

# Latina/Chicana Mothering



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provide daycare but not many, and when they do, it's expensive. Not so long ago I attended a conference in Dominican Republic. It was an academic literary conference centered around women scholars and academics, and a few select creative writers were invited to read. In the audience there were children. There were scholars with their children and even mothers who tagged along to the conference. There were random interruptions during our talks, referring to the sound of a child's voice and even the acceptance or recognition that as women scholars/writers we are often responsible for the well being of our families, our mothers, our grandmothers, our children, our girlfriends, our girlfriend's children, and of course let's not forget our partners. And we also do our work. Show up to conferences, write our books, and so on.

Now that I am a mother, I think often about what we can do to facilitate the participation of mothers inside and outside of academia so we can continue to do our work and also take care of our elders and children; to take care of each other as well. Since my trip to New Orleans, I have been better at asking for help when I need it. By honoring my motherhood I begin to dismantle the unspoken formalities in such professional contexts, maybe even inspire other mothers to bring their children. Most importantly, I try my best to remember that the mothers I know that seem to have superhuman qualities, because they appear to keep it all together, didn't achieve it alone. Even my mother, who I hold on a pedestal, relied heavily on family, friends, and neighbors to raise her children so she could finish her education and take care of us all.

## Mi Madre, Mi Hija y Yo

### Chicana Mothering through Memory, Culture and Place

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I HAVE ONE CHILD. MY PREGNANCY WAS SOMEWHAT PLANNED, I suppose, if you call dreaming and talking about creating a family with someone you're falling in love with family planning. Being alone during my pregnancy, being a single mother and, a year after my daughter's birth, fighting for custody of my first born, certainly was not a part of any sort of plan I had. The story, as many are, is complicated, yet the everyday life that my daughter and I share is probably not very different from many families living in the United States. The rhythm of preschool, play dates, and bedtime stories shape our routine just as much as my work as an academic does. However, due to the geographic distance between us and our extended familial circle, my childhood memories of a close-knit family life greatly differ from the life that my daughter and I share. *Familia* (family), as I lived it, was always close, serving simultaneously as either a source of support or tension. Despite the inevitable contradictions that these relationships implied, my sense of forming part of a larger community remained intact.

As a Chicana single mother juggling parenting, work, life, and love, I find myself wondering how I will be able to provide my daughter with the sense of self and community that I had. In my reflections, I recognize that my mother used *cultura* (culture), (embodied in strength), to teach us about life and love, and as a strategy to overcome daily hardships. This essay of narrative and *cuentos* represents a sharing of my mother's life lessons—lessons steeped in both social politics and those of *familia*, that shape and guide my own journey through motherhood.

A central theme that shapes this piece is the intergenerational conflict that emerges between mothers and daughters; tensions are informed by

the stories of separation, loss, migration, race, and discrimination. By invoking these stories, I hope to inspire new conceptions on mothering to the growing literature on Chicana/Latina mothering as it relates to education, pedagogy, and ethics.<sup>1</sup> This essay looks at the ways in which Chicanas, who have come to embody *mestizaje* (mestization) as described by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), negotiate raising children in a society that continues to denigrate people of color. How does our "motherwork"<sup>2</sup> not only reflect the tensions that emerged during our own identity formation, but also show the ways in which we continue to negotiate our experiences and histories with society? By examining the subtle strategies used by my mother in my own upbringing, I've come to recognize that her motherwork became a form of resistance. In spite of the myriad of misfires between us, the notion of *familia*, community, and *cultura* instilled in me by my mother became the building blocks from which I understood myself and my place in this world.

#### MI MADRE, MI HIJA Y YO: EL CAMINO

Sofia Villenas and Melissa Moreno have argued in "To *Valerse por si Misma* Between Race, Capitalism, and Patriarchy: Latina Mother-Daughter Pedagogies in North Carolina" that "the teaching and learning that occurs between mothers and daughters through *consejos* (advice), *cuentos* (stories) and *la experiencia* (experience) are wrought with tensions and contradictions yet open with spaces of possibility" (672). It is from these spaces of possibility that I speak as I explore three generations of women in my family: my mother, my daughter, and myself.

On a recent long drive with my mother and daughter, I decided to put some Mexican music on the car stereo. Immediately my mother began to sing and although she no longer remembered the lyrics, she still sang loudly. "*Que bonita musica*" ("What pretty music"), she said. I sang loudly too. I was immediately filled with nostalgia for my childhood and memories came flooding back: memories of Saturday morning house cleanings with Mariachi records blasting from our wooden stereo, of the yearly summer trips to my mother's hometown in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, of learning to dance the *zapateado* with my cousins in my *abuelita's* (grandmother's) house—memories that invoke *familia*, *cultura*, and home. My mother was the one who inspired this in me, this

love of our history, language, and understanding of our ties to a place we never lived in for longer than several weeks of the year.

I will always be grateful to my mother for giving us access and exposure to a world and culture that we found a place in. Interestingly, throughout my life I've been told I look like my mother and our life parallels are also revealing: we both lost our fathers at age twenty and had our first child at age thirty-two. We both left our hometowns and our immediate families behind. Yet, my mother and I have a difficult relationship. When my father died and I walked into our house and to my mother's arms, I vividly remember thinking, "I do not know this woman." I could talk to my father in ways that I've never been able to talk with her, and I had a closeness with him that I have never shared with my mother. In part this was due to the fact that my father was born and raised in Chicago, the son of an immigrant mother from Mexico and a father born in El Paso, Texas. He understood the contradictions of biculturalism and did not belittle my youthful angst growing up in the U.S. The image of the typical *machista* father did not apply in my family either, and in fact, it was my mother who embodied the authoritative figure in our household. It was this very strength that allowed my mother to survive her father's murder in her hometown, her brother's death at an early age, and the hardships of migration, including learning a new language and dealing with the oppression that racialized immigrants face in this country. Yet, it was also this very strength that became the barrier that kept her from getting too close to her daughters.

I do admire my mother's resiliency; this strength is similar to what Ruth Trinidad Galván describes as an ability to survive: "*la sobrevivencia* (survival) is what lies ahead and beneath plain victimy, our ability to *saciar* (sate) our hopes and dreams in creative and joyful ways" (163). Even during the toughest times, my mother kept me entertained with stories of her youth, of days spent in *el campo* (countryside), riding horses on bareback, swimming in *el rio* (the river), and going to the *fiestas del pueblo* (town parties) that brought the entire town together. I have recreated these memories as my own and, as such, my mother's birthplace has come to signify a homeland for me as well. My mother created links not only across national boundaries through family ties and visits, but also through language by teaching us Spanish. When we return to her hometown, the time and distance is erased and immediately we blend into the everyday family life with our *tias* (aunts), *primas* (cousins), and

community. Conversely, she created boundaries in our home; if my actions were deemed too Americanized, or "*agringada*" as she called it, she would pull me closer to the home sphere. It is these practices and lessons that have helped shape my journey through motherhood.

#### DISRUPTIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE LESSONS

Through the teaching and learning of the home, "Chicanas are able to draw upon their own cultures and sense of self to resist domination along the axes of race, class, gender and sexual orientation" (Bernal 624). It is in the activities and actions of daily life that Chicana/Latina feminists should "theorize the everyday pedagogies of the home and the tenet of *la familia* as sites of affirmation and intervention for women's negotiations of their multiple identities within systems of oppression" (Knight et al. 42). With this sense of self, knowledge of culture as resistance, and an awareness of the "everyday pedagogies of the home and *la familia*," I have come to recognize within my mother's life lessons the intimacy of the politics and their power. These memories, or what I'll call disruptions, are significant lessons and are particularly poignant to me as a mother.

The first disruption began during a walk home from school in the second grade. As my friends and I turned the corner to our street, one of the boys we were walking with turned to me and said, "You know when your mom speaks English, she sounds like a broken record." I remember falling to the ground and sobbing because of this boy's callousness. I don't remember if he apologized and I don't remember how I stopped crying, but I did. I walked the rest of the way home and as soon as I walked into my house, my mother quickly noticed something was wrong. How could I tell her what this boy had said? How could I hurt her the way he had hurt me? But after just a little nudging, I relented and told her what had happened. My mother responded, "Well it's true. I don't speak English well, but don't let them get to you." With those simple words and a hug, my mother lifted the burden of shame, ignorance, and pain.

I learned then the power of what Graciela Sánchez in "La Cultura, La Comunidad, La Familia, y La Libertad" calls *cultura*: why "knowing how to converse and think in the language of [my] ancestors was important; that knowing about [my] history, and culture, and traditions

would help [me] develop a better sense of [myself]" (76). In my mother's lesson with this boy, I learned to not only embrace my bilingualism, but I also learned how important it is to keep your cool in the face of bigotry. Using these "subtle acts of resistance" have become essential for my survival and a lesson that I must pass on to my daughter (Bernal 625). She must know how to embrace her roots, understand her cultura and the origins of our family, despite parts of U.S. society's capacity to undermine these connections.

The second disruption occurred as I began my academic career. I started college at UCLA in the fall of 1991. That first memory of leaving home is still fresh in my mind. My father took the morning off from work and drove me to Los Angeles on a Thursday morning. As soon as we arrived to campus, he dropped me, my bags, and my heavy heart off on the corner in front of the dorms and quickly got on the road for the two-hour drive back to work. There were no goodbye family lunches or dorm room decorating parties. With a lump in my throat, I watched as he drove off, feeling scared and a bit overwhelmed. Fear had no time to invade my body, as I quickly realized I needed a job to earn money. By the next night, I was working at the cafeteria and I remember watching the families come and go as I mopped the floors; there was disappointment on my part, but I also realized that I wasn't the only one suffering. Years later, my mother told me that both she and my father cried for days during those first days after my departure.

To this day, my mother has never forgiven me for leaving, even though she also left home. The difference, she argues, is that I left home for myself, and she left home to work for her family in Mexico. This tension continued through graduate school and during one afternoon, I finally blurted out, "You're just not interested in the work I do!" My mother responded, "*Ay, hija tu madre es una idiota. Lo único que sé es que estudias mucho y siempre estás ocupada. No entiendo lo que estás haciendo*" ("Oh daughter, your mother is an idiot. The only thing that I know is that you study a lot and you're always busy. I don't understand what you are doing"). At that moment, I realized that we were focusing on what was keeping us apart as opposed to what held us together. My mother had left her country of origin and had learned a new language as an adult. In doing so, she had created the opportunity for me to leave home and pursue my own endeavors; it was because of her that I was able to find

my way that first day at UCLA alone. The lesson that comes from our shared moment of resistance is to understand that while we both left home, our shared stories and our *familia* have kept us intact.

The final disruption occurred while I was pregnant. My sister and my *comadre* had thrown me an amazing baby shower at a restaurant that my family and I had been going to for years. I had many friends and family members present, and I was sitting next to my mother. At one point, my cousin, who was also pregnant but married, came up to the table to say hello to us. When my mother turned around and saw her, she became very animated and began to rub her teeming belly. In witnessing this gesture, it dawned on me that my mother had not once touched me during my pregnancy. Although the birth of my daughter signified much joy for my mother, the announcement of my pregnancy was everything but. It did not matter to my mother that I had completed a doctoral degree; she never once expressed tears of excitement or joy at that accomplishment. But my being pregnant and unmarried caused her tears of despair that would not stop. As Gloria Anzaldúa states, "If a woman remains a *virgen* until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother" (17). We barely spoke during my pregnancy, a painful memory that is deeply buried and is outweighed by the delight I get in observing the relationship that my daughter and mother now have. This example highlights similar tensions raised by other women of color feminists who speak about the conflicts they have with their mothers.<sup>3</sup> In my case, I have conflict not only because I left, but also because of what I have become. To be unmarried and pregnant, despite my ability to care for both myself and my daughter, temporarily overshadowed the joy that my daughter brings.

My mother though, was very independent; in fact, she repeatedly made it clear that I should never "depend on a man." As Sofia Villenas and Melissa Moreno argue, our mothers push us in the direction of feminism by pointing out their life experiences as women (675). Similarly, Uma Narayan in *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* asserts that "In seeing us in this mode, they fail to see how much of what we are is precisely a response to the very things they have taught us, how much we have become the daughters they have shaped us into becoming" (8). I, in fact, had told my mother several times that

I found the institution of marriage to be highly problematic, but that these inhibitions did not negate my desire for children. What I hadn't planned for though was an absent partner. Thus, despite my desperate need for *familia* during a vulnerable time, I failed to receive it and was stifled instead by the Chicana cultural norms of respectability, shame, and femininity. The *machista* elements to my culture, embodied by both men and women, are the norms I am hoping to disrupt as a mother. Clearly, I have witnessed the contradictions both in my mother's willingness to break norms as much as in her willingness to uphold them. However, the lesson that I glean is that nurturance and not fear should fundamentally guide me as I seek to support my own daughter. I must acknowledge that this perspective comes with the privilege of my positionality within U.S. society both as an educated woman and as a second generation Chicana further removed from the culturally defined rigidity of morality and expectations.

#### CHICANA MOTHERWORK.

These memories help me make sense of several political, social, and cultural contradictions. As Gloria Anzaldúa so aptly describes in her poem "To Live In the Borderlands," in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Chicanas continuously move in and out of cultural practices in ways that become normalized (194); we recreate and retain practices in ways that come to exemplify our "subtle acts of resistance" that allow us to mark our place in society as Chicanas. In my life with my daughter, this becomes evident in the kinds of experiences that she has with me. While I will expose my daughter to Mexican cultural icons, she will also know U.S. based artists, Sufi poetry, *indigenismo*, and have "Trader Joe's"-inspired chicken tikka masala for dinner. Our homeland will always be directly connected to my mother's small town in Mexico; but because of the larger Chicana community in which we are surrounded, she will also have access to the diversity that is Mexico, manifested in different music genres, foods, and ancestry. The kind of exposure to language that I give to my daughter is also very different from my own as a child. While I only spoke to her in Spanish for the first two years of her life, we now converse primarily in English. My mother fought to remove me from ESL classes because I was bilingual, but I look forward to putting my daughter in a dual-immersion Spanish

language program to retain her bilingualism. Language codifies the ways in which we make meaning of the world and if I am not committed to this goal, the ways in which my daughter hears and feels the world will be entirely different. By using *cultura* as a tool to persevere, Chicana motherwork becomes a representation of praxis and resistance in contemporary U.S. society.

Moreover, while Chicana motherwork requires an adaptation of cultural practices tools and exposure, it also means reinterpreting motherhood. My mother was taught to sacrifice herself for her *familia*, a role she readily took on as she gave everything to her family of origin and to the one she created. I think her commitment has been admirable, her strength invincible; yet now that I find myself at a point in my life where my care work is extended to not only my three-year-old daughter, but to my seventy-three-year-old mother as well, I must consider at what costs this selflessness comes. Because my mother's memory is so affected by dementia and depression, everyday tasks have become practically impossible. At times, I'm also struck by the numerous similarities between my daughter and mother: their helplessness, their limited attention span, their inability to think beyond their own worldview. Being at this crossroads makes me realize that my mother has receded into her mind because it became easier to do that. While she embodied strength and perseverance throughout her life, she did little to care for her own emotional well-being. The reality is that in the process of giving it all to the *familia*, she never gave enough to herself. As a Chicana single mother I embrace many aspects of what my *cultura* has to offer, but I refuse to believe that motherhood implies a relinquishment of self. Instead, I choose to argue that motherhood implies the creation of a greater self that is in constant regeneration.

#### CONCLUSION

During the Christmas of 2008, my sister, my nieces, my daughter, my mother, and I all returned to my mother's *pueblo* for a long overdue visit. It was a first for my daughter and it was beautiful to see her taking in and adapting to the familiar sounds, smells, and rhythms of my own childhood. It was also the first time in months that my mother seemed stronger, happier, and alive. It dawned on me that for those few days she

was almost complete again. Her children, grandchildren, siblings, and extended family were not only all together in one place, an experience that she has seldom lived throughout her adult life, but she too was also home. A big part of me felt at home as well. For a moment I actually considered what it would mean for us to stay and be filled physically and emotionally with this homeland; immediately, I'm reminded of the other part of us that remained on *el otro lado* (the other side)—the duality of our experience.

In order to *sobrevivir* (survive), the labor of mothering involves constant negotiations between and among mothers and daughters. For Chicana/Latina mothers, it also requires maneuvering and mothering across cultural and political borders by creating contradictions that meet at the intersections of race and patriarchy. It is a process that can be painful and joyous; the truth remains that I hope to give to my daughter as much of me as my mother gave to us; but, in embracing my multiple identities, I also hope that a part of me remains committed to myself, a lesson that I hope my daughter Milagro (miracle) will embrace.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>For discussions on current concepts related to the intersection of Chicana/Latina mothering and education, pedagogy, and ethics, see Andrade and Gonzales Le Denmat; Bernal et. al.; Sandoval; Villenas and Moreno.

<sup>5</sup>See Collins for an explanation of her concept of "motherwork."

<sup>6</sup>For discussions by women of color feminists regarding conflicts with maternal figures see Narayan; Villenas; Woo.

<sup>7</sup>My daughter Milagro was born on the twelfth anniversary of my father's death. This date used to bring memories of terrific pain, but it now signifies the celebration of Milagro's new life, a new life that will be shaped by our family stories, geographies, and our journey together.

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