Rhetorical Functions of Letter Writing: Dialogic Collaboration, Affirmation, and Catharsis in Dolores Huerta’s Letters

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This essay focuses on the letters that Dolores Huerta wrote to César Chávez in the 1960s and 1970s to better understand her role in the United Farm Workers (UFW) union and the functions of letter writing for individuals such as Huerta, who faced constraining ideologies of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Huerta used these letters to establish dialogic collaboration with Chávez. These letters also had a more personal function through affirmation and catharsis, enabling Huerta to affirm her role within the UFW by noting her accomplishments and sacrifices for the union and by expressing both her personal and professional problems. These rhetorical functions of her letter writing contributed to Huerta’s identity consciousness, enabling her to build an identity that emphasized social justice issues related to race, ethnicity, class, nationality, and gender.

Keywords: Catharsis; Dialogic Collaboration; Dolores Huerta; Letter Writing; United Farm Workers

In 1962, Dolores Huerta and César Chávez co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers (UFW), in their focused efforts to combat abuses related to agricultural industries and farm work. Whereas César Chávez has received much attention for his role as the president and co-founder of the UFW through biographies, videos, books, and rhetorical scholarship (Hammerback & Jensen, 1980, 1994, 1998; Hammerback, Jensen, & Gutiérrez, 1985; Jensen, Burkholder, & Hammerback, 2003; Jensen & Hammerback, 2002;
Yinger, 1975), Dolores Huerta has received substantially less focus in historical research (see García, 2008; Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995; Rose, 1990b, 2004; Ruiz, 1998) and virtually no reference at all in rhetorical scholarship (see Sowards, 2010). Some scholars have argued that her contributions to the UFW movement, such as her leadership role as vice-president and participation in protests, boycotts, membership drives, and collective bargaining, were as influential and important as César Chávez’s efforts (García, 2008; Rose, 1990b, 2004; Sowards, 2010). Griswold del Castillo and García further noted that “Chávez was the visible leader and Huerta was the ‘hidden’ one. He functioned as the catalyst; she was the engine” (p. 59). Her exclusion in many historical and rhetorical analyses of the UFW indicates a need to address her contributions to the UFW and other causes, such as the Chicano Movement, where rhetorical scholarship has also overlooked her accomplishments (Delgado, 1995; Jensen & Hammerback, 1980, 1982).

Furthermore, the extant letters that she sent to César Chávez illustrate aspects of the UFW social movement that illuminate Huerta’s role within that movement and also demonstrate how her letters functioned rhetorically. Her frustrations, setbacks, achievements, and sense of self emerged in her letters to César Chávez and others involved in the UFW movement. Flores (1996) argued that for marginalized groups, such as Chicanas and Latinas, private discourse plays an important public role. For example, Huerta’s letters functioned as a precursor to future actions as she discussed goals, problems, and solutions in her letters to Chávez. Palczewski (1996) and Gring-Pemble (1998) observed that letter writing is an embodied rhetoric that validates personal experience tied to real lives and the self, and can play an important role in social movement activities.

This essay examines Huerta’s letters to better understand Dolores Huerta’s life and letter writing as a rhetorical form in the UFW organization and movement. Although Huerta was well known for her UFW public speaking events (Sowards, 2010), examining her private letters to Chávez provides insight into how she developed an assertive public persona. In what follows, I first provide an overview to rhetorical scholarship on letter writing, and then a brief biographical sketch of Huerta’s general contributions to the farm worker movement. I then expound upon how Huerta’s letters expand our understanding of letter writing, through rhetorical functions of dialogic collaboration, affirmation, and catharsis. Finally, I conclude that these rhetorical functions illustrate an expanded understanding of letter writing as rhetorical form, one that fosters identities of social justice related to gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, and class.

**Letter Writing as Private and Public Rhetorical Form**

The study of letter writing in rhetorical scholarship focuses on two types of letters, those that are intended for a public audience and those that are meant for a single person to whom the letter is addressed. In social movements and protests, public letters have often been used to highlight injustices and causes. For example, Martin
Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” offered a response to eight clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama who wrote a public letter urging protestors to cease their activities. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s response letter set a personal tone, creating an intimate relationship between the author and reader, but was more formal and permanent than a speech (Fulkerson, 1979; Gaipa, 2007). The choice to write a letter instead of a newspaper editorial reflects a rhetorical choice of personal connection with audiences.

Catherine Palczewski (1996) also discussed the nature of the letter intended for public audiences in her analysis of one of Gloria Anzaldúa’s public letters. This letter was also intended for a public audience that includes “3rd world women writers” and others who are interested in Anzaldúa’s work. Palczewski argued that this letter specifically named the audience, requested a response from this audience, and dated a specific time in the author’s life that allowed that author to convey a story through personal narrative. The personal nature of the letter reflects a presentation of self through personal accounts of the writer’s daily activities, goals, frustrations, and reflections through embodied rhetoric (Palczewski, 1996). The letter, then, has been used with rhetorical efficacy to create identification and what Kenneth Burke (1969) called consubstantiality or shared substance in letters to public audiences.

However, a private letter is usually directed to a much smaller audience, often one other person and is never intended to be publicly distributed. Rhetorical studies of private letters illustrate that such letters recount personal stories and create narratives or arguments to whom the letter is addressed (Carlson, 1995; Forbes, 2004; Gring-Pemble, 1998; McCormick, 2008). As Carlson illustrated in her essay about the private letters of Maimie Pinzer, an early 20th-century prostitute, private letters adapt language to a specific audience and present or recreate the self as the author intends through narrative form. In addition, because the author is familiar with the intended recipient of the letter, the letter writer may use language of authority and knowledge about the correspondent to establish connection and identification, demonstrated in the letters of Caterina da Siena in the 14th and 15th centuries (Forbes, 2004). The letter can also resist social structures and rhetorical norms through argument by example, as McCormick illustrated in his analysis of Christine de Pizan’s letter to the queen of France in 1405.

Gring-Pemble (1998) further observed that letters between members or organizers of a movement can function as the pre-genesis to a social movement by clarifying and discussing ideas in letter form. The private communication that functions as a pre-genesis to a social movement operates initially in the private sphere, but as these private ideas become more clearly articulated, they begin to appear in public rhetoric as speeches, political lobbying, and other forms (Gring-Pemble, 1998). Thus, the initially private rhetoric becomes public rhetoric, destabilizing the boundary between what is considered public and private spheres. For marginalized groups, this precursory discussion function in letter writing is especially important (Gring-Pemble, 1998; Holling, 2000). In particular, Latina and Chicana feminist scholars have identified the importance of identity and unity as a mechanism for discussing experiences and as an outlet for frustrations (Flores 1996; Holling, 2000; Hurtado 1996).
Michelle Holling (2000) also contended that the study of Chicana and Latina women’s communication in the private and public sphere allows scholarship to move beyond the study of gender, to intersectional identities related to ethnicity, race, class, religion, and gender. Vargas (2000) contended that “the reconstruction of the everyday lives of these wage workers, their worldviews, values, and habits provides a critical assessment of the rich diversity of their experiences” and for analysis rooted in intersectional aspects of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion (p. 153).

In the rest of this essay, I analyze letters written by Dolores Huerta addressed to César Chávez, obtained from the UFW’s official archive at the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. I have purposefully not included Chávez’s letters in this analysis for several reasons. First, there are only a few Chávez letters available that are specifically addressed to Huerta. Since Huerta’s letters are not dated, it is also difficult to determine which Chávez letters are responses to specific letters from Huerta. In addition, because Chicana activists from the UFW and the Chicano Movement have been obscured in historical and rhetorical analyses (Pesquera & de la Torre, 1993; Rose, 1988; Ruiz, 1998), this essay only focuses on Huerta’s rhetoric to provide a richer analysis of her discourse.

Alternative forms of communication have been less explored in rhetorical scholarship, with the notable exceptions of Susan Zaeske’s (2002) work on signatures, petitions, and audiences, Jennifer Borda’s (2002) research on parades, Lisa Gring-Pemble’s (1998) study of letters, and Kristin Vonnegut’s (1992) call for the expansion of what counts as rhetorical artifacts in courses in public address. Recovery of women’s rhetoric has been an important project in the communication discipline for more than two decades (e.g., Blankenship & Robson, 1995; Campbell, 1989; Zaeske, 1995, 2002), but few rhetorical studies have examined Latina/Chicana voices from the 1960s and 1970s social movements, with the exception of Sowards’ (2010) study of Huerta’s public discourse. As Raka Shome (1996) and others have observed, the way in which non-white women negotiate social movement territory requires diverse rhetorical options and strategies, which suggests the importance of including Latina/Chicana voices in rhetorical scholarship (see also Campbell, 1986, 1995; Tonn, 1996).

This analysis of Huerta’s letters reveals three rhetorical functions that extend our understanding of letter writing as rhetorical form. First, her letters functioned as a dialogue with herself and with Chávez to work through problems and UFW activities. Although Gring-Pemble (1998) explored how letters function as collective consciousness raising and move social change from the private to the public sphere, this project expands Gring-Pemble’s work to explore how letters also create space for collaborative dialogue for the self and for union activities. In addition, Huerta used her letter writing for (self) affirmation by illustrating how she found solutions to her own problems as well as her successes in organizing farm workers and other UFW activities, building on Carlson’s (1995) study of character invention and differentiation through letters. More specifically, Huerta’s letters did not invent her character through narrative as Carlson illustrated in her study of Maimie Pinzer but, rather, these letters outlined her accomplishments, providing an affirmatory process through
written documentation. It is this written affirmation that reminded both Chávez and Huerta that she was capable and competent. Finally, her letters functioned cathartically in the process of describing her daily life, and specifically the problems she encountered as a social activist, organizer, and primary caregiver for her eleven children. These functions contributed to shaping and constructing identities related to race, ethnicity, class, and gender as well as her public persona.

¡Viva La Causa!: The Inception of the UFW and Dolores Huerta’s Involvement

Huerta was born in Dawson, New Mexico in 1930 but grew up in Stockton, California, raised by her single mother and grandfather. Huerta attended University of the Pacific’s Delta Community College, where she studied in the teaching certificate program (Lori de Leon, personal communication, June 14, 2006; Rose, 1988, 2004). By the early 1950s, Huerta had a nuclear family and marriage, a job teaching elementary school, and an associate’s degree, a life that represented the American Dream (Abalos, 1998; Castillo, 1995; Martinez, 2000). However, Huerta recognized, as Jacqueline Martinez argued, that the effect of failure to achieve the American Dream means that “those who have not made it up the socioeconomic scale deserve to be at the bottom. And it removes social accountability to even the most horrifically poor, destitute, and socially isolated communities within society” (pp. 21–22). Huerta eventually rejected this idealized version of the American Dream so that she could work to help others to achieve a higher quality standard of living by giving up her teaching job, divorcing her first husband, and working for farm worker causes, often surviving on as little as $5 to $35 per week in the 1960s and 1970s.

As a teacher in a public elementary school, many of Huerta’s students were poor and hungry farm workers’ children, which eventually led to her interest in farm workers’ conditions (Frank, 1987). Huerta became involved in the Stockton branch of the Community Service Organization (CSO), a group that worked to protect poor people’s rights and assist them in acquiring basic public services (Coburn, 1976; Ferris & Sandoval, 1997). Huerta and Chávez soon recognized a need for farm worker protections beyond what the CSO could offer since The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 granted the right to unionize to all workers with the exception of domestic workers and farm workers (Ferris & Sandoval, 1997; Shaw, 2008). Although many attempts to create organized protests and union-like groups existed long before the inception of the UFW (Ruiz, 1998), these attempts failed because laws offered no protections and guarantees for these workers.

In addition to being the co-founder of the UFW, Huerta was also the vice president of the organization. César Chávez called Huerta’s involvement in the founding of the organization critical, especially for her effectiveness in collective bargaining and lobbying (Foster, 1996). In the 1960s, Huerta’s key contributions were signing new members, lobbying, and testifying in Washington, DC and at the state capitol in Sacramento. Huerta also negotiated the first contract for the UFW in the 1965 Delano grape strike (Rose, 1988; Shaw, 2008), a feat that has been attributed to Chávez
elsewhere (e.g., UFW History, 2000). Huerta is also responsible for organizing the successful grape boycott on the East Coast (Rose, 1988; Shaw, 2008) and implementing El Malcriado, the union newspaper, along with Chávez (“Cultivating Creativity,” n.d.). Another major task that Huerta tackled was the passage of the 1975 Californian Agricultural Labor Relations Act (Coburn, 1976; Rose, 1988), among other legislative and organizing achievements.

Huerta’s visibility in the UFW movement defied stereotypes of Mexican American women, as Rose (1988) argued, “Huerta’s rebellion against traditional gender ideology led to major improvements for an exploited ethnic minority. Her accomplishments were a great source of pride for both men and women in the UFW” (pp. 102–103). Although Huerta’s role as a non-traditional female leader of the UFW may have been an exception to the rule, she became a role model for many women during and after these movements, especially given that many Chicanas were excluded from leadership positions and relegated to stereotypical gendered positions within the Chicano movement (Ruiz, 1998). However, Pesquera and de la Torre (1993) and Ruiz contended that Chicana voices were often stereotyped even when they were able to speak out, being accused of becoming feminists or “aggringadas” (acculturated to mainstream, White U.S. culture; Ruiz, 1998, p. 108). Aída Hurtado (1998) argued that acts of disruption that dispel these stereotypes were essential to moving forward because such acts created space for resistance. Huerta was and still is an important figure in this sense because she challenged notions of stereotyped gender roles for Mexican American women, but also expectations about ethnicity, race, gender, and class. Huerta rejected victimage through her sense of agency and assertiveness. Hurtado (1998) observed that it is important to recognize the “joys of struggle” over victimhood and to celebrate agency so there is hope for the future rather than the despair of the past (p. 145). Although Huerta retired from the UFW in 2000 at the age of 70, she is still very active as a speaker, organizer, and campaigner, especially through the work of her foundation, the Dolores Huerta Foundation.

Rhetorical Functions of Letter Writing: Dialogic Collaboration, Affirmation, Catharsis

As rhetorical scholars such as Carlson (1995), Palczewski (1996), and Gring-Pemble (1998) observed, letters, whether intended for public or private audiences, employ a personal tone. As such, Huerta’s letters were personal in nature, especially because she had an intimate relationship with Chávez as a long-time friend and collaborator. Huerta regularly used the first person, signed letters with her first name only, wrote in the active rather than passive voice, and failed to correct or notice spelling and grammatical errors. In addition, she regularly used more informal language, such as “your favorite paper $$$,” “thru” instead of through, and “ha, ha” to signify a joke (“Just a Few Short Lines,” n.d.; “This Letter Has Been,” n.d.; “You Have Probably Thought,” n.d.). Huerta also frequently asked about the Chávez family (e.g., “Thank You Very Much,” n.d.).

Huerta also used Spanish and English code switching, using Spanish words on occasion to express a concept that poorly translates into English or when it best
suited her choice of words (see Jensen & Hammerback, 2002, for a discussion on how César Chávez similarly used code switching in his public addresses). These characteristics of Huerta’s letters exemplify the personal nature of letter writing and how she tailored her letters to her recipient, César Chávez. However, beyond the rhetorical style of personal tone, Huerta’s letters also exhibit characteristics related to her motives for writing these letters to Chávez, revealing how letters function beyond sharing of information or relationship building, including collaborative, confirmatory, and cathartic rhetorical purposes. These functions also illustrate intertwined purposes of pre-genesis stage of social movements (Gring-Pemble, 1998) and sharing of personal stories (Carlson, 1995) to illustrate the complicated and multi-faceted nature of letter writing. Gring-Pemble contended that letter writing for 19th-century women’s rights activists served “to test ideas, challenge opposing views, refine opinions and build consensus” (p. 50). While Huerta’s letters to Chávez illustrate these pre-genesis functions of letter writing, her letters also demonstrate a more collaborative, collectivistic aspect of letter writing through exchange of ideas and a tone of uncertainty. The very personal nature of these letters also demonstrates Huerta’s epistemological standpoint reflected in her letters about her everyday family life and as a farm worker activist. Indeed, García (2008) noted that “Huerta’s life tells us something about the condition of farm workers” (p. xx). This agency of voice and giving space to marginalized voices is important for understanding these perspectives (Córdova, 1999; Holling, 2000), and also for building an understanding of how these rhetorical functions in Huerta’s letters contributed to her social justice identities related to race, gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality.

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**Letter Writing as Dialogic Collaboration**

While Chávez and Huerta generated many of their organizational ideas working together in the CSO before focusing on farm workers’ rights, and in meetings when they managed to find time and the transportation to get together, Huerta’s letters are one of the few recorded documentations of how Huerta and Chávez discussed UFW activities and ideas. The nature of the UFW movement and organization was more collectivistic and communal; for example, entire families and their children were involved in boycott strategies and picket lines (Rose, 1990a; Ruiz, 1998). Delgado’s (1999) study of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial style reflects this kind of collective understanding: “In the collective frame, ingroupness, community, and interdependence are organizing cultural concepts that structure communication and discourse” (p. 19). Huerta’s letters to Chávez suggest a collective, collaborative rhetoric in which she discussed ideas with Chávez through her focus on interdependence within the UFW organization through collaborative discussions about union activities and opinion seeking.

When writing about the union, which was almost always the focus of Huerta’s letters, three aspects demonstrate the way in which her letters function as collaboration through written dialogue. First, Huerta’s letters represent discussions of possible
directions in which the UFW was headed and what objectives they wanted to pursue. Many policies and objectives implemented in the UFW were first discussed as only vague ideas in letters. For example, the implementation of the UFW newspaper, *El Malcriado*, was discussed in Huerta’s letters to Chávez before the implementation of the idea:

> Cesar, I think we should get the show on the road. I mentioned to you before if you wanted me to get adds [sic] to start out with, I think I can get them. What we should do, is budget for a three month out-put of the paper, get the adds [sic] for a three month period, and also plan the content of the paper for that length of time, then go out and get the adds [sic]. We can probably write most of the stuff ourselves and plan what photos we want to use, etc. I wish I could get to Delano to discuss all this with you... (“This Letter Has Been,” n.d.)

Huerta also used the collective “we” to coordinate actions, expressing her desire to meet in person for further discussion about how to take action for implementation of the union newspaper. The union newspaper was later implemented in 1964 by Chávez and Huerta; the first issues of the newspaper illustrate some of the ideas mentioned here, especially the use of artwork, cartoons, photographs, and large number of advertisements from local businesses that were included in each issue (“Cultivating Creativity,” n.d.; “El Malcriado,” n.d.). Further demonstrating the collaborative nature of the UFW movement, none of the early issues of *El Malcriado* had author attributions, including each issue’s editorial (“El Malcriado,” n.d.).

In addition, Huerta’s letters reflect an uncertainty not found in her more public rhetoric. Huerta wrote her letters with a personal tone while writing about policy issues for the UFW. In discussing these policies and issues, Huerta frequently wrote with uncertainty of the successes and future actions of the organizations. In another letter discussing the feasibility of starting the union newspaper, *El Malcriado*, she wrote with this uncertainty, asking for Chávez’s input:

> I don’t know what we are going to do about the newspaper. It all really hinges on you and what you are going to do. If you want me to move down there and take over your duties of paper work, I guess I can. ...I guess the only alternative to freeing you for the newspaper is to get more members so we can hire some clerical help. Am iI [sic] right in this assumption? If you have other thoughts let me know. (“Since I Had Not Heard,” 1964)

Huerta supported the implementation of the newspaper, but her verbal hedges and uncertainty “I don’t know what we are going to do,” “It all really hinges on you,” and “I guess,” also demonstrate that they were working through ideas about the actual work of putting the newspaper together in a collaborative approach.

A final and related way Huerta’s private letters function as dialogic collaboration to later actions is the reciprocity of offering and asking opinions concerning a variety of issues. Huerta used these letters as a way to articulate issues and develop ideas and possible solutions, to discuss with Chávez or invite his feedback, or to work through her own plan of action through the process of writing the letter. For example, in the
following letter, she discussed some ideas for membership recruitment, one of her key contributions in the early years of the UFW:

I had a brain storm—on the ab 59, when it goes into effect now in January, lets [sic] try to get some of the members with large families that can’t join now for lack of funds in to [sic] the Welfare to make the applications. If we dd [sic] this in each town, we could add – probably double our membership in the month of February, when the going is to be a lot rougher [sic] than it is now. During these next two months we could dedicate ourselves to hunting these people up and making a list of them so they wou d [sic] be ready [sic] to apply in January/. [sic] Que te parece? (“I Hope This Letter,” 1963)

In this letter, Huerta illustrated how she was working through potential ways around the effects of proposed legislation (Assembly Bill, No. 59, State of California), as well as ways to increase membership simultaneously. “Que te parece? [What do you think/how does it seem to you?]” asked for Chávez’s feedback or dialogic engagement, but by putting these ideas on paper, she was also able to develop and work through these ideas.

In another example, she suggested that “Maybe a letter should go out on the FWA stationary too. What do you think. Originally, I thought we could wait till the session here was over, but now I don’t know” (“Received Your Concise Communication,” n.d.). She often proposed ideas, and then asked for feedback, using qualifiers, such as “I hoped we could . . .” and “What I hoped we could do . . .” (“I’m Going,” n.d.) followed by a plan of action. In other letters, she also told Chávez about similar problems as a way of writing to work through solutions or to create ideas about how to lobby and work with members more effectively as well as projects related to the UFW newspaper or radio. Huerta made this very point to Chávez: “as always in these reports to you I am thinking out loud, and out of this confusion must come our plan of action. Looking at this from a more objective stand, I hope you will help me to prepare the plan of action out of the observations I send” (“Capitol Capers,” n.d.).

These examples illustrate that such letters played an important role in articulating ideas in the planning stages for union activities. Asking and giving opinions about issues also demonstrates the collaborative element of where they stood on emerging organizational and movement issues (e.g., in Gring-Pemble, 1998). This process of uncertainty and reciprocating opinions was absent in Huerta’s public rhetoric (e.g., Huerta, 1973a, 1973b, 1987). As Delgado (1999) explained, this type of collaborative, collectivistic rhetoric “privileges the whole and demands an ethos of mutual dependence and shared identity. Collectivists share a cultural and symbolic substance that pervades their social interactions and organization” (p. 19). Huerta’s letters clearly demonstrate how personal letters functioned in this collectivist fashion, through their complete integration of farm worker causes and personal matters, collapsing personal and professional lives into one cause that became the UFW’s symbol of shared identity. As García (2008) observed, Huerta and Chávez had a symbiotic partnership, focused on farm worker issues as a collective and communal struggle. Chávez’s influence as the primary leader of the UFW is well documented, but Huerta was also
quite influential for Chávez and the UFW as Griswold del Castillo and Garcia (1995) argued:

Chávez had asked Huerta to be cofounder of the Farm Workers Association because he recognized her leadership abilities, her powerful character, her intellectual toughness, and above all her self-assuredness. ... Her role in shaping César Chávez’s life and the farm-worker movement was crucial, especially during the early organizational years... she was a key negotiator, a nontraditional Mexicana, and a loyal follower. (p. 59)

Clearly, Chávez greatly respected Huerta’s leadership abilities and influence, as he himself noted: “No march is too long, no task too hard for Dolores Huerta if it means taking a step forward for the rights of farmworkers (“A Life of Sacrifice,” 1990, p. 266).

In addition, as Delgado argued, this analysis of collectivist rhetoric moves beyond the traditional understanding of the “individualistic and instrumental frame” found in many rhetorical analyses of Western discourse. Understanding how Huerta and Chávez collaboratively communicated is important for moving outside of individualistic frameworks, since these identities and discourses were shaped by cultural norms and forces rooted incollectivism and collaboration, as illustrated in Huerta’s letters.

**Letter Writing as (Self) Affirmation**

Not only did Huerta use her letters as a way to discuss and collaborate on ideas with Chávez, but the letters served a more personal purpose as well. In many ways, reports of her UFW activities to Chávez functioned to affirm her successes, sacrifices, and roles within and outside of the UFW. Huerta’s letters allowed her to share with Chávez her union activities, but also her union successes. Richard Gregg argued that protest rhetoric often involves an ego-function; although Huerta’s letters are not written in protest per se, her protest-related work for the UFW may have contributed to this ego-function in her letters. Specifically, Gregg (1971) contended that this type of rhetoric involves self-persuasion because of the need for “psychological refurbishing and affirmation” and self-constitution, or “establishing, defining, and affirming one’s self-hood as one engages in a rhetorical act” (p. 74). Huerta used her letters to report her numerous accomplishments, to affirm proposed ideas, and to make note of her sacrifices. Given the challenges and barriers that Chicana activists faced during the 1960s, this approach in her letters may have played an important role in both persuading herself and Chávez that she was a highly skilled negotiator, lobbyist, and organizer. Although Chávez emerged as the public face of the UFW, Huerta skillfully negotiated the male-oriented activist movements of the 1960s, and took on a leadership position in the UFW from the beginning. As Rose (1990b) noted: “[S]he rebelled against the conventional constraints upon women’s full participation in trade union activism, competing directly with male colleagues in the UFW” (p. 26).
This rebellion, however, took confidence and courage, and her written documentation of her accomplishments exemplify one way in which she may have engaged in an affirmatory process. Because Huerta and Chávez used letters to discuss UFW business, her letters and reports fulfilled the collaborative function of informing Chávez of her activities, and they also allowed her to think through her successes, write them down, and send them to Chávez, affirming her accomplishments in the process. For example, in one lengthy six-page letter, Huerta discussed her many accomplishments during a trip to Sacramento:

Being a now (ahem) experienced lobbyist, I am able to speak on a man to man [sic] basis with other lobbyists and am being continuously over-flattered by having other lobbyists, legislators [sic], government folk and complete strangers come and speak to me congratulating me and asking me about CSO’s legislative program and begging to know “What We Want.” (“Capitol Capers,” n.d., p. 1)

In introducing her accomplishments with her experiences working as a lobbyist in the state capitol, Huerta shared her success with Chávez, and then continued in great detail with what Huerta called “Personality Portraits,” in which she introduced key players in Sacramento, discussing proposed actions and strategies for negotiating with these people. Throughout this letter, she demonstrated her strong understanding of the political situation in Sacramento and ideas for proposing legislation and working with these key lobbyists.

The letter established Huerta’s competence as a lobbyist and ability to network and connect with important legislative decision makers. Not only did the letter emphasize her successes in Sacramento, but also confirmed her aptitude for this kind of work. In the process of describing her accomplishments, she demonstrated to Chávez and other UFW members that she was a talented lobbyist and negotiator, while simultaneously affirming her accomplishments. Given Huerta’s recognition for her contributions for UFW lobbying and negotiating (Coburn, 1976; Rose, 1988), these letters evidence not only her early successes, but also demonstrate the process of self-affirmation in letter writing.

In other letters, Huerta often highlighted her successes with not only legislators, but also with potential UFW members. For example, she wrote to Chávez in 1962 that “the membership pledges are coming in much easier than I thought. I have 15 more to send to you & and I really have not begun as yet” (“Please excuse my long delay,” October 19, 1962). In another letter, she gave a specific example of how union activities were influential for membership drives:

The Union had a big meeting (of wins and palapatoys [sic]) in St. Mary’s Hall. Teresa Lopez (one of my unexpected callers) was so inspired by the Union’s proposals of “Strike now, eat later,” Call on us and we will go talk to your boss to increase your wages,” etc., that she came right over and paid her dues to us. Furthermore she said some of the other ladies that were present at that meeting also want to join us the non-striking Union. (“I Received You [sic] Penitent Letter,” February 29, 1964)

Although in this letter Huerta did not directly take credit for recruiting new members, Huerta calls Teresa Lopez “one of my unexpected callers” implying that
she was indeed responsible for recruiting her for union membership. She was not simply reporting union activities, but sharing her successes as self-affirmation through the process of writing. Furthermore, her success in membership recruitment speaks directly to her contributions to the farmworker social movement, since membership in the union was essential for negotiating contracts with the owners of the farms that started in 1965 after the first grape boycott.

Finally, many of Huerta’s letters highlighted the great sacrifices she made for the union, whether related to her health, family, or financial difficulties. These numerous narratives of sacrifice may have been conscious or unconscious rhetorical choices, but the reader understands from these letters that she sacrificed herself for the union. For example, she wrote to Chávez:

“Yes, I am still breathing, although I got a bad scare last week. I kept feeling worse and worse so I went to the County Hospital and they shook me up because they said I have to have an operation...I have a tumor in one of my ovaries. ...The only reason I hate to get operated on is because I hate to lose the time. My health, plus no bay [sic] sitter is one of the reasons things hav [sic] not been moving, so help me Cesar, without someone to watch my kids, i [sic] just can’t find enough time to work, especially in the evening when it counts. ...Also my finances have been terrible. I only drew $20.00 on my last U.I. check and have two weeks for my next check. (“Yes, I Am Still Breathing,” n.d.).

In this letter, she concluded by telling Chávez that she was planning to go to Delano and then Los Angeles for meetings, and that she had addressed problems with delinquent union members. Her narrative of personal problems related to her health, finances, and child care emphasized not only the issues she faced as a sometimes single mother and Chicana activist, but also the sacrifices she had made for the farm worker cause and the UFW mission of social justice for farm workers. In effect, she used the letter as confirmation of her sacrifices for the union and to bolster her own commitment, best illustrated in the line, “The only reason I hate to get operated on is because I hate to lose the time.”

The process of writing these letters to Chávez enabled Huerta to highlight her accomplishments, proposed ideas, and sacrifices, which allowed her to constitute self and create an identity as a social justice activist and organizer for the farm worker cause. Gregg (1971) explained that the ego-function of such rhetoric is based on three general stages of ego formation, ego maintenance, and ego destruction. Her letters represent these three stages, in which she built ego through writing about her successes, maintained ego through proposing plans and asking for feedback, and destroyed ego through personal sacrifice to the union, which became a repetitive and ongoing cycle. Carlson’s (1995) study of letters illustrates that letters can function to constitute identity on one’s own terms through self-description, revealing the affirmatory aspect of letter writing that can carry over into interpersonal and public communicatory acts. While Carlson focused on the constitutive aspect of letter writing in terms of character invention through a rhetorical strategy of differentiation, Huerta’s letters were more about the process of recording her accomplishments and plans, which played a constitutive role, as well as an ego-function role.
For Huerta, these letters to Chávez may have functioned as precursory ideas to UFW movement rhetoric, but also empowered her to become a powerful UFW negotiator and lobbyist. Holling (2000) noted that Chicana identity is constructed through a “conception of herself which is communicated through the names or labels she attributes to herself, the stories she tells and the experiences she conveys, and it involves a process of becoming” (p. 17). Mario García (2008) further explained that Huerta developed intersectional identities related to gender, ethnic, and class consciousness through her work with the UFW. The process of writing letters allowed Huerta to claim her own names, stories, and experiences, facilitating this intersectional identity constitution through affirmation of self.

**Letter Writing as Catharsis**

In the process of using letters as collaboration and confirmation, Huerta constantly wrote about issues that affected her personally. These personal narratives functioned rhetorically as catharsis, or a way for her to negotiate the various personal and professional stresses in her life, while at the same time, often proposing solutions to her own problems. Aristotle defined catharsis as the process of cleansing or purification, whereas Kenneth Burke (1966) called catharsis a transcendence or transformation. As Sowards and Renegar (2006) observed, the “writing process reflects a self-oriented activism that is more about self-affirmation, catharsis, and expression than generating social change” (p. 67). While Huerta was certainly motivated to work for social change, the process of writing these letters also functioned as catharsis for her.

Most frequently, she wrote about her financial difficulties in arranging shelter, food, clothing, transportation, and other basic necessities for her eleven children and herself. Huerta earned $5 to $35 per week from union paychecks and lived on mostly donated food, clothes, transportation, and child care (Coburn, 1976; Felner, 1998; Foley, 1974; Rose, 1988). Because Huerta worked as many as 80 hours a week, she had to rely on family and friends for child care or take her kids with her to meetings and negotiations. Huerta’s letters indicate her constant concern about her children, where they would live, what schools they would attend, and who would care for them. Her children were often separated, living with various family members and friends’ families.

Although Huerta had two ex-husbands, her letters also reflect that she was responsible for their child care and financial support. In the following letter excerpt, Huerta detailed how she typically arranged her children’s living situations:

I am now working on having my kids stay with various assorted relatives for the next month and one half until school starts. If all goes very well, I will still be left with maybe one or two kids, depending on whether Ventura [Huerta’s first ex-husband] can make arrangements to keep the boys. . . . Then do you suppose I could make living arrangements with someone to put me and my one kid up for a month and one half, then I could pay room and board. That means I would not be paying rent, or a baby sitter or utilities, at least until school begins. (“Just a Few Short Lines,” n.d.).
One of Huerta’s biggest issues was determining where each of her children would live, often only for a few months at a time. The letter reflected a problem-solution thought process as she wrote about her child care arrangements and proposed how she might address them.

Similarly, Huerta also was constantly looking for ways to create more time so that she could work on various union activities. Babysitters were an expensive necessity to provide her the time to commit to lobbying and traveling, but as the following and the previous excerpts illustrate, she was in constant negotiation to find family provided or free child care, reduce her living expenses, and participate in ongoing union meetings:

I spoke to my step-father about giving me 6 months rent free. I expect to fire my babysitter, Sunday, so then my living expenses will be cut down about half. I am again going to propose my plan to CSO that they pay just for two days a week for lobbying, instead of a weekly salary. On $30 a week, I should be able to survive, if I don’t have to pay a baby sitter. Maybe I can get someone to watch the kids for me just two days a week, free, then I can have the house meetings at night, for the Association. (“You Have Probably Thought,” 1962)

This pattern is repeated in many of Huerta’s letters to Chávez. Although her ex-husbands did support their respective children financially and sometimes provided a home, Huerta assumed most of the responsibility for ensuring that her children had a place to live, food to eat, and a school to attend, an issue that other UFW leaders (mostly male) did not have to face. For example, Helen Chávez took care of the Chávez children, so child care was not an issue in the same way for César Chávez. In fact, Huerta’s children sometimes stayed with the Chávez family (Rose, 1990b). This problem–solution format in Huerta’s letters represents catharsis through transformation of the problem itself into a workable solution, as she began the letter discussing the difficulties of finding child care, but then explaining the steps that she had already worked out to cover child care to provide her time for union activities.

Not only did Huerta write about her personal financial problems, she also openly expressed her frustrations with various people, including Chávez himself. Huerta, who had a reputation for being assertive, was often confrontational with Chávez in her letters, although they both greatly respected one another for their own strengths and contributions to the UFW movement (García, 2008). This ability to be confrontational comes from an open discursive space, in which Huerta felt confident and comfortable in expressing herself assertively with Chávez. For example, she wrote to Chávez in 1964:

To further finish up with my peeves, since I am not the quiet long suffering type, I also resent it when you are not honest with me... I do not mind playing the part of the heavy if If [sic] I know why and when I am supposed to take this role—please remember this for any future conspiracies. This is what I mean by your “honesty” of sincerity [sic] if it sounds nicer that way [sic]. (“Since I Had Not Heard,” 1964)

This letter illustrates Huerta’s ability to cleanse or purify herself of a possible interpersonal conflict with Chávez, by expressing her “peeves” in letter format. In
the former letter, she addressed these peeves at the beginning of the letter, and after half a page of type written peeves, she wrote “All of the above is old business, but now I want to get to the new developments” (“Since I Had Not Heard,” 1964), and quickly moved into a report of her union activities.

Furthermore, Huerta may have used the writing process subconsciously to construct new identities as she wrote about her struggles to provide for her family. Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment in how or why someone takes on a new identity, her letters reflect a consciousness of her social standing and struggles she faced as mother, activist, organizer, and female leader. Palczewski (2001) drew from Kenneth Burke’s notion of terministic catharsis to explain how definitional shifts occur. In Huerta’s case, terministic catharsis functions as identity formation, as her letter writing process reminded both the recipient and herself of her social justice awareness and her own struggles. Huerta believed that it was important to focus on four key principles: “first, to establish a strong sense of identity; second, to develop a sense of pride; third, always to maintain the value of service to others; and fourth, to be self-reflective and true to oneself” (Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, pp. 69–70).

Huerta’s letters demonstrate how she developed an identity situated in social justice consciousness within the farm worker movement, even though she was aware of the many injustices that farm workers faced from an early age. Through her lived experiences within the farm worker union, she understood the challenges that farm workers faced, but also the barriers Mexican American women and Chicana activists faced both in the personal and public spheres. For example, Huerta explained how her work as a UFW leader eventually led to her feminist and Chicana identities:

I have been asked whether being a woman has made it difficult for me in my exercise of leadership. For years I never thought about that. We were too busy in organizing struggles. Now suddenly I am invited to speak here and there on different issues. The suggestion being that I am a symbol of the women’s movement or that I speak for Hispanic women. And that has been difficult, I am a sort of born again feminist. (as cited in Griswold del Castillo & Garcia, 1995, p. 71)

Huerta’s letters are one way in which she was reminded of and constructed her identities as a social justice advocate.

Huerta’s personal stories, frustrations, and hardships reflected in her letters exemplify how these letters function cathartically. Huerta used the letters to Chávez to write about her problems as a way to purge the stresses she was facing on a daily basis, but also as a way to balance tensional guilt about her children and the farm worker cause. Indeed, the union became Huerta’s family, and her children were raised by the union. Rose (1990a, 1990b) observed that work related to the union became family affairs, whether related to bargaining with growers, participating in protests or picket lines, or lobbying in Sacramento or Washington, DC. In a 1975 interview, Huerta noted that “I know I have a terrible temper. It might be that I’m still suffering from guilt about my divorce, and from the feeling that I shouldn’t be the leader people see in me. . . . I guess I just haven’t forgiven myself the divorce, and if you haven’t forgiven yourself something, how can you forgive others?”
This interview reflects a sense of guilt and insecurity, and as Kenneth Burke (1966) explained, terministic catharsis enables guilt redemption, “‘rebirth’, transcendence, transubstantiation, or simply for ‘transformation’” (p. 367).

Her letters to Chávez may have functioned cathartically to purge and cleanse anxieties about balancing family and union activities, as well as address interpersonal issues with Chávez, or a way to create space for self-expression and constitutive identity. Lisa Flores (1996) explained that “Chicana feminists begin the process of carving out a space for themselves where they can break down constraints imposed by other cultures and groups” (p. 143). Although Flores wrote about Chicana novelists and writers, Huerta used these letters as one way to create her own space for expression, agency, and identity. This agential space for catharsis, in turn, fostered Huerta’s sense of rhetorical agency within the UFW and other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The manner in which Huerta’s letters were written reflect a style of cathartic, stream of consciousness, more than carefully planned, edited, and revised writing, since her letters were written on a type writer and are full of typographical errors and colloquial language. This style suggests that she felt free to express her thoughts and concerns without restraint. Elsewhere, I argue that Huerta used what Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) called haciendo caras (making face, making soul) and what Chela Sandoval (2000) called differential consciousness as a form of rhetorical agency, through faces of emotionality, familia, collaborative egalitarianism, and courageous optimism (Sowards, 2010). Huerta’s sense of rhetorical agency came from years of developing a self-confidence to speak out, and also originated in her social and family networks that enabled her sense of confidence and rhetorical agency. Huerta’s cathartic writing style is just one manifestation of her sense of rhetorical agency. The symbiotic relationship between rhetorical agency and constitution of identity that emerges in Huerta’s letters is especially important, given the rhetorical constraints that Huerta faced as a Chicana and labor activist.

**Conclusion**

This study of Huerta’s letter reveals three important conclusions about the rhetorical process of Huerta’s letter writing. First, the three functions of Huerta’s letters, collaboration, affirmation, and catharsis, are intertwined features of her letter writing process that contributed to Huerta’s social justice identities, especially related to race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and gender. While I have separated these three functions for analysis, Huerta’s letters illustrate how collaboration, affirmation, and catharsis often occurred simultaneously in her narratives and appeals. Delgado (1995) explained that collectivistic rhetoric emphasizes interdependence and the need to share common experiences; Huerta’s letters focused on that kind of collaboration with Chávez.

Building from Gring-Pemble’s (1998) work, this study also reveals that letter writing in social movements can be more than consciousness raising and a transition from the private to the public sphere. That is, Huerta’s letters demonstrate a
collaborative and collectivistic function for organizational activities and ideas, such as her thoughts about *El Malcriado*, the union newspaper, or membership drives. Her language, such as her use of the plural “we” and request for exchanging opinions further illustrate this collectivistic approach. Huerta’s letters also reflect a need for affirmation and catharsis to address her insecurities and guilt that she experienced, whether about her role as a mother or labor organizer (Baer, 1975; Sowards, 2010). Her letters were both simultaneously other and self-directed, expanding the notion of Gregg’s (1971) and Stewart’s (1999) understanding of the ego function in social movements through the study of letters. Furthermore, as Carlson (1995) explained, letter writing can function as character invention; for Huerta, the cathartic aspect of her letters may have also played a role in identity formation and awareness, as well as a reminder of her sacrifices for and commitment to the union way of life. Huerta’s letters, then, build our understanding of the purposes of letter writing, especially within social movements through these interrelated concepts of dialogic collaboration, affirmation, and catharsis.

Furthermore, Huerta’s letters provide insight into the UFW union, in ways that scholarship about public discourse does not reveal. Specifically, Huerta’s letters demonstrate the difficulties of her own life and as a mother, but also the challenges facing UFW activists during the 1960s. Other scholars have studied the public rhetoric of Puerto Rican and Chicano activists such as César Chávez, Reies Tijerina, Corky González, and the Young Lords Organization (Delgado, 1995; Enck-Wanzer, 2006; Hammerback & Jensen, 1980, 1994; Jensen et al., 2003; Jensen & Hammerback, 1982), but the focus on the personal experience of what it means to be a social activist in these movements has been missing. Huerta’s letters reveal her personal struggles as a woman participating in the UFW union, and how she negotiated and survived these struggles, reminding the reader that participation in social movements, particularly related to power struggles related to class, ethnicity, national origin, and gender, is a commitment that requires personal sacrifice and difficulty. Ultimately, Huerta’s letter writing provides greater insight into her life, the UFW as a union, the Chicano movement, and social movements more broadly.

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