

Chela Sandoval

Interview:

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Chela Sandoval is Associate Professor and current Chair of the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Sandoval is an intellectual activist and is the author of *Methodology of the Oppressed*, Forward by Angela Y. Davis. She was the keynote speaker at the 2002 *Race and Digital Space II Conference* hosted by the University of Southern California.

OSA: Where and when were you born?

CHELA: I was born in the 50's and raised in San José, California.

OSA: Back in the 70's, you were one of the first Chicanas working in moving image production. How did you become involved in making media?

CHELA: In 1971 I took a class at UC Santa Cruz called "Women in Literature," which was a radical concept at the time. It was shocking to see a course that had the word "women" in the title, that meant that women were a category of analysis of their own, that "women" were part of what was important to study. When I went to the class, there was an aura of excitement. We were all very present. In the first part of the class, the professor asked us to give presentations on varying books we had read, but in the second part of the class we had to break up into collectives that had to do with advancing the condition of women. And the group I joined was the Women's Media Collective. It just so happened that some of those women had already been meeting and making a film together and they were called the Women's Film Collective. They were finishing that film at the same time we were constituting ourselves as the Women's Media Collective and a new collective was born. And that media collective determined the next six, seven, ten years of my life.

We thought of ourselves as an underground guerilla media troop, and we had varying plans for how to get access to equipment. And at the time there were national alternative



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media collectives growing up all over the county in the form of community access television collectives. Community access television really began around that time as part of the radical movements of the '60s. Our Woman's Media Collective was part of that community access television movement. We made connections with a community access television group that was traveling from town to town, and when they settled in Santa Cruz we made a strong alliance with them. One of its members, David Castro, was a wonderful, revolutionary thinker who believed that carrying television access to the people was the way in which we were going to change the world, because we were going to give technological access, and give people voices who had never had a voice before, and allow us all control of our own images.

David Castro, Sarah Nelson and their group started the first television studio in town that was to provide community access television, and the Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective began producing one hour television show per week for the local Santa Cruz Cable TV station. This went on for thirty-two weeks, and we made thirty-two documentaries about women in Santa Cruz County. We began to take ourselves seriously as television producers. I remember David Castro was very supportive of me as an eighteen-year-old cameraperson. He used to say, "Chela, you are the most sensitive, and therefore gifted cameraperson in town," and he had me do the camerawork for all the documentaries he and Sarah did. But, he was murdered in a police shoot out in San Francisco in the early 80's.

The Santa Cruz Women's Media Collective also ran community access television seminars. We would go to community centers with a "portapak," cameras and editing decks, and show

people how to use them. We'd have people go out and make documentaries. Part of my excitement about the Women's Media Collective was that we had an opportunity to work with creating the world anew through a form of artistry that was connected to the community in an exciting, living way.

OSA: What were some of the projects you did with the Women's Media Collective?

CHELA: We made documentaries that were connected to our community activism. We worked in the canneries as socialists, and made a documentary about that process. We made documentaries about sexuality (which won a New York Video Festival Award), about teaching, about the unions, childcare, Vietnam, film. We made a documentary, and some of us produced the "Amazon Music Festival," which was the first US women's music festivals held, this one was in the mountains outside Santa Cruz in 1974. Everyone at the festival was a woman except for one guy, who was a transsexual. She/he was the first to cause a controversy about transsexuality in the women's community in the United States. People debated for years about whether she/he should have been there.

In fact, that documentary documents very little of what really went on there. A lot of the footage was lost over the years. We edited together whatever we could salvage and that was what you saw in the film, video, which by the way, was collected and archived at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

OSA: What happened to some of the other women in the collective?

CHELA: Anne Irving became the first woman to join the Projectionists Union before it was shut down. She became an independent filmmaker, and went on

to manage and coordinate the Pacific Film Archives. Pam Springer, editor-par-excellence, went on to coordinate and supervise video and telecommunications systems for Kaiser Hospitals in California. Cathy and Barbara Zuetland went on to become well-known independent filmmakers, producing the lesbian mothering documentary called *In the Best Interests of the Children*. Suzanne Schifman became an editor for NBC or CBS or one of them. Jan Hughes, Catherine Angel, Brenda, Debbie, Zoë, I've lost track of them over the years.

OSA: In the late 70's you made a transition away from your work with the Women's Media Collective. What motivated that change in direction?

CHELA: In 1978, I won an internship at ABC documentary news in New York City, which the feminist Barbara Walters arranged for me. The internship paid \$400 a month. I had to move from Santa Cruz to New York, and I went, but I didn't know how to make such a profound relocation. Barbara Walters was great for trying to bring me in, but she wasn't there the day I started, Marlene Saunders met me instead. She is another of the great, old-timer, successful feminist women – but not as feminist as Walters. Marlene Saunders was busy that day. Her approach was “you can start your internship any time you wish. Here's the paperwork. I'll see you later...good-bye.”

You and Pam Springer accompanied me on that trip. You and I were strangers in a strange land, Chicanas in 1978 Manhattan meeting other Latinas for the first time. We were interviewed lots, people asking us what it meant to be Chicana. You, Pam and me visited PBS in New York and talked to all the television producers there, because we saw ourselves as community access ambassadors. At the time, there were no Latinas, Chicanas

or Chicanos to talk to at the studios, only a few isolated Blacks and Puerto Ricans who met with us as friends. We had a great time moving around in the city.

So, to make a long story short, I didn't end up doing that. Instead, I did an intensive summer workshop with Constance Penley and Bertrand Augst at UC Berkeley. Then I was accepted into the History of Consciousness (HistCon) PhD program at UC Santa Cruz where I went on to study with Stephen Heath, Teresa de Lauretis, Vivian Sobchack and Janey Place. I studied film theory and production, helped build master control with Aubry Harris, taught video production, and made a documentary about childcare for my first year qualifying essay.

OSA: How did you become interested in HistCon?

CHELA: I admired the political activists who were graduate students and teachers in the HistCon program. I worked at UC Santa Cruz as a video technician teaching students how to make documentary videotapes for the Community Studies media lab. Our job was to establish a community access television studio so that Community Studies majors could make documentaries. It was from there that I decided to go to graduate school. I had been a political activist throughout the 70's. When the 80's rolled around, I finally said ‘I can't spend the rest of my life doing this.’ I need to understand how to make activism matter, how to make my life matter. I thought HistCon would be a good place for me to try figure it out. I felt the activism was...frustrating; we were repeating the same practices over and over again. I really needed to think about what we were committing our lives to, to see if there was another way to make positive social change. That's when I applied to HistCon to learn from activist-theorists and philosophers, in those early

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stages it was Howie Winant, Catherine Angel, Mike Rotkin, Nancy Shaw, Karlene Faith, Herbert Marcuse, Hayden White and Norman O. Brown. That's how I began my graduate career.

In HistCon I began reading a lot. My dissertation originally was about women and video; I have a lot of research on that topic, and I wrote a short article, I was interested in images and power, about people becoming more than simply producers, but in Boal's terms, becoming spec-actors, not spectators, but spec-actors in the system that we both behold and create. The idea that everything is performance is an idea that U.S. third world feminists in the 70's used as a basic premise for our politics. In order for us to realize that everything is performative, we needed to have access to and recognize the sense of mobile identity that Gloria Anzaldúa called a *conciencia de la mestiza*; this was the ability to move from one sense of one's identity to another sense of one's identity and not only in order to negotiate survival. The purpose of *la conciencia* was to take an active part in creating realities that would have the best opportunity for generating egalitarian relationships. So this idea of us being both spectators and actors, of being spec-actors, was one that we believed in as 1970 Santa Cruz Women's Media activists, as U.S. third world feminist activists, as radical HistCon media philosophers, and this is what we were all thinking and talking about in those days, the early 80's. So I spent years studying philosophy, aesthetic philosophy, media philosophy, film theory and criticism. I moved to Santa Barbara, finished my book, and started teaching a class called "Decolonizing Cyberspace" in 1994.

OSA: Speaking of your "Decolonizing Cyberspace" class, as a member of the Women's Media Collective and then after, you've worked very closely with emerging

electronic and digital technologies.

CHELA: In the early 70's collectives, women had never before touched the technology, had never been electricians. We started thinking of ourselves as electricians. There was a small group of us who actually participated in building master control, laying all the wiring for the television station, putting all the cabling in, making the studio work. And then we went in front of the camera as news reporters for the campus news station. We were serious about getting good at what we were doing.

We went to women's media conferences and film conferences all over the country. New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Berkeley. We traveled and showed our videotapes; we met with feminist media activists from all over the country. We created "video letters" so we could communicate with each other. And we saw ourselves as technology activists. My father was always fascinated with technology and believed that technology was going to bring new hope for creating a better world, he felt we had to use technology to make things easier and more egalitarian for people. And so that's part of what drove my interest. He and my old friend Gloria Anzaldúa had a shared fascination with technology, cyberspace and science fiction, and we spent a lot of time talking about the new worlds possible and how, through varying sorts of technological and spiritual forms, we could change the world. There was a little group of us that came to HistCon, to Santa Cruz, all interested in advancing this kind of thought.

OSA: Now you are working at UC Santa Barbara?

CHELA: Today I'm Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at UC Santa

Barbara. My most recent class was called "Video Witnessing." The idea here is that we become "active witnesses" in relation to what is going on around us by using digital video. Here, as video producers, as camera people, we are not simply "spectators" of what is, in a *cinéma vérité* sense, we are not those who are supposedly "capturing reality," but instead we position ourselves as spec-actors. I mean, active witnesses both witness and participate in what is going on around us. Video is one tool for doing active witnessing. We talk in the class about what it means to be an active witness and what it means to be a video witness, what our responsibilities are to the communities we are videotaping.

OSA: Can you elaborate on the role of the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department and the work you've been doing in it?

CHELA: The department is more than a department; it's an intellectual center. We are a department that studies theories of decolonization and theories of emancipation, using *mestizaje* and border theories as a means for understanding. That's what the discipline of Chicana and Chicano Studies offers. Part of what we do as a department is community building – intellectual community building, academic community building, we strive to make connections between community groups of varying kinds. The Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies is one of the first of its kind in the nation.

OSA: You were one of the few women of color in the Women's Media Collective, so you've been dealing with issues of diversity for many years. How do you approach diversity, or how do issues of diversity affect you today?

CHELA: At UC Santa Barbara, less

than one percent of the administration is represented by people of color; if we're talking about the professoriate, less than one percent of the professoriate, too, is comprised of women of color. Of the professors of color who are present, most of them are appointed to one of the ethnic studies departments. Now there's a big discussion going on about diversity. How do we bring more people of color to the Communications Department? Or into History or Political Science or any of the sciences?

I hear certain Academics saying that they don't want to sacrifice "quality" for "diversity," but they don't understand that in order to have quality, we must have diverse forms of thinking taking place in the University. Diverse class backgrounds, ethnic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, diverse language backgrounds, peoples who have experienced colonization within the confines of these national borders or outside of them bring the kind of diverse intellectual, emotional, political, and spiritual perspectives that are ultimately going to bring a higher form of intellectual engagement and scholarship to departments, and to the intellectual endeavors of the university as a whole. That's something that's hard for a lot of people to wrap their minds around because they haven't had the experience or training around diversity that many of us have been forced to develop.

OSA: How can we better work to bring about institutional change?

CHELA: The only way change can occur is by instituting new structural forms that value the differences diverse voices bring to bear on reality: truth and reconciliation commissions, "*estacion libres*," experimental free zones like those proposed by the Zapatistas, these and other examples all are proposing and generating these new forms. Only

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then can society and psyches expand and grow towards more egalitarian possibilities. I think larger institutions, like the University of California, can create new experimental structures to allow us to identify and develop these new possibilities.

What a department like Chicano and Chicana Studies contributes is the recognition that the global situation now calls for the understanding that colonial forms of thought have determined much of human history. And now that humanity has become “global” in its ability to communicate with all “others,” we need to focus on de-colonial modes of connecting, exchanging, communicating, and creating egalitarian cultural forms. Although the West has brought us incredible, interesting forms of being and models for generating human existence, there are also incredibly rich models and profound suggestions offered by indigenous peoples and those cultures that have experienced colonization, and de-colonization. Now human beings

are in a position where we can go way beyond older imperial and colonial forms, but, unfortunately, societies are not yet able to respond to these new possibilities. There’s a constant rumble of de-colonial forces, and indigenous cosmo-visions that have to do with social and psychic forms and feminist forms of connection that still need to be recognized and legitimated for human societies to move to new structures, to more interesting modes of evolution.

That’s what SWAPA is (Spoken Word Art Performance Activism.) It’s a way of communicating and creating connections between people that is based on older rituals where councils of people came together to experiment, to speak truths that they are then able to share, transform, and reshape as the collective changes and grows. SWAPA is an important example of how we can bring spec-actorship into our smaller organizing communities in ways that can transform our larger societies. SWAPA is a technology for truth and reconciliation.

