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## DOING RESEARCH AT THE BORDERLANDS: Notes from a Chicana Feminist Ethnographer

Michelle Téllez

*This article explores the tension between activism and scholarship and develops a counter-narrative intended to reformulate the tension. Framed by and in conversation with the groundbreaking work of Chicana and women of color feminist writers and scholars whose work critiques cultural, political, and economic conditions in the United States and whose work embodies the goals of advocacy scholarship, the essay offers a pathway for negotiating and disrupting dichotomies. Fundamental to this piece is the creation of bridges between the production of knowledge in the academic world with communities struggling for social justice and the application of it to the concept of mestizaje. [Key words: Chicana/o Studies, feminist theory, women of color discourse, ethnography, methodology, border studies]*

**In this article** I develop a narrative of my own experiences as “researcher/ethnographer” at the U.S.-Mexico border framed by, and in conversation with, the groundbreaking work of women of color feminist scholars and writers. My identification as a borderlander can be applied to both my border-crossing experiences at *la frontera* itself, as well as to my border-crossing experiences within academia. As someone who has been strongly rooted in community-based activism (i.e. community theater, outreach, advocacy groups), I was cognizant of my interests in maintaining and creating these ties once I entered graduate school. I planned to write about the projects of hope in which I had been involved and bring the voices of these agents of change into academic discourse. But more often than not, academia strongly discouraged my idea.

This response encouraged me to explore the tensions that exist between activism and scholarship, and the border created between these two worlds, as it connects with my personal history and experiences as a Chicana. Partly

because I am a product of a border city, I wholeheartedly bought into the idea that activism and scholarship are two seemingly opposite worlds that could never coalesce. I thus became proficient at keeping them separate. For instance, I remember that as a young elementary school teacher, I was unable to bridge the world of my nightly community meetings and actions with that of my daily world of the ABCs. While teaching children to read was important, it somehow wasn't enough; for me, change happened somewhere beyond the confines of the classroom. Thus, I became frustrated with my feeling of political alienation and left the classroom. Now as I explore the path I have taken, I can recognize that this division was not necessary. This essay is an attempt to reclaim the multiple spaces from which seekers of social justice can advocate. Furthermore, I suggest that through an informed critical praxis both inside and outside of academia these binaries can be challenged. I hope that the insight I provide in the following pages sets forth a Chicana scholar/activist paradigm that erases the imposed dichotomies between community/academia, activism/scholarship, and subject/researcher.

My own experiences had brought me to what became the focus of my research interests. As an activist, I had long contemplated and supported projects of autonomy in multiple spaces and cities. Gaining ground worldwide, but specifically in Mexico led by the Chiapas-based Zapatista Army of National Liberation, the autonomous movement attempts to solve the human displacement and erosion of local ways of being and knowing that have resulted from the racialized politics of globalization. My work loosely defines autonomous spaces as those places where voices are no longer suppressed, where creative energies are shared, and the lives of those who have been silenced by race, class, and gender oppression are valued and restored. In these contexts, rules of power are renegotiated, critiques of the current system are articulated, and resistance is encouraged.

I have explored and participated in such projects in Madrid, Mexico City, Los Angeles, and most recently in Baja, California. My current work focuses on the community of Maclovio Rojas where I examine the meaning of living autonomously through an analysis of the oral narratives of ten women from the community.<sup>1</sup> Situated between the cities of Tecate and Tijuana, Maclovio Rojas was founded in 1988 by twenty-five families seeking to form an *ejido* (communal land holding). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the interests of the corporate government have impeded this possibility, and in response the residents have formed an autonomous project. The community of Maclovio Rojas is a remarkable example of people uniting to challenge what they have been denied: basic human needs such as shelter, food, health services, and education.

Because I am invested in grassroots autonomous projects, prior to writing I had to ensure that I was comfortable with my line of inquiry. Even before I had the language to deconstruct ideas about positivism and Western dichotomies of the “other,” I did not believe in the idea of objectivity or value-free research (Weber 1958), nor did I see myself conducting this particular sort of research. Instead, I wanted to pursue projects of inquiry that engaged my own position while learning from the communities with which I would be working. By writing an ethnographic narrative case study of Maclovio Rojas, where the voices of the women and my own voice are present and framed with Chicana feminist epistemology, the hegemonic nature of academic inquiry and thought is challenged and reconstructed. We are demanding to be heard both inside and outside the walls of academia.

### **(Re)shaping Ethnographic Methodology:**

#### **A Chicana Scholar/Activist Perspective**

Chicana feminist discourse (Barrera 1991; Delgado-Gaitán 1993; Flores 2000;



García 1989, 1997; Martínez 1996; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983; Russel y Rodríguez 1998) critiques cultural, political, and economic conditions in the United States. This theoretical framework embodies the goals of advocacy scholarship, which both challenges the claims of objectivity and links research to community concerns and social change. Furthermore, I suggest that creating bridges between the production of knowledge in the academic world and communities struggling for social justice is absolutely fundamental. While my intentions are to *crear puentes*, I also recognize that my position as a Chicana informs my way of observing, interpreting, and understanding the world around me that could “enable or inhibit” particular kinds of insight (Rosaldo 1993). Chicana anthropologist Mónica Russel y Rodríguez (1998) asks us to consider how anthropology requires uncomplicated single identities of its subjects and theoreticians and reminds us that we need to acknowledge the multiple subjectivities of the researcher, subject, and communities. Thus, I cannot remove myself from the research process and must instead place myself in the center among those involved in creating this knowledge.

Feminist scholars have been essential in highlighting the ways in which theories and methods reflect particular political, cultural, and identity positions (Flores 2000, Latina Feminist Group 2001). These positions, or memories, of how class, race, and gender shape and form each other become the building blocks of theory (Alarcón 1995). Gloria Anzaldúa (1990) argues that since women of color are not allowed to enter discourse, it is *vital* that “we occupy theorizing space and that we not allow white men and women solely to occupy it” (xxv). By introducing our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space.

Chicana feminist discourse is driven by a passion to place the Chicana, as speaking subject, at the center of intellectual discourse (García 1997). A Chicana

epistemology must be concerned with the knowledge of Chicanas, about who generates an understanding of their experiences, and how this knowledge is legitimized or not (Delgado-Bernal 1998). This framework advances notions of hybridity that challenge the distinction between self and community, between Mexican and American, and disrupts dualisms by identifying the co-existence of seemingly contradictory ideas (Sandoval 1998). Chicana and women of color feminist discourse speaks to the issues that have been ignored by white feminists, most pointedly the fixation on gender that ignores the major elements of race/ethnicity and class (Martínez 1996). The emphasis on intersectionality challenges an essential notion of self as unified and whole. Thus, Chicana feminism “offers models of subjectivity that highlight the interconnections of gender, race, class, nationality and sexual orientation” (Flores 2000, 695).

Applying this framework to my research methodology has been imperative to my work in giving me the language that I may have inherently known but was unable to articulate. It made little sense to me that a researcher could claim so-called objectivity and define the cultural ways of a group of people from afar. Although ethnographic inquiry has proved to be an essential tool for social scientists seeking “to not lose sight of the people caught up in sweeping changes and global economic trends,” and ethnographic inquiry “moves beyond abstract concepts found in contemporary theory to focus on the everyday lives of real people caught up in complex macroprocesses” (Chávez 1992, 3), it has nonetheless served as a colonizing tool as well. Edward Said (1978) underscored the links between power and knowledge and between imperialism and orientalism, by showing how seemingly neutral, or innocent, forms of social description both reinforced and produced ideologies that justified the project of Western domination (Villenas 1996a). Chicana anthropologists prove that culture cannot be reified, that it is not static but constantly shifting (Davalos 1996, Russel y Rodríguez 1997). Thus, writing

“ethnographies of the particular” subverts the othering process because it moves away from generalization and objectivity (Abu-Lughod 1991).

As a Chicana feminist ethnographer I strive to keep my work true to the visions of the community by writing an “ethnography of the particular” while simultaneously reflecting on my own experiences. My understandings fall into the tensions that many other writers have previously named: feminist ethnographer as dual-citizen (Behar 1993), native (Russel y Rodríguez 1998), or halfie ethnographer (Abu-Lughod 1991), and the insider/outsider dilemma that emerges for people of color doing research in their “own” communities (Baca Zinn 1979, Zavella 1993). I turn to Sofia Villenas’ (1996a, 1996b) discussion of her “contradictory identities.” She writes,

Yet, what about the researcher as Colonizer and Colonized? As a Chicana/Latina graduate student in a white institution and educational ethnographer of Latino communities, here is my own dilemma. I am both and in between. I am the Colonized in relation to the society, the institution of higher learning and to the dominant majority culture in the research setting. I am the Colonizer because I am the educated marginalized, recruited and sanctioned by the privileged dominant institutions to write for and about the Latino communities. I am both and neither because I have a foot in both worlds: in the dominant privileged institutions and in the marginalized communities. I am a walking contradiction yet I possess my own agency and will to promote the agendas of my own communities in relation to my own. (1996a, 231)

I appreciate the way she invokes agency in her writing. Several experiences allowed me to establish relationships and fit in relatively quickly in Maclovio Rojas: my personal experience as a borderlander (a concept I discuss later in

this article), an organizer, my interest in autonomy, my bilingual abilities, and a childhood that included frequent and lengthy trips to my mother's hometown in Mexico (Tomatlán, Jalisco). In many respects I saw my family reflected in the families of the community. Yet, while Maclovio Rojas revealed a world very familiar to me, the community was also much removed from my experiences and realities as a graduate student. This reality constantly forced me to consider issues of power and privilege and the contradictions that are created (Roman and Apple 1990). Villenas concurs: "My space is a fluid space of crossing borders and, as such, a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity and subversion" (1996b, 729). I have had to acknowledge that in some ways my own interests are being served, and that I could very well walk away from the community and not be held responsible for my subsequent actions. Because I see myself reflected in the community and because of my consciousness as a Chicana feminist, I cannot remove myself from the commitment that I have to continue my relationship with Maclovio Rojas. I turn to Rosi Andrade and Hilda González Le Denmat's (1999) proposed research ethic. They state,

Based on experience, our research ethic has become as follows: if we are not directly bringing to the community something that will become theirs in their own quest for change, then we have little reason to be there. If we are interested in observing the community to report on it, to point out what we feel needs changing without their knowledge, active participation, and informed consent, then we have no reason to be there. The community must be part and parcel of any decision-making process and final outcomes. This ethically informed model of feminist action research benefits our research; most importantly, it is an ethical model driven by community women's own interests and goals for social change. (159)

Villenas adds that "reciprocity, community activism and work are a critical

part of research” (1996a, 33). In this case, though, the reciprocal relationship between myself and the community commenced before I began my field research and will continue well after I’m finished. Thus, while I see myself conducting critical research, I am also very involved as an advocate in the community, as a feminist interested in moving forward the women’s center project, and as an organizer who co-plans cultural celebrations, meetings, and actions. Not only am I advocating for a conscientious research practice but also for a commitment from scholars to maintain ties to their respective communities. I do not believe that any one project will result in the “right” way, nor should any project seek that, but if conscious scholars commit to this task, powerful steps can be made. Moreover, while the ways in which we go about doing our work is extremely important, I also believe that when we are defined, as either activists or academics, a false tension has to be negotiated and deconstructed.

### **Exploring the Academic/Activist Divide**

I left my job as an elementary school teacher and moved into graduate studies because I wanted to explore critical ideas about the world around me and gain insight into my inherent notions of injustice. I sought the words to be able to support what I was feeling. A couple of years into my graduate studies, I went through my files and came across posters, fliers, and notes from the numerous political campaigns and events in which I had participated. Amidst the stacks of paper I also saw class notes, articles, and research papers that I had written over the last ten years of my academic life. I remember telling myself: “A border between these two worlds exists even in my filing cabinet!” I wondered how it had been possible for me to get this far and not negotiate these seemingly contradictory spheres of my life.

Feminists of color and other academics have explored this tension. Patricia Hill Collins insightfully states that “elevating Black feminist thought to the level of

theory and devaluing Black women's activism as less theoretical are strategies that aim to contain them both" (2000, 282). By deconstructing this notion that theory and activism are two separate entities, I can see that my work as a Chicana, as an academe, and as an activist must operate at all these levels. Barbara Smith also brings some understanding into this conversation,

The question has been raised here whether this should be an activist association or an academic one. In many ways, this is an immoral question, an immoral and false dichotomy. The answer lies in the emphasis and the kinds of work that will lift oppression off of not only women, but all oppressed people: poor and working-class people, people of color in this country and in the colonized Third World. If lifting this oppression is not a priority to you, then it's problematic whether you are a part of the actual feminist movement. (1990, 27)

Robin D.G. Kelley continues the discussion against this dichotomous understanding of academia and activism. He states,

While that may seem obvious, I am increasingly surrounded by well-meaning students who want to be activists but exhibit anxiety about doing intellectual work. They often differentiate between the two, positioning activism and intellectual work as inherently incompatible. They speak of the "real" world as some concrete wilderness overrun with violence and despair, and the university as if it were some sanitized sanctuary distant from actual people's lives and struggles. (2002, 89)

A paradigm of denial and of borders helps to maintain this tension. Throughout our educational careers we have been misled into believing that we must acquire a specific body of knowledge and that once we do, we have crossed the border, and remnants of our past, our stories, and epistemologies must remain on the other

side. Patricia Hill Collins argues,

Epistemology investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true. Far from being the apolitical study of truth, epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why. This directly causes members of subordinated groups to replace individual and cultural ways of knowing with the dominant group's specialized thought. (2000, 252)

Not only are our epistemological stances as people of color in the United States ignored and devalued, but for those of us who enter graduate school with a critical mind, conscious of oppression as it relates to colonization and modern-day imperialism sponsored by transnational companies, the U.S. government, and militarization, the border is quite striking. Furthermore, following the jingoistic fervor of 9/11, the academic realm as a safe space for critical intellectual rigor is being constantly threatened.

As some have argued, Chicana/o scholars and their place within academia is directly connected to the legacies of the civil, social, and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Davalos 1998). At times when this history is forgotten or dismissed, we must remind ourselves of the past and current struggles that inform our place and work. I embrace the call for a decolonizing social science (Davalos 1998, Mohanty 2003, Sandoval 2000) in which we collectively advance projects of change that challenge and confront epistemological imperialism. If we are committed to issues of social justice and inclusion in the community outside the ivory tower, then we cannot justify abandoning that commitment as academes: the paths to both are one and the same.

### Doing Research in Maclovio Rojas

Decolonial ethnography and my position as a borderlander shape the methods I used in the field. While I became a “participant observer” (Spradley 1980) of the community approximately three years ago, the more extensive fieldwork began at the end of summer 2003. During the period of my research, I lived with my family in Chula Vista (a suburb of San Diego just two to three miles from the U.S.-Mexico border) and commuted thirty miles daily to the community. Only a few times did I actually spend the night in Maclovio Rojas, either in the shared home of the community leaders or in the upstairs guestroom of the cultural center called the *Aguascalientes*.

Although I had previous connections with the community and my interest in it, the *poblado*, as a possible site for my research, once I arrived the organizing committee met to determine how my role would evolve. President Hortensia Hernandez made the final decision to approve my stay, requesting only a copy of my final product. I readily agreed since I also had intended the community to own the piece written with and about them. The committee wanted me to take a few weeks to get to know the community and learn its history before I began to interview the women. Thus, the first two months of my time at Maclovio Rojas consisted mostly of getting to know the residents, the community, and its history by spending time and *platicando* (talking) with people; passing time in the *Aguascalientes*; watching people come and go; lingering in the *Vías* section (the most northern part of the *poblado* which is divided into five sub-areas) with my new friends; and joining families at their homes drinking *café*, making *tamales*, and *platicando* about everything but autonomy. I also attended local meetings, events, and celebrations. Oftentimes, I became the chauffeur in residence for those needing a ride, but mostly I took the organizers on *mandados* (errands) to the courthouse, back to Tijuana or just around the community. I’ve experienced Maclovio Rojas in the unbearable, dry heat, and have slid in the mud after a



rainy day transforms the landscape into a thick brown pool. During the day I jotted down thoughts and observations in my notebook and spent evenings transferring them to my computer.

During the last year I researched archives such as local and national press coverage, court records, legal documents, community files, and other resources available through the Internet to obtain a more complete understanding of Maclovio Rojas and its residents. The organizing committee made this extremely easy for me by readily making available many clipped articles about the community. Jaime Cota at the CITTAC office (Centro de Informacion de Trabajadores y Trabajadoras, a *maquiladora* worker support center in Tijuana), a long-time activist and supporter of Maclovio Rojas, handed me a thick binder of articles and pictures to peruse. Elizabeth Huato and Michael Schnorr from the Border Arts Workshop/ *Taller de Arte Fronterizo* generously provided historical information and important links indispensable to this task. All of this help considerably reduced my research time.

By the third month of my stay at Maclovio Rojas, I felt I was ready to begin the most exciting part of the research, that of gathering the oral narratives of women from the community. While the scope of my research does not encompass the complete life histories of the women, I heed the words of feminist scholars such as Weber (1990) in recognizing the value of oral narratives. Researchers interested in documenting and salvaging the richness of the past and the nuances of the present have “efficaciously used narrative in their diverse configurations of life histories, *testimonios*, auto-ethnographies, memories, and memoirs as a precise and rigorous methodological tool” (McClaurin 1999, 27). Personal narratives contain a dimension of oppositionality, in that through stories, communities create discourses about themselves that can replace dominant representations and

resist social determination (Flores 2000). Solely through their own words can their stories be told.

My goal was to elicit narratives from ten women that specifically described how they came to live in Maclovio Rojas and their ideas about gender roles and autonomy. After compiling ten names, I consulted with the committee, which added the names of long-time residents I hadn't met. Although the final list of about twenty women was not randomly selected, it represented the diversity of experiences of community residents from new arrivals to long-time residents, and from active organizers and supporters of the movement to those not actively involved in it.

### **The Politics and Ways of Eliciting Oral Narratives**

I faced two challenges in eliciting the oral narratives. First as a Chicana committed to decolonizing methodologies, I had to take into consideration the issues of power and privilege during the interview process itself. Ellen Herda suggests that critical hermeneutic research conversations are one possible solution to address this concern. She states, "A fusion of horizons occur when we make our own what was once alien; this does not take place in solitude but is a social act in concert with one another" (1999, 129). Therefore, as opposed to coming to our meetings with preset questions, I instead wanted the process to be as informal as possible and for us to develop a rapport specific to that moment in time. My list of topics for the interview included how they arrived in Maclovio Rojas and experienced life there, and what they thought about autonomy and the evolution of their roles as women in the community. But I tried not to impose my position on them, which I recognize is hard to do. In fact, in the first couple of interviews I led into the questions too much. I was waiting for something particular to be said and when it wasn't said I insisted on explaining matters, hoping to lead them into what I wanted to hear. By my third interview I realized

what I was doing and consciously made an effort to stop. Specifically, it had to do with their notions of autonomy. I had to recognize that if they hadn't developed an idea around autonomy at the time then I couldn't force it to emerge. Villenas speaks to her own arrogance when assuming in her conversations with the women that she could teach them how to create a dignified space for themselves in a biracial space not accustomed to Latinos. She states, "As if I thought I knew the hopes and aspirations of this Latino community" (1996b, 715). For myself, what I later understood was that their experiences and notions of autonomy didn't reflect my own presupposed definitions. As soon as I recognized my misperception, I began to truly listen to their own words.

Presenting the narratives of the *mujeres* in a way that maintains my commitment to decolonizing social science methods is another challenge. Ideally, with critical hermeneutic interpretation, the conversations would be transcribed, and then the two of us would read the text together and identify themes, ideas, and possible conclusions. But that goal assumes literacy on the part of all participants. I never asked them about their formal education because this question itself is laden with issues of power and access. I felt that we were talking about sensitive topics, so I let them offer information about their formal education but did not directly ask about it. Because my work concerns conferring value on what life experiences had taught them and brought them to where they were, I decided to transcribe, translate, and share their stories as narratives. I then extracted ideas and themes using their stories as references. My goal was not to create a grand narrative, but more of a vignette into the lives of people living in an autonomous community from which we can begin to learn about local groups generating autonomous spaces and collective activity. What resulted is the stories of the women who shared their thoughts, tears, and hopes with me contextualized within a framework that examines this situation as an example of the realities created by

modern-day imperialism. I don't change their narratives to fit a hypothesis; in the final project I provide a space where their voices can be heard. Similarly, I acknowledge that my own lens, interpretations, and experiences are included in the text. Following the example of Chicana/Latina writers such as Ruth Behar (1993), Sofia Villenas (1996b), Lisa Flores (2000), and Alma García (1997), in the following section I outline my personal story as a Chicana from the borderlands and describe why using this methodology to do research in Maclovio Rojas has been essential to understanding my role in academia.

### **Life in the Borderlands**

I was born and raised in "sunny" San Diego, a place of white lines, white walls, and white folks ignoring the humanity on the other side of the "white" line known as the border. I am the youngest daughter of Freddie and Cristina Téllez, he a second generation Chicano from Chicago, she an immigrant from a small town in Mexico. My father was a *pocho salsero* musician used to big cities, fancy night clubs, and late-night jam sessions. He taught us to listen to Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, and Azuquita as well as el Mariachi Vargas, Vicente Fernandez, and Los Panchos. My mother's small town in the state of Jalisco is very grounded in its Spanish traditions and ways. Classical music and waltzes overtook the classic wisdom of the ancestors. Comparisons between all shades of brown were often made and the whitest *primo* won the game of internalized racism. I was raised by parents who viewed the world from completely different lenses based on their own experiences, while living in a border-city created a reality that entailed a continuous weaving in and out of cultural, class, and social intersections. The border was significant to me growing up because while I was cognizant that I was on "this" side of the imposed wall, I always knew that a part of me was on the "other" side as well. Tijuana is the place where many San Diegans and other tourists go to place bets, buy tequila, and take pictures with donkeys wearing a *sarape* that says "Mexico." Visitors traveling to

Tijuana may comment on the poverty that they encounter but will never see their own reflections in the eyes of the street children. The border experience in San Diego County is unique in San Ysidro, because the proximity of that community to the border can serve as a buffer, whereby the city of San Diego proper can remove itself from its neighborly obligations and relegate this task to the southern part of the county. San Ysidro becomes the place where the gritty, raw realities of border life are neatly packaged away from the renovated downtown Gaslamp district and the new PETCO ballpark. For many San Diegans, then, the reality that the border imposes can easily be dismissed and the gap between the two cities widens. Instead of thinking critically about the issues that affect *tijuanenses*, such as NAFTA, the *maquiladoras*, and the insatiable quest for capital by transnational corporations, negative judgment is placed on the city and its inhabitants.

In fact, in 1989 and 1990, while I was in high school, San Diegans expressed their fears about undocumented immigration by staging “Light up the Border” rallies. About once a month during this time, a number of San Diegans lined up their cars and shined their headlights at the border to symbolically state their opposition to what they considered illegal immigration (Chávez 1992). This anti-immigrant hysteria translated into an anti-Mexican environment that exacerbated the racial borders of the city. Growing up amidst this tension meant that I constantly straddled these contradictory worlds.

My experience allows me to identify with the vivid description that Gloria Anzaldúa provides of the border, a portrayal that has become a foundational allegory for scholars. I repeat it here to remind us of her clarity:

The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it

hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. (1999, 25)

Although the border distinguishes *us* from *them*, the emotional residue about which Anzaldúa speaks emerges when one struggles with understanding how your life exists on both sides. In some ways this is both a forced and chosen position with which to identify. For example, when I was a child my family and I lived in an area of San Diego known as Pacific Beach. Although miles from the actual border, my neighborhood was known as “Little TJ” (Tijuana) because of its large Mexican community. Regardless of our geographical space, an imposed border was always placed on us. Surrounding our small apartment complex was Navy housing, and the Navy kids often gave us *mexicanos* a good share of taunting that included degrading name calling. As if it were yesterday, I see myself sitting in my seventh-grade math class doing my work, talking to friends, laughing from time to time. Out of nowhere a fellow classmate turns around and calls me a “Tee-a-wanna Junkie” (Tijuana Junkie). Unable to control my anger, I grab the hair on the back of his head and bang and bang his face against the desk until his two front teeth fall out. As soon as I hear him yell, “Ahhhhh, my teeth!” I became frightened not only because I feared the punishment I was about to receive but also because I understood the capacity for violence that I had inside of me. I know now that this is what years of colonization, oppression, and inequalities can do to the human spirit.

“Tijuana” or Tee-a-wanna, to be more accurate to the portrayal by this classmate, signified that I belonged to the other side of the border despite my

citizenship status, but adding “Junkie” was a simple gesture of hate, disrespect, and *asco* (disgust) to us, “the brown ones.” He, a twelve-year-old white American, had already learned that across the border to the south, humans no longer existed, only disposable junkies. Equating me with his imagined reality was the worst insult you could possibly give. This is just one example of how, while growing up, I crossed the imaginary and real border, both continuously imposed on me in very concrete ways.

Moreover, my family and I often headed south on Interstate 5 on Sundays. As a child I knew we were getting closer to the “real” border when I would start seeing the yellow caution signs of a man, woman, and child in braids, warning signs of the *mojados* (derogatory term, literally translated means “wet-back”) trying to come to *el otro lado* (the other side). On these trips we would often visit *familia* and return with good spirits and our car packed with groceries from *La Comercial Mexicana*. The ways in which I lived *la frontera* changed when my family and I moved a little more east of the beach and we came to the working-class neighborhood of Clairemont where it seemed like interracial strife was not as stark. The experiences between the brown, black, and white flowed a bit more easily, albeit cautiously, sometimes even temporarily. Yet it was at this point in my life that I first started hearing my sister, other Mexican Americans<sup>2</sup> from my school, and old friends from Pacific Beach use the word *white-washed* to describe me: *white-washed* because I somehow did not fit into the standard box of what it meant to be “down” and Mexican. In a racially mixed neighborhood ethnic identities are marked by socially determined signifiers. Operating outside of this paradigm was/is not easily accepted. However, the multilayered contradictions were exposed when the same people who were calling me *white-washed* could call my *primos* and friends who had recently crossed the border, *pollos* (a derogatory term used to describe recent immigrants, used more within the Mexican American community). What I eventually came to realize

was that the border had already made a way into their psyche and had separated them not only physically but spiritually as well. In an effort to claim a sense of belonging, these youth recreated and enforced divisions, a way of being that had become the norm in their own lives. As I was making sense of these experiences and imposed dichotomies, I also found myself offended when my Anglo friends' parents would not let them cross the border with my family and me to join us in parties or weekend visits. Ironically, though, as soon as we turned eighteen they were free to walk across, never drive, of course, to drink, drink, drink the night away on the streets where Revolution (the name of the major bar strip frequented by American youth) was a concept usurped by teens bloated with *Coronas*. I remember feeling disconcerted but unable to explain why.

Learning to weave in and out of the racial boundaries and tensions in my life is a complex, painful experience. As a border dweller living between Tijuana and San Diego, I reconcile reality on a daily basis. My political, personal, and professional activities require that I frequently cross the border, an almost symbolic divide, as fluid a process as switching from English to Spanish, or as using pesos over dollars or vice versa. While I understand this experience is valid, I also heed Manuel Luis Martínez's caution when he argues that within Chicana/o studies and the poststructuralist/postcolonial realm, borderlands criticism has transformed the site of the border into a symbolic place where a purely discursive form of "opposition" to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands has emerged. He states,

The most damaging aspect of this so-called post-national work, however, is its dismissal of the importance of "place" and "citizenship" in a nationally defined entity that permanently denies especially the (undocumented) migrant arrival. (2002, 54)

He argues that a focus on the exploitation and constraint of the border itself,



which has acted historically as the “literal and figurative marker of nation-state exclusion, and as a literal representation of the denial of citizenship and its rights should be emphasized” (54). Martínez states the importance of making the border distinctive from the borderlands, of “acknowledging the reality while utilizing the liminality” (65).

The application of Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1999) notion of *mestizaje* is useful in negotiating this tension. What I’ve come to realize is that growing up on the border has informed my identity: the identity of a *mestiza*, not in the sociological/anthropological sense but as a consciousness and as an experience. For example, Anzaldúa clarifies,

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman’s sister or potential lover. I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. (102–103)

This borderlander, *mestiza* experience creates a space for me to subvert the borders in my life. “That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs” (Anzaldúa 1999, 101). Anzaldúa’s new *mestizaje* is radical in that it is about producing a consciousness and a movement that does not insist on fragmentation (Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991). Understanding that fragmentation or separation is not a necessary component to survival is imperative for understanding our communities, our

lives, and our futures.

This is an empowering way of understanding oneself in the context of imposing boundaries and experiences. I embrace *mestizaje* as a way of reclaiming my borderlander experience and I recognize that my lens as a *nueva mestiza* creates a unique vision of the world around me, one that wouldn't have been possible if I hadn't lived in the tensions created by *la frontera*. Applying this concept to my research practice has been liberatory, because not only am I naming the multiple cultural, class, and social tensions that permeate my own experience, but also I am working through them and offering a model that I hope can be useful to other students, teachers, and researchers of color who find themselves questioning their histories, their experiences, and their roles in the academy.

### **Conclusion**

My research in Maclovio Rojas has meant coming full circle as a borderlander and coming full circle home. I've spent many years away from this place for various reasons, primarily because the pain of my childhood experiences aren't easily forgotten. I thought that I wanted to make my life in a place where I wouldn't have to constantly battle the xenophobic fever of a military border city and its consequent alienation. But something brings me back to *Dago*, to *Chula*, to *Sidro*, to *Tijuas*; crossing the border going south gives me a sense of freedom, liberation from the confines of straight walls and straight lines. I can now embrace the contradictions and live in the tensions.

Furthermore, although I seek to move beyond nationalist sentiments in defining myself as a Chicana with a *mestizaje* practice that transcends borders and boundaries, I am clear in my analysis of the stark realities of the imposed border. Because I have dual-citizenship, can cross with relative ease, and have the option of applying for the *Linea Sentri*-card,<sup>3</sup> I recognize my own

privileges in being able to choose to do research in Tijuana and the “class and cultural locations and implications that it produces” (Behar 1993). For example, on my trips back to the United States from Maclovio Rojas, when I reach the border, my brown face, the old Volvo that I drive, my “accentless” English momentarily confuses the officers, who are unable to immediately categorize me and make sense of who and what I represent. Yet it is during these moments that I can subvert the multiplicities of my identities. And while “Dora,” “Juana,” and “Maria” may not be returning with me physically when I am finally waved through, their stories, their spirits, and their voices of resistance shine through loud and clear.<sup>4</sup> This is the power of the written word. My intentions in this article have been to share my experiences as a way of adding to the conversation begun by other women of color feminist scholars. I recognize that although here my voice is privileged, it is merely one element of the work that I have to undertake as a scholar/activist committed to building bridges, to creating social change and disrupting the norm of academic epistemology. This piece is a challenge to myself, just as much as it is to others, to be cognizant of the need to continue to work from multiple spaces.

Living in the borderlands and disrupting the dichotomies means that we will have to negotiate the contradictions constantly and vigilantly. But if we are heeding Villenas’s (1996b) call to work from within and facilitate a process where Latina/os become subjects and creators of knowledge, an important step has been taken. As Flores states, “One important practice of decolonization is replacing silence with voice” (2000, 693). With my work as a Chicana scholar/activist, I hope to create a better understanding of *mestizaje*, of creating a space where multiple voices are reflected, and open the possibilities for creating knowledge across *la línea*, knowledge that challenges and humanizes all of our experiences.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The results of this study will be available in my forthcoming dissertation, "Globalizing Resistance: Maclovio Rojas, A Mexican Community en lucha" from Claremont Graduate University.

<sup>2</sup> I use "Mexican American" to describe students who are of Mexican descent but do not identify with the political identity of Chicana/os.

<sup>3</sup> La Línea-Sentri is a program implemented three years ago for border crossers who are able to pay the \$60 per year fee and come up "clean" after the extensive six-month background check. It "erases" the border for an elite group of commuters.

<sup>4</sup> I use fictive names to retain anonymity.

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