

# MESSY SPACES: Chicana Testimonio and the Undisciplining of Ethnography

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*This article explores the value of personal insight as an analytical device while gesturing toward its limits. It compares and performs writing one's voice with writing the voices of others (through the method and practice of ethnography). It demonstrates how these parallel projects are often censored by notions of what is messy and should be kept "private." It also shows, however, that these muted and messy spaces can be productive places to look for Chicana feminist contributions. By looking for examples of messiness in ethnography, historical narratives, and personal experience, I am performing multivocal perspectives as a politics of Chicana feminism and deploying them to defy disciplinary claims to merit. The ethnographic component of this work examines practices of feminisms among working-class Chicanas who labor outside the home and attend school. Historical notes consider the multiple meanings of domestic knowledge. My own testimonio provides an added verse to the polyphony, connecting how my mother's story influenced my own. Through this multivocal approach, the article develops a notion of "undiscipline," riffing from Foucault, as a means for reevaluating the place of personal voice and disciplinary censorship.*

[Key words: testimonio, undiscipline, performance, Chicana feminism, ethnography]

## Writing one's experiences as an

urgent political practice of liberation has been central to the methodological foundations of Chicana/Latina feminisms (de la Cruz 1991/1994; Latina Feminist Group 2001; Moraga 1983; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Trujillo 1991). It remains equally imperative today. Participant observation is the methodology of ethnography, a discipline whose politics of liberation has varied. That space between writing others' and writing one's own experiences requires some investigation in relation to these politics of liberation. At the heart of my project is the distinction made between personal knowledge and academic knowledge. I try to explicate and inventory how some academic

practices encourage a kind of self-censoring. Yet my objective isn't quite so simple as to identify areas that require resistance. If it were that easy, I'd just do it. The power in naming the dominant practices is elusive. It is tricky because we are all situated in these many sites. Thus, it is important to see how these practices work together to create silencing discourses and where we might look for alternative spaces. I look especially at the rules for engaging in ethnography—in practice as a discipline and as a method regulated by the university/federal rules of human subjects. These strictures are but a few of many sites that seem to promote voice while silencing it. My work isn't a neat and tidy task. I develop themes of messiness and undiscipline to plumb these relationships of liberation and voice.

This article presents a conversation between different sites of knowledge: in the educational system, ethnography, the home, history, and the community. I highlight shifts in expressions and contexts through the use of headers and stylistic demeanor to guide the reader through the myriad voices that talk to each other, placing myself amid these many and often conflicting sites. For example, I locate myself getting an education and educating, learning about Chicana feminism while illuminating it, valuing education while being critical of it. These articulations dynamically inform each other. In practice, these are all my speaking positions, and some slippage between first-person personal, third-person historical, and first-person academic purposefully occurs. The overlap is especially intentional as I head toward the conclusion. In the body of the presentation I seek a juxtaposition of experiences through which specific meanings can be derived. By looking at these different sites of knowledge and concomitant ideas of merit, we can begin to question our own unwitting participation in the silencing of others. In this examination, I hope to contribute to a methodology of dignity and liberation and a further elaboration of Chicana feminist practices (Sandoval 1991).

### **Domestic Training**

American education for Mexicana/Mexican American women can be dated to early twentieth-century programs of home economics, programs expressly intended to "Americanize" Mexican women and educate them into becoming proper domestic workers for the Euro-American elite (G. Sánchez 1994).

Mexican American women, for their part, engaged in this so-called education with a good measure of skepticism. They became domestic workers, cleaning houses and cooking for the wealthy Euro-American women who profited from this arrangement. Euro-American women, now free from the drudgeries of domestic work, could engage in the refined domestic arts. This system inculcated a kind of shift in the worth of housekeeping. It deemed Mexican American women incapable of good housekeeping and devalued their knowledge and locally derived culinary practices. And yet Mexican American women were still doing Euro-American women's dirty work. I wonder how individual Mexican women interpreted and reinterpreted these judgments.

Devalued for their own knowledge of the domestic sphere, they were retrained to uphold a specific set of practices of the elite culture that did not include Mexican-based knowledge. In a U.S. Southwest context, this became both a means of deracializing through assimilation and reracializing through the imbrications of gendered-economic-racial dictates (Romero 1992; G. Sánchez 1994). George Sánchez shows how savvy Mexican and Mexican American women were in taking advantage of the economic opportunities these programs offered while shrugging off attempts at assimilation. Today, we still feel the echoes of this gender/racial labor segmentation and racist ideology. These are the very people who are deemed illegal because they are crossing into the United States to care for middle- and upper-class children and the elderly

and to clean our homes (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). In this paradox, American home economies are at once thought of as threatened by Mexicans and Mexican immigrants even while being sustained by their hard labor.

## II

### **Home Economics**

My mother and father ran a smart household.<sup>1</sup> They had to. They had eight children; I was the youngest. Their efficiencies and creativity in cooking dinner, packing lunches, and performing the hundred other tasks involved in raising children expanded when my mom returned to school again and got her BA, then an MSW, then a law degree. As we did not have much money, we created; we invented; we made do. Our house, constant with activity, never felt meager: there was always enough food for another guest, always enough space for another pillow. My parents were vibrant and unconventional, yet held close many traditions. My mom became a Chicana during my early childhood; before then she was *una Hispana* farm girl. My dad cooked and cleaned well before The Men Of Today. It was a time of protest, of inkle-loom belts and macramé plant hangers, of grape boycotts, and of homemade pizzas made with tortillas.

### **Home Ec 101**

In eighth grade, I along with my fellow students, largely Vietnamese and Korean immigrants, Mexican Americans, and working-class whites, were encouraged to learn the manual arts. More precisely, I “tested” well to become a beautician. Hah! The boys took shop, and the girls, home economics. In home economics 101, we made quick breads and I sewed my own apron. Despite my mom being in law school, an educational bar of a different sort was set low for us. I knew the trick was to keep reading, to keep getting A’s in my classes. Yet my social studies teacher explained to us her own brand of economic theory of

the home: "Mexican girls," she explained, "want to stay home, go on welfare to have babies after babies after babies." I was outraged. But it also created a crisis: what do you do when the classes that you must master to succeed tell lies?

My mother would have talked back. And I should have too. Forced by medical, legal, and religious prohibitions against birth control, my parents struggled for a decade with what my sisters and I now take for granted. After having eight kids, they talked back. Lest we need reminding, women today must still pay high prices for effective birth control that are often not covered by health insurance (when we have it) and are limited by reproductive technologies (when we have access to them). My mother acknowledged the high cost(s) of having more children—not the least of which was delaying her own education. Abusing the welfare state? I don't think so. She waged her own war against those patriarchal limitations. It was a private battle in which both my parents engaged, as they had to challenge deep religious convictions that were shored up by common practice. It was a private fight that for my mother would burst into the open. She would work for reproductive health care for *mujeres* on a local and national level. Planned Parenthood, Catholics for a Free Choice, and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health: these became her grounds for educating others.

But I get too far ahead of myself. As an eighth grader, what was a young Chicanita in training to do? It would take time to learn to talk back. It would be years before Mom's, bell hooks' (1989), and Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) wild tongues would urge me to disobedience.

### **Domestic Policy**

In 1981, the year my mother passed the bar exam and became a lawyer, I crossed town to attend a fancy prep school. Perhaps this was my own

Americanization program: learning not domestic work, but learning an Americanized version of domestic policies. It was my mother who made me realize the politics in my education. “Take advantage of the education,” she told us, “but be wary.” Even more, she modeled for us how to be outraged. I recall her arguing with my history teachers about the overall absence of the U.S. Southwest, dismayed that we didn’t learn about the U.S.-Mexico war. In our very own state, what kind of domestic policy had been in place during the Sand Creek Massacre in which Colonel Chivington of the 1st Colorado Cavalry slaughtered whole Cheyenne and Arapahoe families? What kind of economic policies had allowed for the Ludlow Massacre, in which European immigrant and Mexican coal miners went on strike and were attacked by Colorado National Guardsmen, who fired upon them and set afire the workers’ families’ encampments? I needed an education in domestic affairs and domestic economics of a different sort. I read what I could get my hands on. I devoured black history. By my junior year in high school, I sat on my first of many diversity committees and I pissed off the headmaster. No National Honor Society for me that year, no siree.

### **Domestic Work**

My parents were still paying off my loans for my fancy prep school when I was finishing at Yale. My mom worked two jobs, and my dad and his union were preparing to strike. I had already been on strike while a dishwasher, and I had worked in many of the other domestic arenas: in food service, as a janitor, and as a construction worker. In my last semester at Yale, I took a history course on the U.S. West. It was quite a popular course in such a famous department. In that last semester as an undergraduate, I still had to argue for the inclusion of Mexicans in the historical picture. We still didn’t read about the U.S.-Mexico war, Ludlow, or Sand Creek. History had still been swept clean; the narratives, while somewhat spicier, were served as predictable fare for our consumption.

III

**Recuerdos**

I remember the first time I considered Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert as an ethnographer while looking for my intellectual antecedents. In the same way that we now commonly regard Zora Neale Hurston as an ethnographer, I similarly claimed this author of *The Good Life: New Mexico Traditions and Food* (1949/1986). Both Hurston and C. de Baca Gilbert were highly educated and wrote in genres that stood largely outside of disciplinary expectations. C. de Baca Gilbert, a *nuevomexicana* folklorist, wrote about the land and kitchens (1949; 1949/1986; 1954/1994). She wrote her folklore at a time when popular literature about New Mexico would create a dominant narrative that placed Mexican culture betwixt a fading, remnant colonial culture and a future that promised only assimilation (Kaup 2005; Padilla 1993). C. de Baca Gilbert worked as a county extension agent after earning her degree in home economics. Her writing was a blend of genres—*cuentos*, *recuerdos*, recipes, and folklore. Her place within the popular (Anglo) conception of New Mexican life seemed harmlessly fixed in salvaging old stories of a fading life. C. de Baca Gilbert fills her books with recuerdos that endlessly enumerate the land and herbs, recalling *remedios y recetas* that catalog the vitality of family life in rural New Mexico (1949; 1986; 1994). In *The Good Life* (1986)—a work that announces its “collection of over 80 recipes” (cover/frontispiece)—C. de Baca Gilbert praises the knowledge of a *curandera* through her portrayal of Señá Martina whose words speak to a vast knowledge of plants and cooking, but not without political commentary:

This was a good year for *poleo*, pennyroyal, and I gathered bushels of it along the ditches. If the doctor tells you your children have tonsillitis [sic] don't let him cut the tonsils as everyone is doing; mix

pulverized pennyroyal leaves with butter and rub the white spots in their throats. Take my word, they will not need a knife...I have cured all my children without assistance from a doctor which I could not have afforded, anyway. (15; italics in the original)

Señá Martina's plight is starkly presented, as she sees her own knowledge undervalued literally and figuratively; as a curandera, she is poor. She acknowledges she cannot afford the very doctor whose knowledge she evaluates as unworthy. Rebolledo (1995) and Padilla (1993) suggest that C. de Baca Gilbert's detailed descriptions and constant location of the plants, land, and names reveal a consciousness of being colonized. It is a subtle but important framing within this genre, as a cookbook/cuento that appears, at first, to be genteel. Rather than silence her work, she wrote in mixed genres that reinsinuated her knowledge and respect for local customs. Even if writing in a moment when her work would be muted, she reappropriates her own ability to speak. In this move, she subtly inscribes a reality that calls into question the dominant analysis (Rebolledo 1995). I tie my writing to hers, seeing ethnography as a volatile genre. I feel my own self-censoring has come from the discomfort of what I have to say, the unpopularity of my message: it is not easy to talk about the absence of Latina/o voice in the academy without engaging the popular criticisms of quality. Certainly other kitchen tables allow for an angrier tongue, but I am sympathetic to C. de Baca Gilbert, and I pay attention to her positioning. Dominant literature is powerful in its claim as to whose reality counts.

## IV

### **Home Grown Theory**

I am the daughter of a Mexican American woman who returned to school after she had eight children. This experience has provided a wellspring of

meaning and urban lore for my family and for me. Our family is not unique in this experience. In the research to which I allude here (but which I analyze largely in a forthcoming project), I spoke with working-class Chicanas and Mexicanas about returning to school, working outside the home, and their relationships to their families.<sup>2</sup> I asked how they prioritized, negotiated, and performed the hundreds of tasks and claims on their time; I suggest that their insights speak to a variety of contemporary Chicana/Mexicana womanhoods. Their economic straits and educational barriers also speak to the tensions and aspirations of working-class Chicanas/Mexicanas and their practices of feminisms. Through their expressions, I see a common thread: their educational struggles in academe and my own efforts to write ethnographically for academe. I interrogate this intertwined struggle through what I call “undiscipline.” Undiscipline seeks an unveiling of silencing practices in academe, and it does so with a politics of solidarity.

I consciously write against disciplinary tidiness and thereby tangle and tango with ethnographic methods in two ways. First, I explore shifting life experiences and how that shift relates to ethnographic work. Second, I consider the ways in which disciplinary training inhibits us from considering other vantages. The political economy invested in the production of the ethnographer shores up specific agendas and practices. These practices, I will show, can be at odds with a politics that helps people to see and name their conditions of subjugation. I unpack some of my own disciplinary training; I rethink my own work; and I consider how my life experiences, including the privileges that I have, affect these. My intention here is not to dismiss the power of ethnography, but rather to think about the implications beyond self-reflexivity, using the devices of testimonio and undiscipline. Further, I avoid positioning myself as self-valorizing or as exempt from the critiques that I am making against discipline. Without being self-abnegating, I hope to demonstrate the possibilities of

wrangling with testimonio, ethnographic writing, and self-representation in pursuit of dynamic expressions of Chicana feminisms.

### Hiding the Dirt

There were two things I didn't expect or want to find in my ethnographic research about feminist practices among Chicanas/Mexicanas who were returning to school. The first was the number of narratives that involved domestic violence as part of the explanation as to why women return to school. For many mujeres, the strategy of self-advancement was the key to their survival. The second unexpected finding was their unsuccessful college experience, if measured by the completion of a degree. Too many did not graduate from college or obtain their Associate of Arts degrees. This was the mess that I wanted to hide. I had hoped to find that women, though facing difficulties, were able to persevere. But the reality I found is difficult to publish inasmuch as I loathe and fear an article that seems to contribute to studies that claim Latinas don't value education, and blah, blah, blah. I could certainly document how exquisitely hard working, smart, and invested in education the women I interviewed were; I could not, at the individual level, explain the low rate of graduation. Entering school, yes. Taking classes, yes. Working hard in school, yes. But getting a degree—that mark of distinction that allows for a change in economic chances—was, by and large, not there. What I heard was a compulsion to see educational success increasingly as a private matter.

I argue that the very reasons women were not successfully completing their degrees had everything to do with neoliberal economic practices: the privatization of industry paralleled in the privatization of education. Patricia, for example—one of the many women who contributed to the research—cast her own performance in school as solely her own failings, rather than part of an educational system that failed her:

I mean I have gone to school so much and yet not really having accomplished it. You know, I don't have a degree in my hand. If I would have stayed in school straight through, I would already have a BA. If I wouldn't have gone in and out, in and out, go here, go there.

Patricia, an incredibly articulate and perceptive Chicana, mother of two school-aged kids, had to drop out that term when she couldn't afford to fix her broken car. These same privatizing impulses urge us not to connect these experiences; rather they frame our successes and failures as ours alone. We are left to own them. Our experiences, successes and failures alike, then seem to be entirely personal, by choice or circumstance, and not systemic. Thus, while I draw some parallels between my mother's experience and those of the women I interviewed, the rules have changed. Funding for education has plummeted, placing an especially heavy burden on poor, working poor, and middle-class students. Child welfare grants in the 1960s that had enabled my mother and others to complete their education are now entirely gone. In a sense, I do not wonder at the low matriculation and graduation rates for Latinas following these decades of funding slashes and concomitant tuition increases.

This desire to see educational success increasingly as a private matter, individually obtained through merit alone, also parallels the idea of the ethnographer as individual authority and, to a certain degree, private or not self-disclosing. To step beyond the bounds of those limitations seems inappropriate, excessive, and messy. I look to testimonio as part and parcel of my analysis and gesture toward a politics of community that stands in defiance of neoliberalism's drive toward economic privatization and social privatization.

### **Testimonio: Home to a Socialist Economy of Narrative**

In my use here, the hallmarks of testimonio are personal narratives connected

to larger group experiences, with elements of the narratives shifted and emboldened to make those political interpretations (Arias 2001; Beverley 2004; Partnoy 2006; R. Sánchez 1995). Some women were quite clear about these connections, articulating a powerful counternarrative, implicitly incriminating that isolationist drive. Laura, a Chicana lesbian, mother, and office worker, made extra effort to clarify this. She left a message on my answering machine after she and I had already completed a three-hour interview. She called back to underscore the implications of her education as a Chicana lesbian and as a mother. She affirmed: “We all understand that this [going to school to get a degree] is part of a larger context, that it is not an individual endeavor. We see it as part of the less than 2 percent of us who ever go to school and that needs to change, and [we need to see] why that needs to change.”

Laura’s story was at different moments about lesbian activism, workers’ rights, and later, education. The significance of such telling can shift with time, audience, and political necessity (Beverley 2001). I am not suggesting that testimonio is a better stand-in for fact or authenticity (Pratt 2001) or that it is devoid of its own political failings (Arias 2001; R. Sánchez 1995); indeed, as a genre, it may more acutely reveal the motivations of the author (Warren 2001) and allow for a greater sense of political framing. And that’s the point. I am relying on a genre that uses its retelling as a means to connect with a collective (Partnoy 2006). Testimonio contributes to a reframing of what it means to be unconnected or “private” in a way that joins with both methods and the effects of neoliberalism on the poor and working poor (Binford 1999; Vandegrift 2006). It further adds to a reframing of authorial power by asking, “Who has the authority to narrate?” (Beverley 2001, 221). It does so in two ways: testimonio challenges the concept of “native informant”—seeing interviewees as capable of their own political analysis—and reframes the author’s own self-story, one that moves in and between data gathering and analysis (Beverley 2001).

My testimonio engages the project set out by Chicanas and Latinas as a necessary entry point in academe. The most recent of these, *Telling to Live* (Latina Feminist Group 2001), locates Chicana/Latina writers and their experiences within academe and within activism. Many of the works are intensely personal, some are written anonymously, and each of the works speaks from a different voice than is typically heard in academic venues. This radical project, which is authored as a collective, locates the realities that are frequently undisclosed and unexamined in academic writing but that are crucial to the experiences of many Latinas and other women of color (Quinn-Sánchez 2006). Other academics have been writing about these as the spaces behind the scenes (García 2005; López 2006; Reyes 2005). Journals that publish the articles distinguish them spatially from other academic articles. These works consider the price paid by many very high achieving Latina academics, and, in doing so, bring a grounded reality that might otherwise be mystified behind titles such as “associate professor.” Outside these journals, I fear, the impact is still regarded as unacademic.<sup>3</sup>

### **Kitchen Table: Sites of Chicana Feminisms**

In speaking from and to our own experiences, I build on the traditions of Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa and their work with the Kitchen Table Press (1981). Other Latina/o ethnographers have long drawn from this history and incorporated their own experiences into their research and theory building (Alvarez 1988; Quintana 1996; Rosaldo 1989; Zavella 1987).<sup>4</sup> This is not new, nor is it anathema whatsoever for ethnographers to position themselves within a text. However, I suggest such positioning has been largely limited to giving authority to ethnographers to locate themselves in first-person accounts of the field. But what happens when those first-person accounts are not drawn entirely from the field? Renato Rosaldo, for example, was quite taken to task for his emotional and personal account in “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage”

(1989) despite the clear analytical insights the self-revelation provides (Behar 1996, 174; Rosas 2001). Edén Torres and others (Flores 2000; Klahn 2003; Nuñez-Janes 2006; Perez 2006; Tellez 2005; Villenes 1996) address differing kinds of knowledge, some based in academic training and some that “rise up out of this well of knowledge that was left to me by my grandmothers and great aunts” (Torres 2003, 2). Torres boldly acknowledges her insight that provides “an unapologetic challenge to the traditions and systems that have tried to silence Chicanas and so many others” (2).

### **Discipline and Undiscipline**

Ethnography has much to gain from heeding Chicana feminist theory. Much of the contributions are made in relationship to questions of power, authority, and the histories of colonialism and racism. The vexing questions for me are not the endless reproduction of insider/outsider, native scholar, or author-present/author-absent narratives. Rather, I wonder how to write about these multiple sites of knowledge in a way that honors and parallels the Chicana feminist wit that I describe here and in a way that is self-aware. My development of undisciplining is an effort to think about our own locations within academic training as a device that will allow a continual rethinking of our/my positioning. It is not that I consider my experiences to be the same as those of the women with whom I worked, but rather that I think about the larger systems (neoliberalism) that urge a persistence of meritocracy as an explanation of school success/failure much in the same way that disciplinary strictures similarly use meritocracy, among other myths, as a device to explain academic acumen/failings. In both instances, arguing against the myth of meritocracy allows us to think about the knowledge bases and voices that oppose this dominant ideology; it does so in a way that avoids our own self-criticism as the sole explanation. What an amazing system it is that urges our own self-censoring and self-silencing.

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prisons* (1977) provides an explication as to how self-censoring is part and parcel of disciplinarity—as in the discipline of anthropology. He excavates the multiple meanings of *discipline* and allows us to consider how elements of academic discourse bind proper comportment and so-called good methodology with self-denial. Taking inventory of the multiple associated meanings of *discipline* allows us to better locate our own self-silencing and own self-censorship. In a sense when we locate discipline as a school of thought with “disciplinary requirements,” one can imagine that the rules of compliance constrain mind and body. Discipline in this sense upholds denial of self (objectivity) as supreme. Conversely, speaking from experience seems lazy, lacking rigor. It is a self-censoring of the private voice that is trained toward the meritorious, disciplined voice. Such claims of objectivity and subjectivity are by now well-rehearsed. But they hold a different meaning for those of us who regard the inclusion of our subjective reality as a crucial and necessary political intervention. Ignoring such interventions may silence our contributions; including such interventions may also result in a silencing when doing so results in not being published or promoted, or simply having our efforts disregarded as poor scholarship. Foucault’s work locates self-censorship in a complex web of discipline. Understanding our own place within this web urges us to winnow out the dominant forces subjugating us, and our own possible subjugation of others.

If Foucault draws our attention to the dilemma of self-silencing, Torres urges us to be vigilant, but not to silence ourselves either. Torres calls for a kind of policing of our sentimentality and suggests it as a likely place for the reproduction of those dominant ideologies identified by Foucault: “We must police ourselves for good intentions that actually support an oppressive system or present people from naming and inventing themselves in opposition to the dominant ideology” (Torres 2003, 144). What I am suggesting, with the

inclusion of her point, is a means to imagine that attentiveness without the silencing/self-censorship, which would allow us to winnow out what to keep and what to throw away. Such attentiveness would affirm Chicana feminist praxis of mutual liberation.

### **Home and Educational Costs**

Like many women, my mother did well quite in high school, and yet she did not go straight to college like her brothers had. What are the costs in sending a girl to school? What are the expectations regarding work outside the home? What majors were available to a young woman in college in the 1950s? After she married my father, and in the course of raising us children, she attempted to get a college degree several times. Attending college is still assumed to parlay into economic upward mobility, and yet Latinas have a lower attendance rate than their female counterparts (González, Stoner, and Jovel 2003). For her, those attempts were interrupted by childbearing and rearing. After having me, her eighth child, she returned to school yet again. Starting in the late 1960s, she earned her bachelor's degree at a local college where students were fighting for a department in Chicano studies. She helped write a justification for the creation of a Chicano studies department there. I still have a copy of the proposal.

In the late 1960s, educational programs were connected to movements for civil rights. Indeed, Chicano studies emerged from and contributed to El Movimiento. But even more, grants, not loans, allowed working-class folk such as my mom to go to school. Child-care stipends allowed her to attend class. Today grants for low-income students are nearly nonexistent, child-care grants are mere relics, and personal loans now reign.

Those who have speciously argued that Mexican and Mexican American women do not value education have been deceived by what seems to be

cultural causality. My mother completed her law degree—going to school part-time during the evenings. The women I interviewed in my research, just as I reached for my own degree in higher education, powerfully showed me tenacity, smarts, and home economics with which I was intimately familiar. As a kid I watched my mom study with her law books and yellow highlighters for four years, passing the bar exam with *ganas* and style.

The women I interviewed, although they were persistent in school and shouldered their accumulating college loans (the lending of which is an industry in itself), proved less successful overall. We in academia are encouraged to think that educational success and intellect are enough to succeed. But in these times, without the funding, we are asking those to see their success or lack of success as personal rather than the failure of our educational system. While I deplore the obstacles that have kept them from receiving a degree, their narratives map the ways in which they made do with their education.

### A Guide to Good Housekeeping

The use of testimonio I advocate here can collide with ethnographic disciplinary expectations, creating quite a mess, a kind of lack of discipline if you will, and hence an undisciplining of ethnography. The repercussions of this collision are not simple. The inclusion of testimonio creates two methodological problems. First, we see collisions of requirements and expectations enacted at a methodological level under the strictures of the Institutional Review Board (IRB)—the local body that reviews research with human subjects (Bradburd 2006; Lederman 2006). These rules have increasingly restricted the kinds of innovative and community-based research that are the hallmark of progressive ethnography in general and of ethnic studies and Chicana/o studies in particular (Katz 2006).

There is a self-silencing and self-censorship afoot under these requirements. Researchers who do flout those rules and instead seek more collective methods, do so at a cost. They get disciplined and they don't get funding, but mostly they learn how to obscure their undisciplinarity (Katz 2006). For example, in preparing for this paper, I asked a number of researchers across the country to account for how they approach the IRB in relationship to creative work or community-engaged work. One person retorted, "You just have to lie." Another person admitted calling it "co-performative witnessing" instead of participant-observation. So yes, people who use ethnographic methods do indeed imagine and use creative and community-based tools in their work. To fulfill the IRB approval, though, one must obfuscate not only methodological innovations but also epistemological partnering.

Yet even the most crunchy ethnographic disciplinary strictures have, of late, grown weary and wary of self-reflexive obsessions. Likened to kitsch, self-representation has been charged as sentimental, sappy, fluffy stories about "me." The substance may seem similar, but the stance and the attitude for this self-interrogation are critical. For example, Chicana ethnographer Michelle Tellez's explanation of her own history in relationship to academic voice dramatically illustrates her anger toward racializing antagonisms (Tellez 2005). It stands with an attitude of survival, irreverence, and affirmation. The resulting "messy" and undisciplined spaces become productive sites of theory building. Moreover, without irreverence and affirmation, critiquing the normative restrictions is difficult because the normative position has, in many ways, appropriated the terms of Chicana feminist positions—social justice, inequality, attentiveness to race, class, gender, sexuality—figuring them as concerns about Latinos without abdicating the power that would effect change in the university (for example, who is worthy to hire, what terms do we use for success and merit?).

Pushing the boundaries of self-reflexivity beyond the disciplinary monitors can be read as unkempt and flabby, or creative and dynamic. As such, this messy space requires attention. Several well-established works have addressed the question of the colonial history of ethnography and frameworks for decolonizing such epistemologies (Behar and Gordon 1995; Rosaldo 1989; Smith 1999; Visweswaran 1994). Among these Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) use a critique and historical context of field and fieldwork in *Anthropological Locations* to consider decolonizing possibilities. I draw substantially from their work, as they provide a consideration of literal space (the field) while I also examine the spaces in and outside ethnography and discipline.

Let me elaborate. In their introductory essay, Gupta and Ferguson map out the history of anthropology as a field science, rooted in the ideas of objectivity and going “away.” Their insightful analyses show how elements of this now-obsolete idea still retain powerful features that make a distinction of *good* and *bad* ethnography. Moreover, they review the ways in which the very choices of a “field” site are mystified, presented as randomly selected when they are not, and then downplayed as a means of exalting the excellent research of the anthropologist. Ethnography will gain from these authors’ call for writing that does not obscure research contexts and asks researchers to locate themselves, no longer spatially, but rather in their social position. In a curious moment, they move to the question of the researcher and one’s relationship to home through “other genres, other fields” (29), such as ethnic studies. Yet, after such an elaboration of the field, they declare that they cannot “pursue this topic in detail” (29).

This move, to locate researchers in their own unobscured social location, implies a number of matters that I elaborate upon in this article. As I suggested above, my own hidden rooms of messiness may be resurrected as a kind of social location. Other Chicana ethnographers, particularly concerned with

educational ethnography, have similarly called into question this social location (Delgado Bernal, et al. 2006). Sofia Villenes (1996), in particular, tackles her role as both colonizer/colonized within academe and in the educational field context; she considers not only her own subject position but the ways in which others sought to claim and circumscribe her subjectivity. With this good company I wonder: how do we attend not only to the hidden reasons behind the choice of a field location as Gupta and Ferguson suggest, but continue to demystify this process that addresses alignment to theory and epistemological questions? What are the personal and political behind the theoretical? What are the limitations we should heed? It is certainly powerful to reject these limiting methodologies and epistemologies, but it is problematic when we must abide by them to have our research methods approved, funded, or published. The silencing, then, is not only self-silencing; it is a real censorship found under the guise of *good* method and style.

### **Domesticana**

I examine these unkempt times and messy spaces that are so familiar to me. These are the shifting sites of communication and potential collaboration in ethnography and kitchen-table talk. I'll admit that in the process of my early venture, as the well-trained anthropologist, I imagined myself attempting to recombine the ingredients of ethnographic production as the recipe calls for, to hide the mess in the cupboard, to emerge triumphant with ethnographic cupcakes in hand. Voilà! Or I imagined presenting myself as the shabby-chic, insightful anthropologist / interior decorator who can see the patterns in the research that is at once based on the right research and evocative of modes of resistance that I would share with My Community. But instead I had still the mess of uncertainty, the bits of fabric that wouldn't be combined into a throw pillow. The weeding through, the vetting and evaluation of different kinds of knowledge, then becomes crucial.

I turn to Amalia Mesa-Baines in her description of *domesticana*, an artistic practice of Chicana representation (2003) as an informative example.

Mesa-Baines describes domesticana as a feminist *rasquachismo*—a kind of reclamation of domestic objects often incorrectly deemed kitschy, cast in a context of a working-class affirmation and of a politically empowered sensibility that rejects domestic subjugation. She locates this tension—between that which is “affirmed and that which is contested” (314)—in a similar production of Chicana feminist practices unapologetically located in the domestic (2003).<sup>5</sup> Like Mesa-Baines *rasquache cum domesticana*, I locate my kitchen table insight as a politics of knowledge. Although I am not trying to uphold, say, a relatively stringent idea of the objective ethnographer, I still find that I have more mess than I know what to do with. This presents both an inquiry into ethnographic praxis and gestures toward larger feminist projects. I’ll shove the good-anthropology cupcakes down the drain and make do with the pieces that I have, including all the mess. I am learning domesticana wit.

In the processes of rethinking my disciplinary requirements, I’ll admit I wanted to keep it all. Even while challenged about “what made my research anthropological,” I wanted to dance in the kitchen with that body of literature, connecting the beautiful and inspiring work of queer and heterosexual Chicana feminists with the sweaty rhythms of everyday lives. I had been inspired by the powerful chaos of my own family of origin, my mother’s own brand of feminism. I knew it was there. And I saw it reinvented. I was further humbled and inspired by talking with Chicanas who showed me the intricate footwork in returning to school and working outside of the home.

The women I interviewed generously shared the messy spaces in their lives when they could not tidy over the stretched resources that are often obscured in women’s doubled day of labor. In one interview, Isadora, a Mexicana

widowed mother of three, related to me her economic straits when she chose to pay her tuition or get kicked out of her degree-granting program:

I always turned to my family, like my mother. But she couldn't always help. So I had to wait and suffer like a lot of people do. Sometimes, if you owe the telephone bill, they cut it off—or the electricity or gas. They cut it off. Sometimes we would be without gas or electricity. We had to be with candles. For the young kids it was like a joke—they were laughing and having fun turning on the candles—for me it wasn't. So those kinds of problems [were what I worried about], but I knew that I had to go to school.

While having one's electricity cut off is not in and of itself feminist, Isadora's defiant stance in which she would have to make the tragic choice between tuition and electricity is. This tension is not an imagined dilemma. It is the unromantic yet feminist experimentation borne out of necessity. She was committed to a larger educational vision despite great sacrifice. Pulling it together, making do, and pushing, always pushing, the envelope. In her hand she held that tension of what needs to be tended to now and tucked away the rest for later.

### **The Undisciplined Ethnographer: My Own Clutter**

The reality behind this work-family-education triad described my own childhood. I could describe how feminism existed among working-class Chicanas and Mexicanas, but I could also look for how those feminist ideals were shared and passed along. What was the power that my mother had over me and my sisters? How did she teach us about feminism and what did that have to do with being Mexican American? The messiness, then, is more than the self-reflexive researcher. I see this as a necessary positioning, not only as an entry into the text but as a site for further consideration (Klahn 2003;

Tellez 2005). It is in the spaces beyond the disciplinary boundaries, in the undisciplined spaces, that I hope to find a liberating praxis that will allow me to explore productively the realm of shifting subjectivity and those that I would afford my mom, the *mujeres* I interviewed, and myself.

As I was looking for clues to understanding, learning, and living Chicana feminisms, I heard too that same quest from the women in Denver and Los Angeles as they sought their own goals and those for their families. Laura describes the insight she gained from taking one class and where that led, not only in terms of economic advancement but in terms of learning. “I took one philosophy class and I loved it. I realized that I could do it. I knew I could write [and] speak but I didn’t have any formal training...[Now] I feel like I am modeling something valuable [for my daughter].” Amidst this, Laura described how stressed she had become trying to fulfill grand ideas of what she was supposed to be as a mother and wife to her partner, Margie. We hear Laura articulating a feminist vision for herself and her family:

Somehow I got over feeling like I had to [cook and clean]...Even though we don't spend a lot of time together, we do spend quality time together. The atmosphere in the house is important. We place a high priority on school and doing well in school...aside from work, school is the most important priority and it offsets the stuff that isn't important.

Demoted from her priorities for her family are cooking and cleaning, the very things more normatively associated with women's restricted roles in the family. In their place, new priorities emerged for her use of limited time and money. Education and work stand in as examples of a feminist agenda for Laura.

It is in this context that I consider one of the paradoxes I witnessed in some of the *mujeres* describing their relationship to education. Even while some

women were in the midst of their ten-plus years of attending community college and had not yet obtained a degree, many clearly articulated how empowering school was. Attending school was supposed to be a road to economic upward mobility, and many were banking on that assumption. Even when the endeavor was not actually bearing out that reality—largely for structural reasons and funding limitations—they were insistent on the value of attending classes. Lena described what was so liberating for her about college:

The beauty of it is studying one thing...and then saying, "Well, I don't think so. I think I am going to go this way," and to know I can make those choices. I don't have to explain anything to anyone. I don't have to ask permission from anyone; I just have to know that is what I want to do and go for it.

The freedom to make independent choices models, perhaps, what people such as Lena will experience with the economic independence that schooling may bring. Lena's course of study was continually adjusted to accommodate her economic needs, but this does not diminish the significance it had on her sense of being an intelligent and capable person—a sense she was not afforded in her workplace.

## V

### **Recipes for Success**

My grandmother was 4' 11" when I was a kid. They say that during her prime, she stood a proud 5' 1". But given her height, she was the measuring stick against which I could see my body growing. I would later hope to measure up to her spirit. There were stories of her learning to drive before other women, of going to school longer than my grandfather (who completed the fourth grade), and of her working in the church. She demanded that my grandfather leave his

job with the railroad, the job that left her isolated in the hills of New Mexico. Hell, she got him his job in town. I cannot tell you directly how she managed to be so powerful; I do know that I stand on the shoulders of giants, even when they are 4' 11".

My mother's body, that body that bore eight babies, has always exuded strength. When I was a child, she had long, black-brown hair, straight down to her waist. My hair, in comparison, was always a short, messy mop of hair, brown verging on red. Because my hair was always short, I was frequently mistaken for a boy. My mother's femininity did not result in gender confusion. In contrast to my mother, who had lovely olive skin, I, in my *güera* skin, was mistaken as white. Our antecedents were likely from Santa Clara, San Juan, Acoma, and Spain, *por supuesto*. In this mestizaje, we have African *antepasados* waiting to be named. Only some of my familia bear witness to these histories, although we all share them. I remember tracing the squiggly patterns of my mother's varicose veins and the scars that her legs bore from those veins. They seemed colorful to me as a kid, soft and yielding. Now with my own bluish veins, I recognize my mother's dismay at hers. Those muscles had to bear the weight of generations.

My own body vexes me. My struggles here with writing and domestic work are inflected with rheumatoid arthritis, making the simple tasks sometimes painful. I try to teach my own daughter, who sympathizes with my pain, to see my other locations of strength.

## VI

### **Apron Strings**

My own place within the lives of the women I interviewed then (when I was a single hetero female without children), and how I made sense in that moment,

and how I make sense now all these years later, has undergone considerable modification (now married, with children, still hetero, economically well off). Before the fieldwork, I saw myself as my mother's daughter, and now I feel the concomitant presence of the listening granddaughters. I hear Patricia's comments with tones of hope and determination that not only tie my story to hers, but also to her story woven among her mother's and children's:

I look at [my mom]; she went back to school; she got her A.A. degree; she got her high school diploma. She's working; she's been working for I don't know how many years...And I look at that and I think, "That is where a lot of my strength comes from." I want to succeed like her. Through all the adversities in her life, she has accomplished all her goals.

Diana, a young mother, provides a kind of Chicana feminist witness as she reports the values and lessons she hopes her preschool-aged daughter will embody: "I want her to believe in God and be Catholic and be really proud that her parents are Mexican. And [be proud] that she's a girl. I always tell her she can be the President of the United States if she wants." Such a statement would be largely incomprehensible to her daughter, who was then about two years old. It is a manifesto, but directed at whom? Certainly, she was telling me as the ethnographer. But more than that, I suggest that Diana, in "always" telling her daughter, also reminds herself of those same messages. It is a powerful and romantic desire to instill pride in those markers of race and gender as a source of strength for herself as a woman and as a maker of hopes for her daughter's future.

I now reread those notes and think about the simultaneous message they were offering: how to survive and teach their daughters these same lessons. How do we equip our daughters and granddaughters and young friends and girlfriends

to battle those pressing terms of patriarchy, racism, poverty, heteronormativity, and their very real material consequences? Julia comments on this challenge in relation to her granddaughter: “I don’t want her to grow up like I did. I want her to grow up with real positive feedback that I didn’t have. Right now I tell her, ‘You’re beautiful, you’re gorgeous.’ I never heard that when I was growing up. That you’re pretty ‘even though you are dark.’” My organizing structure privileges questions of feminism, subjectivity, and awareness of our place within the community, and how they vary. I seek this not as a matter of academic debate, but to further our own sense of survival and of self-worth as we see the looming crisis that presses us all—albeit from our own social locations—into complicity. My work adds to the important process of documenting the consequences of those self-conscious locations (Alarcón 1988; Kristeva 1986). It was not merely to an academic mind that I cast these question, but to me as a young *mujercita*—thinking that I was not the only one asking these questions of emerging Chicana womanhood. But these ruminations I kept hidden in my own messy spaces. And now as I return to them, I think of my daughter and my son as they must enter into these questions.

### **Work-Family-Education: Cleaning House**

I grew up seeing my mother as a strong Chicana, and she, in turn, raised a strong Chicana. She and my father had eight children; I had two. My mother returned to school as a “nontraditional” student, and I was afforded (literally and figuratively) an elite education. She is outspoken and involved in her communities, and I attempt to be involved in the many communities in which I live and through which I cross. Like my mother and other Chicanas, I do not shy away from strength; I work hard; I value education—the very qualities that we have been deemed to be lacking. I have many more economic options than my mother had. I hope to continue to work as a Chicana in alliance with my culture(s), community/ies, family/ies.

Chicana/o and Latina/o studies have made huge strides in the last thirty years, but we still labor under criticisms of value, rigor, and quality. We have not yet achieved parity as students in higher education, nor have Chicana/o and Latina/o studies scholars become fully valued as the producers of knowledge at a time when deep thinking about our place as (un)equal citizens in our society remains unanswered. It is not only that I want to see my family in these books, but that I see the cost of the misinformation. While I live now a comparatively privileged life and I'll likely not have to worry over many of the concerns about which I write, the connection is still there. My mother taught me to act. We must not be merely outraged; we must move with audacity in the public domain.

In a gesture that seems in retrospect poetic, I too have fought for the creation of Chicana/o Studies and/or Latina/o studies departments, several times now. What seems the most infuriating in this fight is the continuing nature of it: there is an apparent need to prove continually the validity of Chicana/o and Latina/o studies as an intellectual endeavor. Despite the eloquent insistence on the epistemological and societal contributions of Latina/o studies to the university and the central place it can and should hold in higher education, there is still reluctance (Aparicio 1999; Oboler 1999, 2003.). The marginalization and continued exclusion of Latina/o studies in our colleges and university parallel, justify, and reinforce the inequalities faced by Latina/o populations (Marquez 2007). I have been a part of this series of intellectual and activist struggles to create Latina/o studies at many institutions, including the one I am in now. It is a difficult matter in which to engage because there is so much at stake. The fight in academe is not merely about academic recognition, but also about how structures of power regard, value, and acknowledge the contributions of Latinas/os.

My mother, as a working-class Chicana, got her BA from a local public college; while she was there, she fought for a Department of Chicano Studies. It was

her experience at this school that became the basis of my dissertation theory, and I would return to the school to be a tenure-track professor there twenty-five years later. I would symbolically give back to my mother what she had been giving to me all these years. I imagined the students in my classroom as people much like my own mother: working class, returning to school, seeing the classroom as a privilege, not an entitlement. Most of the students worked forty hours a week; many were working even more, and still they came to class. Many were parents, including the younger ones among them. But child welfare grants no longer existed. One young Chicana student brought her infant to class and to the final. As a professor, I did what I could to accommodate her. I was then humbled by her and the other students. I discovered how they helped her tend to the baby before and after class. And now as a mother, my amazement at her and their efforts is redoubled. I worked with colleagues from whom I learned immeasurable lessons—academic and activist alike.

I don't want to romanticize this time too much; I was teaching eight courses a year, and I was really struggling viscerally with a chronic illness. The students, although highly deserving, had only a fraction of my time given the course load that I had. In this context, where teaching is the main object but for which there were few resources, I spent far too much time getting battered audiovisual equipment to work. The Chicano Studies Department held bake sales (I brought *pan dulce!*). No shit. I was exasperated to learn that the student support services were not open when working students were typically available to use them. And I felt myself existing in a world in which teaching could conceivably become more of a defensive art than a productive and creative one. I felt myself worn away by the lack of resources for the students and for myself. And I frankly admit, I felt myself substantially diminished by choosing that school. By teaching in the school that educated my mother, in a program where I felt my contributions and courses to be valued, in a department whose

chair remains my educational hero, and by the rules of the game, I was, in essence, diminishing my own ability to write and be published.

### Throwing Out My Own Garbage

I struggled with the socializing process of academe, that process in which I mastered disciplinary training. I entered graduate school with the arrogant notion that I would be the voice that cut through the din. At present, getting into and surviving graduate school likely require that arrogance, and that is a conundrum. It was through my naïveté, born of this conceit, that I thought I would be rewarded for my insights and my analysis. What I didn't anticipate as part and parcel of this education was my own initial complicity in my students' silencing—by upholding the very meritocracy that would make me successful and them unworthy. The diminishing sense I felt comes from academe, although I internalized it. A more coherent narrative of my academic journey aligns my quest for knowledge not with a certain level of authorial production, but with seeing the women around me as my “educators” in becoming Chicana.

Still, honestly, my alliances are torn. On the one hand, I need to write in a genre that reproduces cultural/racial norms (who can speak, who can be an authority, for whom do we write?) in order to publish and become an authority to affect change—in graduate school admissions for example. On the other hand, I locate myself with women who are seeking an education as a marker for success and not getting it. Yet, I have achieved that education; and, therefore, we are not in the same situation. I cannot presume to discount the significance of their desire and how deserving they are of an education, but neither can I say that I am aligned precisely with their social context, even while I learn from them strategies of resistance, *supervivencia*, and groundedness. Without the policing, I risk the nuance between reproducing and resisting.

### Conclusion

I try to tap into practices in education as a point of departure for understanding how self-silencing appears for me as a writer and also how I saw this among the women I interviewed. In my project, I begin to identify conditions that encourage self-silencing as part of a dominant ideology of merit within education, but my inventory here is not complete. Nor is my inventory new, as I point to discourses of neoliberalism, racism, and patriarchy, among others, to reveal those dominant ideologies.

Chicanas know much about self-silencing, and among our most celebrated voices are those mujeres who have written bravely about their own lives. But what are the conditions that lead us as courageous writers, ethnographers, and educators also to silence? My intention is to consider how the intersections and moments of conflict reveal something about that place of power and our own conditions within it. I do this by using a range of voices and positions to see how different kinds of information tack in and out of dominant, subjugated, and resistant discourses, and, in charting that movement, I suggest a means of further mapping our own mutual liberation. Through undiscipline, I seek a methodology that is itself rigorous in its quest for our collective experiences that, while not the same, are drawn together to expose the structures of domination.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I want to thank both my parents for reading through endless drafts of this essay. I explicitly asked them to identify any information or representations they felt I should not include, which I have respected.

<sup>2</sup> The bulk of my research took place during 1993 and 1994 in Los Angeles, and some occurred earlier in Denver. During this time, I used general snowball sampling to meet twenty-four primary interviewees—that is, the Chicanas/Mexicanas who lived in Los Angeles, worked outside the home, and were attending some kind of school of higher education. Hereafter, I use *Chicana* as the ethno-racial term for the women I interviewed. While this is problematic and highly reductive,

there were no clear patterns among common use: the women who were Mexican nationals or born in Mexico were inclined to use Mexican American or Chicana, while *Mexicana* was a term that was, interestingly, used frequently by women who were neither born nor raised in Mexico. Mexican American and Latina were also used intermittently and often interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> I substantiate this fear through conversations I heard in the context of hiring scholars and practitioners of Latina/o studies. On these occasions, largely in anthropology, my “home” discipline, the comments deride auto-ethnographic or self-reflexive positioning of scholars of color.

<sup>4</sup> The ethnographer missing in this account is Ruth Behar. Her two works intertwine in my own analyses in two ways. The first is her use of the notion of *testimonio* in her work *Translated Woman* (1993). The second is the exposition of personal, vulnerable experience in the practice of ethnographic analysis in *Vulnerable Observer* (1996). Much ado has been made about these works and Behar’s presence in the texts; I have heard scholars note them as having “gone too far” in terms of self-reflexivity. Indeed, there is much to criticize about the analysis and some of the parallels that Behar makes. However, I suggest that neither the self-reflexivity (the method and methodology) nor *testimonio* (the genre of narrative) is troubling; rather, we disagree or see her analysis as lacking. I assert that being able to disagree with her analysis in order to favor our own clear awareness of her weaknesses is not a bad thing. As I have indicated, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) spend considerable length asserting that this is the very work that would demystify anthropology and open anthropologists to critique. As Behar suggests, indeed, it would make them/us vulnerable, which is uncomfortable but perhaps necessary (1996). What I do feel would assist a more nuanced analysis is more attention to the particular ways in which Behar may have assumed positions of authority through the myths of meritocracy, and phenotocracy, among others, without considering how those very positions perpetuate the system she seems to denounce. I hope this present essay provides a structure to think through those tensions.

<sup>5</sup> Domesticana allows for a feminist spin on the objects that seem to represent (often stereotypically) Mexicanas in a domestic sphere and to affirm or reject those objects. The distinction Mesa-Baines asserts has everything to do with the intentions of the artist and her stance or attitude. “The sense of survival, irreverence, and affirmation in the work of women plays against the tension of domination and control” (2003, 302). While adapting the noun “domesticana” from the visual arts to self-writing, I draw from domesticana a kind of verb, an action that gestures toward the self-reflexivity, especially by women of color, which often has been devalued as indulgent, insignificant, lacking research vigor, and too easy.

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