismissed as politically unimportant.

Eventually, I enrolled in the History of Consciousness doctoral program at UCSC where I studied social movements and identity politics so I could understand what my generation went through in the '60s and '70s. In 2000, I completed my dissertation: *Coming Out Together: An Ethnohistory of the Asian and Pacific Islander Queer Women's and Transgendered People's movement of San Francisco*. I then started my postdoctoral studies in health policy at UC San Francisco (UCSF) and became the Associate Director of the Lesbian Health Research Center under the direction of Dr. Sue Dibble. This was during President Clinton's administration. But once President Bush Jr. came into office, funding was cut for all lesbian health research. My research career began and ended overnight. Fortunately, I had put in the years at UCSF as a manager to take early retirement at 50, so I did. This allowed me the security and income to work part-time, which I did as an instructor in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Department at City College of San Francisco (CCSF). It was there at CCSF that I had time and opportunity to put all these differing pieces of my life and academic learning together.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *When I took your Queer People of Color (later LGBT Communities of Color) class, you taught it through an intersectional perspective that included different frameworks. Can you speak about your approach for the classes that you taught?*

TRINITY ORDONA: From 2000–2018, I taught at CCSF, the local community college, because I wanted my teaching to be financially and culturally accessible to as broad a population as possible. I taught two classes, both of which used radical perspectives in orientation, content, and outcomes.

Let me begin with my "Issues in Lesbian Relationships" class. I had taken this class myself 15 years previously when my relationships were not working out. It put me back on track to having healthier relationships. This time around as the instructor, however, I focused on the negative effects of violence on self and others in our personal and familiar relationships. I came to this realization during my postdoctoral studies when I was researching my populations of interest: Asians, women, and lesbians. Here, sexual violence was in the research literature and interest of the three groups. At the time, however, the research, which is usually 10 years behind practice, was just beginning and focused on how to count its prevalence. Also, Western medicine and social science health research is on the health management of trauma and not healing. I could not wait for research to "catch up" and was also convinced that one could heal from trauma, not just learn how to minimize its symptoms. Mitigating, lessening, and managing trauma's after-effects was put forth as the only option from everyone and in everything I read. As a multiple abuse survivor myself, healing trauma was my personal goal, even though no one claimed to know how to do it and many believed it could never be done.

So, despite my PhD training in Western-based research and academic thought, I turned away and, instead, looked for a healing path through Eastern philosophies and Indigenous spiritualities and practices. Then, in a flash, it all came to me, literally, on the bus to my Laurel Heights UCSF office. Like a tight, fisted-up ball of crumpled

tissue paper, all the curriculum topics for a relationships class that followed a self-healing approach “unfolded” in my mind.

First, the relationships class would *not* be about “finding the ‘right’ her, him, or them.” It would be about finding yourself, as YOU are the common denominator in all your relationships whether, it is with a female, male, or Trans person. Second, if you had relationship problems, the class would be about looking back to who, when, and where you “learned” these problematic behaviors. Third, the class would focus on how society teaches these problematic ways through physical, sexual, emotional, or cultural pressures, expectations, examples, or violence in some form, conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional. The students would use this orientation to self-examine their life experiences of romance, dating, trauma, sex, and commit to unearth their relationship pitfalls, identify their issues, and heal the consequent emotional wounds.

How I knew this approach would work is because it was based on the knowledge that the lesbians taking the class had, listening to themselves before “coming out,” despite what their family and society said, did, or expected. So, now they needed to ask this same “inner voice” that had brought them to a positive identity of their gender and sexuality about their relationships. Aware that this introspective process could mean examining painful chapters in their personal histories, I included simple grounding and meditation exercises, as well as one-on-one and confidential posting opportunities in their weekly assignments to provide safety and security along their journey. As I regularly told and posted to the class, each person had to walk each step of their journey, but I was always with them. The class became a radical space for healing, which I taught to hundreds of students from 2001–16 in both in-person and online formats.

Once the class started, I quickly learned that more than half were survivors of violence, and some were actively in recovery and would speak about their experiences. However, I immediately realized it was not enough to hear and talk about it in a 3-hour class. In fact, many left the classroom dazed, glassy-eyed, or numb whenever a difficult topic came up. So, together with a handful of brave trauma survivors from one of my first classes, we initiated a Saturday healing event using nondiscursive healing modalities, such as sound, music, meditation, touch, drama, and movement. I taught meditation and drew on experienced healers from the community, like the Instituto Familiar de la Raza from the Mission District of San Francisco, which used healing drumming circles for their clients. Our group eventually became a recognized CCSF student club, Healing for Change (HFC). Over the next ten years, HFC offered biannual self-healing workshops as well as a full-day Saturday event for campus and community female survivors of sexual violence. At one point we accommodated 120 women in a bilingual, two-track workshop system for English and Spanish-speaking people.

As for my “QPOC/LGBT Communities of Color” class (see figure 2), I completely rebuilt and developed it in stages over a longer period of time. First, like the LGBT movement itself, LGBT Studies is mostly all white, in content, pedagogy, and teachers. But the solution is not additive; that is, to bring in more “diversity” and include some people of color to the curriculum. Instinctively, I knew it was a more fundamental problem and, thus, that class would require a transformative solution. But exactly what and how would take me years before I figured it out.



Fall 2018
ONLINE CLASS!

*City College of
San Francisco*

LGBTQ
Communities
of Color
(CRN 77185, Sec 831)

Instructor:
Trinity A. Ordonez, Ph.D.

FIGURE 2. Image of fall 2018 flyer for LGBTQ Communities of Color course at the City College of San Francisco. Image courtesy of Trinity A. Ordonez

I began by putting people of color back into LGBT and American history. Drawing on my dissertation research, I taught how race, gender, and sexuality “fault lines” in American society reproduced themselves in the 1960s through separatism or self-determination: Black, American Indian, Chicano/Puerto Rican, and Asian Power, and also the Women’s Liberation and Gay Liberation (later Pride) movements. Looking at this phenomena from the outside, many criticize separatism or identity politics as a weakness, a sign of social disunity. However, before the empowerment movements emerged, our communities were legally, socially, culturally, and institutionally hidden in or pushed to the margins of American society. That was (and still is) part of American society. White heteronormative men in America are on top of the hierarchy based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. Since the 1960s, these empowerment movements began to shake up this hierarchy from the very bottom. Separatism was, and still is, a necessary “step back” into ourselves—away from oppressive judgements of who or how anyone else thinks we “should” be—to determine instead for ourselves, who we really are. We each needed our own space to recreate ourselves—to be “by, for, and about” ourselves.

This was the undercurrent, one of the reasons the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) asked white people to leave the organization. Black Power meant Black people were “going to do it on their own,” without white people hindering or “aiding.” Other communities of color followed suit: Red Power, Brown Power, Yellow Power, and Women’s and Gay Liberations. Without the force of these social movements, orchestrated by no one and emerging unstoppably by many, we would not have Ethnic Studies, Women’s Studies, or LGBT Studies, just as an example.

Back to the class. Because my personal experience in these movements was a positive one of individual pride and collective empowerment, and I knew many

local QTPOC leaders, I invited them to be guest speakers during the three weeks we spent on each racial/ethnic group. If you recall from the time you took my class, I think you will agree that their presence and presentation of the history, issues, and organizing strategies of each group's distinct identities and politics both concretized and personalized an Ethnic Studies framework.

In 2008, the class focus shifted to QPOC cultural production since it is an area that depends on one's creativity, the place where LGBT people of color could express themselves freely. We therefore read and studied the works of past and current QPOC artists inspired by the example of the Black gay and lesbian people of the 1930s Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, who were of the first generation of Black people NOT born as slaves. The midterm and final "exams" of this class required each student to present a concept proposal for review by a jury of senior QPOC peers, culminating in a final presentation before the class. Many of those students from that class went on to launch their own cultural work as performers, poets, artists, and arts administrators.

Later, by the time you were in graduate school at UC Berkeley and you invited me to speak and/or attend critical events at UC Berkeley, such as the Queer People of Color and Decolonizing the University conferences, I learned the next key framework that you and other scholars of your generation were developing—decolonial scholarship and activism. Through this, I learned how racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism were central to the very creation and colonization of the Americas of today. Adopting a decolonial framework to my classes and pedagogy made sense.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *Let's go back to something you talked about earlier when you developed your "Lesbian Relationships" class. Here, you clearly combined education and healing practices. How did you get there, where did your path take you after, and did spirituality also become a part of your QPOC class?*

TRINITY ORDONA: I started to focus on spirituality as early as 2003. One day, I was walking in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco with my partner when we saw a sign announcing a psychic healing fair. We attended the event and I later took a free introductory workshop. The experience was positive and motivated me to learn more. I started taking classes at Psychic Horizon in San Francisco, beginning with energy basics, then advancing to healing techniques and "reading" energy, itself. After a two-year seminary training program, I became an ordained minister in the Church of Natural Grace. At the same time, I studied Buddhism, which gave me access to Eastern philosophies and practices and taught me how to calm down and listen to my inner self.

Together, psychic healing and Buddhist meditation opened me to a spiritual realm to which I didn't otherwise know, understand, or have access. Once I was in meditation trance, I could ask myself deep questions and my inner voice would speak the truth. I readily integrated the spiritual orientation and meditation techniques when they were appropriate to my classes. I then would plunge deeply into my own wounding and trauma and taught myself to release the resulting emotions, thoughts, memories, and feelings that were blocking my energy system. By 2005, I was teaching a simple 8-session workshop series where I demonstrated these techniques and taught others how to do the same.

Looking then at history and politics from a decolonial perspective, I readily saw the deeper spiritual significance of European colonization of the Americas: one of the reasons for the genocidal destruction of Indigenous people was because the Spanish didn't think they had souls; that is, they were NOT fully human. Ever since I saw Theodore De Bry's 16th-century copper etching "Feeding the Pagan Sodomites to the Dogs," I connected this vicious form of colonization as the foundational basis for the ongoing violent targeting of Queer people, especially Queer and Trans people of color.

Based on European conceptions of Christian norms, there are many "sins" committed by humankind, such as theft, lying, adultery, and murder, which are also "crimes" under the law. But why is the state of "being a homosexual," by itself, a "sin" so diabolical that it must be punished in public and by imprisonment, torture, and gruesome death? One has to wonder: What was the fear? What exactly did the Inquisitors and Colonizers want to obliterate? The research on Native American Indians by Will Roscoe and others on the "berdache" or "two-spirit" people reports that many early Native American tribes' gender-variant people had spiritual, special roles in their communities as leaders, healers, teachers, or cultural practitioners. Prior to Christian domination or the violence of the Mission system, the question was less about who two-spirit people loved and more about the roles they played in their societies. Europe's method of violence and rape to take over lands and people happened regardless of gender and sexuality. But could it be that the maliciousness immediately delivered to the two-spirit people was intended to pre-empt the threat of their influence? That they could otherwise have led the challenge to stop the colonizers?

As I thought about the colonization of the Americas, I also connected violence against LGBTQ+ people of color in both American history and contemporary contexts. By removing the "Queer" leader/healer/teacher all at once as they did then, did it leave a spiritual leadership vacuum? Did this lead to core destabilization and, thus, no defense against not only colonial violence, but also racism, sexism, and toxic masculinity that subsequently implanted in its place? I thought about violence today and its effects, like people attempting to take our power away, which is where I made connections to the sexual abuse I survived. It made me think how getting rid of or damaging QTPOC today could be a way of continually removing a core, central spiritual and cultural component that naturally exists in communities. After all, why else are Queer people found across all dimensions of difference—race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, age, nationality, ethnicity, and religion—if we are not a core part of Mother Nature's plan?

Religious dogma has not only denied LGBTQ+ people, especially of color, spirituality, but also has made us antithetical. I therefore think that the white-led LGBT Movement is completely unaware of this "colonial" part of our Queer legacy because white people, including its Queer members, have been "exempted" from the worst, most savage aspects of colonization and its economic engine of capitalism. The real story of the Americas is one of conquest and colonization by white settlers for the riches of its natural resources and later for the mercantile and industrial wealth created by stealing land from its native peoples and enslaving African people and now exploiting undocumented immigrants, among others. The founding "democracy" is

a system by, for, and about white, landed men. The extension of democracy to everyone else came much later—hundreds of years later, in fact.

I brought these intersectionality threads together in the last version of my QPOC class after studying the 2012 Mayan Calendar Prediction, which marked the beginning of a cosmic, global transformation: the end of the “way it used to be for the very few” and the beginning of the “way it must be for all.”

Thus, it became clear to me to get this message out, especially to Queer and Trans people of color, who are the most immediate inheritors of this otherwise missing legacy. We must retake our place as active leaders, healers, and teachers at this moment of a radically changing and transforming world. Armed with the realization of our cosmic place, Queer and Trans people can readily access the critical, decolonial spiritual framework undergirding our potentialities and abilities to lead in the transformation of ourselves AND society. We have a special role to play in moving the global collective into a new paradigm of consciousness by mediating spiritual matters as we have done in the past: between heaven and earth, men and women, young and old, and the past and future. I believe that this is the true meaning of being “two spirit” because we are of both and everything in between.

XAMUEL BAÑALES: *Lastly, what can this “Queer” spiritual perspective offer to Ethnic Studies?*

TRINITY ORDONA: Academia generally does not seriously incorporate spiritual matters, which, I believe, has a legitimate place in our knowledge. The mind is not the same as the brain, and spirit is not the same as the mind. The brain is the physical receptor, but the question is: What in the body uses the brain? Western science, such as medicine, can look at a body like a machine, but the spirit makes a body alive, express itself. Society confuses and conflates religion and spirituality—it is similar to people who see Ethnic Studies as only an academic discipline. In reality, Ethnic Studies is part of an epistemic decolonial movement. Humans create religion as structure, ritual, and with rules—often with corrupt intentions—to interpret spirituality, while the latter can represent a freedom that does not fit with doctrine.

We already have productive examples and scholarship from activists and scholars who offer insight on spiritual matters, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Gloria Anzaldúa, Leela Fernandes, and Laura E. Pérez. This type of spirituality could help build more authentic coalitions and communities. It could help us to break boundaries of colonizing human categorization, or help to transcend the confines of contemporary society. I think if we were to free ourselves from the prejudice of reducing spirituality to religion, it could open these doors otherwise closed out of ignorance and preconceptions. In addition, invigorating the spiritual practices of our ancestors and in our communities—which is already happening—has powerful meanings, intentions, and effects. Spirituality combined with action could provide the clarity we need to move further toward liberation.

I went into psychic energy work and deep meditation to understand and heal the past—myself and other abuse survivors from childhood trauma. I turned to spirituality to transform. In trance, I can, from a bird’s-eye view and an elevated perspective, see everything. For example, when an eagle looks down and sees a field mouse on the ground, it is not imagination. For its survival, the eagle is born with very sharp eyesight to be able to see what is going on below. The eagle does not fly

down and “hope” to find a mouse somewhere. Before the eagle can fly down to catch a mouse, it sees it from that high position and then strikes with precision. In a similar way, Ethnic Studies could be like the eagle, where it evaluates the university and society with sharp eyes and from an elevated perspective and then strikes, for its survival and forward movement, with clarity and precision. The university and society may not understand this, but practitioners of Ethnic Studies can use the truths enabled by our decolonizing “eagle eyes” to find entirely new meanings, ways, and paths forward. ■

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