

MEMORIES OF SCHOOLING IN THE FIELD: From Barrio Scholarship Girl to Chicana Activist Scholar

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Through memory as methodology, this autohistoria examines the author's memories of schooling and the ways in which this self-reflexive process serves as a site for theorizing the historical, institutional, and everyday practices of schooling in San Antonio, Texas. Through the analysis of various school artifacts—yearbooks, photos, and school records—the author unearths her memories of schooling to examine the class-, race-, and gender-based injuries of schooling and the ways in which she navigated, negotiated, and resisted a culture of schooling that has historically miseducated Mexican Americans. Drawing from Chicana feminist theories in education, this autohistoria also examines the ways in which family and community served as sites of resistance, empowerment, and Chicana/mexicana consciousness in the face of assimilationist discourses in school. This autohistoria also examines how memories of schooling became a site for analyzing testimonios of Mexican American teachers in a barrio school.

Key Words: autohistoria, testimonio, conocimiento

As part of my dissertation field research, between 2006–2008, I interviewed Mexican American teachers at a dual-language school in San Antonio's Westside, observing their everyday practices and discussing with them their memories of schooling as racialized, working-class, Spanish-speaking children. As I listened to teachers' stories of their experiences of cultural loss, internalized oppression, and miseducation, as well as their stories of academic survival and cultural self-determination in barrio schools, I could not help but see myself in them.¹ Their stories of miseducation, the process in which they were systematically denied academic success through various forms of educational oppression like tracking (being placed in vocational, rather than college-bound,

courses), differential curricula, low teacher expectations, linguistic oppression, and cultural exclusion, opened up my memories of schooling experiences in a public school system where I navigated the culture as a “scholarship girl.” While I did not experience language oppression in the same ways that they did in the highly segregated 1950s and 1960s, their testimonios evoked pain, shame, resentment, anger, and disappointment—emotions that I, too, learned to negotiate, if not completely ignore, throughout my education as I spring-boarded from one academic benchmark to another with what seemed (on the outside) to have been seamless facility. Despite my familiarity with critical ethnography and feminist methodologies that interrogated the myth of objectivity in masculinist and Western research epistemologies, their conversations presented a challenge to defuse the range of emotions that surged within as I listened to the teachers voice their injuries (Torres 2003; Anzaldúa & Keating 2002; The Latina Feminist Group 2001; Wolf 1996; Anzaldúa 1995; Rosaldo 1993). As I interviewed teachers, transcribed hours of recorded data, and analyzed individual and group pláticas, I did my best to exclusively focus on their stories and put in context how my own experiences served as a site for theorizing the practices of barrio teachers en el Westside.

Like many of the teachers in this study, I had not voiced the many injuries I sustained in school from my days as a barrio scholarship girl en el Southside to my days as a Chicana student activist at an East Coast university. To family and friends, I was a success story. While their accolades gave me the spiritual and emotional nourishment to continue jumping hurdles y abriendo brecha or carving a path for others, they had no clue as to the hurdles I jumped to survive the culture of academia—a culture that was diametrically different to my personal and social history as a working-class mexicana. While I resisted the arduous and painful process of unearthing my own memories of what it was to be miseducated, silenced, and treated as less than worthy of a first-class

education, I could no longer dismiss those recollections. I placed the injuries teachers voiced—injuries they embodied not only in their flesh but also in their everyday professional practices—in context. This embodiment clearly informs how they understand their identity and conduct their work as teachers.

In order to be clear about how my experiences formed the lens through which I saw my data, I critically unearthed my memories and traced the ways in which the culture of schooling in mexicana/o working-class schools shaped my identity as a scholarship girl. Moreover, I called upon the ways in which family and community served as sites for cultural resistance, empowerment, and Chicana/mexicana consciousness.² However, the most difficult memories to excavate and process were the ones I attempted to bury as a high school and undergraduate student at a prestigious East Coast institution in a wealthy, conservative, and predominantly white cultural environment; it was much different than the one in which I was raised and educated—working class, Spanish-speaking, and predominantly Mexican. Even as I analyzed teachers' narratives, I struggled with what Chicana feminist scholar Gloria E. Anzaldúa (2007) calls—the “Coatlicue State”—the process of reopening the most excruciatingly painful wounds inflicted at the interpersonal and institutional level in order to come out more whole and conscious. Notably, it was by engaging in the iterative process of listening, analyzing, and interpreting teachers' stories that I generated a much deeper understanding of the ways in which the culture of schooling shapes Mexican American teacher identity and consciousness, a process that required emotional, as well as intellectual, engagement.

As a feminist and critical ethnographer, I relied on various school artifacts kept since the first grade—academic achievement awards, yearbooks, photos, school newspapers, report cards and transcripts, classroom notebooks, exams, and letters by school officials—to critically examine the multiple ways in

which I complied with, negotiated, and resisted a culture of schooling that ultimately miseducated me through a differential curricula and an ideology of meritocracy that concealed institutional race, class, and gender inequality. Through this archaeological process, I have been able to begin to work through the insidious injuries of internalized oppression I have carried. Further, I have gained a deeper understanding of the unvoiced injuries of my educational experiences and identified the ways in which I have engaged in acts of resistance and negotiation to survive and thrive in an institutional structure that has historically miseducated, and at worse, denied education to people of Mexican descent. I also map out my post-baccalaureate educational experiences to understand the ways in which the process of *conocimiento* and liberatory praxis, the ability to create personal and social change from a place of political struggle, informs my personal and social identity as a Chicana activist scholar, thus framing my analysis of first generation college graduate Mexican-descent teachers.

Bordercrossing Home and School Cultures

I grew up in San Antonio's Southside, where *mexicanos* constituted the overwhelming majority of the population. The Southside was *pura raza* and reflected the linguistic, religious, cultural, regional, generational, and class diversity of Mexicans in the Southwest—from working-class Mexican immigrants like my family who came from *el otro lado* and made the Southside their home, to others who had lived in San Antonio for generations and created a unique *cultura* from living in between two worlds.

My mother, *tíos*, and grandmother made the Southside their home in 1972, entering a new sociocultural landscape marked by a history of racial, cultural, and class oppression (Ruíz 1999) against Mexicans. Within the specificity of this cultural environment, they witnessed the consequences of language oppression

and cultural loss among Mexican Americans; in response, they immersed me en todo lo mexicano and instilled a strong sense of ethnic pride, with the Spanish language being the main vehicle for forging my cultural identity as a mexicana de este lado. This context informs my family's sense of fear that their children could one day become acculturated *pochas* or *pochos*, Mexican descendants with a fragmented sense of self, or worse, ashamed of their origins.

I am not sure when or how I learned English, but I must have learned the language before entering public school. At the age of three, my mother enrolled me in a small preschool downtown, not far from her work, run by Carmelite nuns. It was then that I was first excluded and marginalized for being different—for speaking Spanish and looking “Chinese” (i.e. indigenous). I have vivid memories of my classmates deriding me for not speaking their language. While I did not understand their exact words, I understood their tone and *caras*—facial expressions that communicated hostility toward me. Feeling like an outsider, I became frustrated and angry. I fought back, hitting those who taunted me, even sticking a pencil in a boy's ear. Those who picked on me the most came back to school with bruises. I must have been pushed to my limits. I remember the *monjas* telling my mom, in a sanctimonious tone: “She has to stop hitting students or she is gonna have to go somewhere else. Parents are becoming very upset.” I was immediately tagged as the problem. For years, I tried to understand why I reacted so violently to their taunting. Reflecting on this experience, I realize that I wanted to be accepted in school just as I had been accepted by my family who loved and cared for me. My fighting was an act of resistance against the exclusionary tactics of my peers and even the administration. At the age of five, I had an opportunity to begin a new academic journey when my mother enrolled me at Antonio Olivares Elementary, only two blocks from my house. I started first grade in 1980, during the emergence of what the media termed the “decade of the

Hispanic” and at the height of Reagan’s call for more standardized testing and assimilationist models of bilingual education (San Miguel 1988).

Since I had already learned some conversational English, I was not placed in any kind of bilingual education program, although one of my closest childhood friends claims we were in a bilingual classroom in second grade—it may have been an early-exit program that transitioned me into an English immersion classroom by the time I was in second grade. While I do not have any memories of learning or speaking Spanish in school, I have many memories of working toward academic excellence in a new language and culture. My elementary school, Antonio Olivares Elementary—named after a Spanish friar who helped establish the presidio and villa of San Antonio in 1718 with the intention of converting Coahuiltecan Indians to Christianity—was ethnically Mexican and working-class. In his description of the inhabitants of San Antonio, Olivares describes them disparagingly “as nothing more than ‘mulattoes, lobos, coyotes, and mestizos, people of the lowest order, whose customs [were] worse than those of the Indians’” (De la Teja 2000, 18). While I do not remember the school mistreating me or my peers for being Mexican, we, like the Indians Olivares sought to civilize and save, were deculturalized in school in many ways, stripped of our ethnic culture, language, or history in our everyday school learning. School was the place where we spoke English, learned “official knowledge,” and complied with a culture of schooling that made us into passive and obedient learners, memorizing and regurgitating sanctioned information (Apple 2000). Unlike the generation of Spanish-speaking mexicanas/os who attended schools during the era of segregation, we were not physically or emotionally punished for speaking Spanish. Nevertheless, our school miseducated us mexicanas/os, in a subtle yet violent ways.

In elementary school, I learned that if I wanted to succeed, I needed to know the culture. So, I learned what the school system deemed important for

me to know (including English). With the help of my padrinos, who were second generation English-speaking Mexican Americans, I learned English, maintained an excellent academic record, and was a “good” student. Looking back, I did not feel confused or ashamed of my ethnic/racial identity. I learned to border-cross between home, school, and community spaces like my church, and to negotiate and synthesize multiple subjective identities of granddaughter, mexicana, and student. At a very early age, I became aware of the differentiating aspects of these cultural spaces and succeeded in school precisely because of my ability to be a *naguala* and shift or synthesize my identities from one context to another in order to survive in every world I entered (Anzaldúa 2007).

Elementary school introduced me to the culture of schooling very similar to the one I found at my field site, marked by high-stakes assessments, memorization and regurgitation, and a market approach to education. I remember second grade as the time in which I invested much of my time perfecting my writing, an exercise that would become a disciplinary technology of the self as a scholar. I spent hours on end writing on pieces of thin, beige paper with dotted lines to guide the height and width of each letter. With each stroke of my pencil, I meticulously replicated the beautifully written alphabet above the green boards. I was so proud to have the best handwriting in my class. My grandmother, who had only a third grade education, was central to my success. Before beginning elementary school, she had shown me how to draw lines and circles; exercises she believed would sharpen and strengthen my handwriting skills in school. As a working-class *mujer* who raised four children in one of the poorest barrios of Monterrey, Mexico, she learned to use available resources, and she lovingly crafted small notebooks out of brown paper bags from the grocery store so I could practice my writing.

While first and second grade were about copying and mimicking expected behaviors, third grade was about becoming a competitive and efficient worker, a market philosophy central to Reagan's educational policy. My third grade teacher, Mrs. Olvera, taught us our multiplication tables by timing us, a practice privileged by American capitalist business rationale. Those who finished their tables first without any mistakes earned the highest grade. Through this subtle math lesson, I learned the culture of competitiveness and efficiency, rules of the game that would benefit me as I maintained my status as a scholarship girl. My mom also learned and perpetuated the culture of schooling as she quizzed me with homemade flashcards after working long hours at the panaderia. It was with her help that I strengthened my ability to recall multiplication tables.

In Mrs. Lopez's fourth grade class I was taught to be a consumer, one of the components of neoliberal educational curricula. In her class, I read voraciously, turning in book reports at the end of each one. Students would earn fake money for each report, which we used to buy school-related goodies. After school Mrs. Lopez would set up shop in the back of the classroom where we would exchange our imitation bills for colorful pencils, snazzy sharpeners, and funky erasers. This is a practice I witnessed with some of the teachers at Emma Tenayuca Elementary where I conducted my fieldwork. At the end of the six weeks, those students with the highest number of book reports earned a corporate reward—a free personal pizza from Pizza Hut. The implicit lesson others and I learned: We would be able to reap the rewards of our academic labor as consumers in a capitalist market economy.

While I benefited from these rewards, I knew that my formal education meant more than a corporate reward. It meant being in a position of first-world privilege, not forced to quit school to earn wages at an early age to survive. My

grandmother and mother (who completed high school before immigrating to the United States) instilled the importance of an education for personal and social growth. I did well in school to make my family proud. Throughout my elementary school years, I succeeded academically because the *mujeres* in my family instilled the value of education without ever having to explicitly tell me, “Échale ganas a los estudios, mija.” As a child of immigrants, I cultivated a dual-frame of reference for understanding that I was in a position of privilege (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001). I would not have to work on my feet all day long in the blistering heat of the panadería.

Looking back at my early childhood experiences, I have become aware that I learned to maintain discrete boundaries between school and home. Even though the schools I attended were predominantly Mexican American and working-class, the majority of instruction was in English. Moreover, curricula excluded Mexican American history and cultural knowledge. While I do not share the same memories of language oppression as the teachers in my study, I nevertheless experienced institutional racism, cultural exclusion, and assimilationist strategies through White-stream and differential curricula. Looking back, I do not remember ever learning about the cultural knowledge valued in my home and community.

At home, my mother and grandmother constantly emphasized the importance of speaking “proper” Spanish, not for market reasons, an idea that was constantly “sold” to students at Emma Tenayuca, but because it was connected to my ethnic identity. For them, language was an extension of *mexicanidad*. I remember my grandmother telling me, “En esta casa se habla español. En la escuela puedes hablar todo el inglés que quieras—as if I had a choice—pero aquí solamente español y no me vengas con tu mocho pocho.” It was evident that my family did not want me to become what they perceived to be “una

agringada,” Americanized, or worse yet, a lower class Mexican who spoke mixed codes. So, I spoke “proper” Spanish. My grandmother, who had limited formal schooling, also taught me how to read and write in Spanish, and both my mother and grandmother passed on Mexican history to me. I learned about *la conquista*, *las guerras de independencia*, *la invasión norteamericana*, y *la revolución mexicana*. They taught me countercultural narratives that decentered U.S.-dominant narratives that vilified or made Mexicans invisible, such as the recurrent historical narrative of Anglo men from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Missouri, which glaringly overlooked Mexicans of whatever side. They also instilled the value of various Mexican cultural expressions and as such, I came to appreciate *folklorico*, *el cine mexicano*, *las comidas típicas*, and the various musical traditions like *rancheras*, *boleros*, *mariachi*, and *sones*. As racialized ethnic, working-class women, my mother and grandmother also passed down their stories of struggle and survival in Mexico and the United States that created their ways of knowing and understanding the world.

I unearth these memories because, while I did not experience the hostility and oppression that teachers in my study articulated, these experiences led me to create a third culture—the liminal space between two oppositional cultures—out of necessity in order to survive and thrive in the culture of schooling. I did not simply maintain separate spheres between home and school, although these cultures were diametrically opposed. The expressive elements of my *mexicana* working-class culture, such as *cuentos* (stories), *canciones* (songs), *dichos* (sayings), food, and dance—and an immigrant worldview and *mujer-centered* epistemology—all informed my identity and consciousness as a scholarship girl in San Antonio’s Southside. My mother and grandmother’s stories of struggle and survival, and their experiences as working-class *mexicanas*, gave me the *ganas* (motivation) to *valerme por mi misma* (to be self-reliant) and survive and thrive in a culture of schooling that denied my identity and miseducated me in the process.

As a border-crosser I learned to navigate home and school cultures with fluidity. Despite the rigid linguistic and cultural borders of both spaces, they were porous and fluid enough for me to take the best of both worlds for my intellectual, spiritual, and emotional security. For example, I often relied (and continue to do so) on my mother and grandmother's ways of knowing—their *consejos* (advice) and words of *sabiduría* or wisdom—to jump through the various academic hurdles along my educational path. The *mujeres* in my family also encouraged me to further develop my intellectual curiosity and love for learning at home and emphasized the importance of a formal education and an *educación*—the comportment of a proper Mexican girl. It was by bridging both cultures that I was able to maintain the sociocultural identity my mother and grandmother carved and continued to shape in my trajectory as a *mexicana*, *barrio* scholarship girl. Unlike Richard Rodriguez's scholarship boy, I did not want to lose my *mexicanidad*. On the contrary, I sought opportunities through home and community spaces to maintain my sense of *mexicanidad*; for instance, strengthening my Spanish oral and literacy skills and learning about indigenous and *mestizo* cultures as a *matachín* at my church. Still, as a scholarship girl, I learned to be a compliant student, accepting a system I knew to be unjust in terms of funding, curriculum, and overall treatment of working-class Mexican origin students who were, for the most part, pushed out of the educational system. My survival as a scholarship girl depended on my ability to navigate, blend, and work my way through the institutional inequality and racism.

By the time I attended middle school, I had already learned the “hidden curriculum” of compliance where working-class, Mexican-origin students like myself deferred to teachers' authority when it came to challenging rhetorics of domination. As a “good” student, I learned to memorize and regurgitate (Freire 2000) colonial/master narratives, even when these contradicted the counternarratives I learned at home.

Negotiating Cultural Imperialism and School Success

By middle school, the “system”—teachers, counselors, and those educational practitioners linked to the state—officially tracked me into honors courses, where I continued to excel in all content areas, including history—my favorite subject. From all of my classes, I remember my Texas history class the most, probably because I worked so hard to navigate the competing discourses of home and school cultures. While my mother and grandmother taught me that “los Estados Unidos se había robado la mitad de México,” our teacher, Mr. Potter, reminded us mexicanas/os that the Anglo “settlers” liberated us from the savage hands of the Mexican government. I, of course, did not question Mr. Potter’s historiographic authority on the matter. As an “A” student, I knew that if I wanted to continue being an academically successful student, I needed to comply with the colonial/master narrative—at least in school.

My mother and grandmother taught me to respect my elders, especially my teachers, so I deferred to Mr. Potter’s authority. Within the context of U.S. schooling, this meant that I did not challenge or contest “official” narratives of U.S. superiority. I had become well aware that my academic success rested on my compliance to memorize and regurgitate a dominant cultural memory that glorified colonizers and vilified Mexicans. I did so well on a term paper about Sam Houston, a slave owner responsible for the “liberation” of Texas and subsequent colonization of the region (not to mention the genocide of Cherokees), that it earned first place in a district-wide competition. For that state competition, I created a giant poster board presentation to go along with my award-winning research paper. My mother even helped me with my poster board, helping me draw a large cutout in the shape of Texas. She wanted me to do well and supported me as much as she could in my school projects, even when challenging their content. When my mother and I arrived at the venue, Mr. Potter embellished my poster board with some additional artifacts—a

machete, an ax, a Southern hat of the time period (like the one Sam Houston wore), and some flags from his personal collection—signifiers of colonialism and white supremacy. As I studied the photo that Mr. Potter took of me, I realize why I had always felt awkward pulling the photo out of my mother's photo box. In the picture, I am half smiling, happy and proud of my academic accolades, but at the same time I look tense, if not troubled, at participating in a project that reproduced, if not reified, the culture of white supremacy in my schooling. I negotiated cultural imperialism in the best way that I could given the inequitable social position I occupied as a Mexican female student and went ahead with the project to avert school failure. Given the counternarratives that I learned at home, I refused to internalize the gringo narratives that branded Mexicans as criminals and as subhuman.

I share this story because I have come to the realization that I learned to move in and out of shifting worldviews and identities at a very young age, from seemingly compliant student at school to mexicana daughter of working-class Mexican immigrants with strong cultural roots in the home and my community of upbringing on the Southside. I learned to live and thrive in nepantla, the in-between space of home and school, in order to succeed in school without compromising the mexicana identity and consciousness my mother and grandmother had so carefully nurtured at home. It was in the in-between space of home and school that I learned to adapt and negotiate colliding worldviews. It was also in that in-between space that I learned to resist discursive practices that I had perceived to be detrimental to my sense of self as a mexicana. The home-school borderlands introduced tremendous ambiguity, tension, and contradictions, yet it was where I developed my identity as a barrio scholarship girl who was not going to compromise my ethnic identity to be a successful student.

Despite the neocolonial relations of power where white, middle-class, and ideologically conservative teachers banked narratives into the minds of

Mexican working-class students (Freire 2000), I resisted cultural domination and worked within the constraints and limitations I faced as a student so as not to compromise my academic success or sense of self. I did not unconsciously comply with a colonial discourse. I consciously navigated spaces of power and regurgitated dominant discourses while privileging the personal collective histories of struggle and resistance that my mother and grandmother taught me, from oral histories of the Mexican Revolution to their testimonios of everyday survival as working-poor *mujeres* in Mexico and the United States. Their narratives served as pedagogies of possibility that gave me hope to succeed in a culture where an overwhelming majority of “Hispanics” would be pushed out of the educational pipeline (Yosso 2006). I was very proud of being Mexican, unlike some of the teachers I interviewed, who internalized shame for being Mexican from their similar experiences in the school system. The women in my family, like others in the community who played an integral role in my identity formation, emphasized the importance of never losing sight of who I was and nurtured me through what Dolores Delgado Bernal et al. (2006) call the epistemologies of everyday life—the cultural knowledge and *sabiduría* that informs my Chicana, working-class, and *mujer-centered* consciousness today. I became a *nepantlera*, a border dweller and transgressor, and learned to rely on my *facultad* (Anzaldúa 2007), a sixth sense that provided me with the ability to read reality and enact my agency.

Becoming Aware of my Miseducation

By middle school, I had already started to see myself as a scholarship girl in the making. As a “good” student, I listened attentively and took copious notes in class as teachers deposited knowledge in a top-down, banking method (Freire 2000). I continued to maintain stellar grades, making the honor roll every grading period and earning membership in the national junior honors society. With the encouragement of teachers, I also began to participate in

academic competitions and received invitations to participate in pre-college summer enrichment programs like the Pre-Freshman Engineering Program (PREP), a math and science curriculum that prepares high achieving students, including underrepresented groups like women and students of color, to pursue careers in science and technology.³

I was fourteen years old and had just finished eighth grade when I started these college prep summer courses. I felt confident and excited about being part of such a prestigious program. But unlike the As and Bs I was accustomed to earning in school, I only managed to earn a few Bs during my three years in PREP. Despite my *ganas*—ambition and willingness to work—and laborious *empeño* or effort, words of empowerment that had sustained me throughout my miseducation, I found it nearly impossible to earn anything above a C, bringing home a couple of Ds. These extracurricular experiences became significant in my understanding of the culture of schooling because through them I learned that no matter how hard I worked, I would never be able to excel like the students who came from private or more affluent public schools.

It was during this time that I became more and more disappointed with my academic preparation and began to wonder whether I was not able to succeed in the program like my peers because I was Mexican, working-class, a girl, or a combination of these identities. For the very first time, I questioned my teachers' assessment of me as an outstanding student. How could it be that I was barely passing PREP, yet earning excellent grades at my school? I began to be plagued by questions and self-doubt. Was I really as smart as I thought? Was I college material? Did I have what it took to go to college? I soon came to the conclusion that there was a gap between what the school system wanted me to believe—that we all had an equal opportunity to succeed in the educational system regardless of race, class, and gender—and the harsh,

uncensored reality of my miseducation in segregated, under-funded, Mexican working-class public schools. As part of the top ten percent of my graduating class, and an Advanced Placement student at my high school, I internalized the myth of meritocracy inside all its classist permutations and practiced the values of a system that prepared me to succeed academically, when, in fact, it had miseducated me, albeit to a lesser degree than other students.

Before PREP, I had never felt so academically unprepared. For years, I thought I was qualified, competent, and smart, only to find out that I was not exactly a stellar student in the eyes of others. I internalized the notion that I had been lied to by those I trusted the most—my teachers, and the system as a whole. I began to doubt my intellectual abilities and felt embarrassed as instructors returned exams or homework assignments riddled with red marks and less-than-impressive grades that were not worthy of a scholarship girl. I remember the many times instructors returned my work. I would take a quick glance at my grades, distraught, ashamed, and wounded by my academic failure. I would immediately turn my work face down and stuff the papers in my notebook so my peers would not think I was an intellectual fraud, someone who had ostensibly and erroneously been accepted into the program. In PREP, every day became an academic and emotional struggle as I battled with self-doubt. While my family expressed an enormous sense of pride and joy with my accomplishments, I could not help but internalize the idea that I was an undeserving candidate in the program—most seem to come from privileged classes and I did not measure to their standards. Despite my growing insecurities, I continued to enroll in the program for the next two years with the understanding that my academic failure was a reflection of the lack of educational preparation I received and not a result of my race, gender, or ethnicity.

Like many of my peers tracked into the honors curriculum, I entered various interscholastic competitions in middle school and high school. To further

elaborate on this part of my academic history, I rely on an issue of my middle school newspaper, *Panther Pride*, which records the various competitions I entered. I remember preparing myself academically and emotionally for my first academic meet and even though I felt a bit nervous, I was confident in my ability to excel and earn commendable marks. Being a scholarship girl, I entered just about every area of competition for our district, including spelling, Spanish poetry, history, writing, modern oratory, and even the most absurd areas like dictionary skills and calculator, areas that were clearly not academic, but rather technical. It turns out I earned eight trophies that day—five first-place awards, one second-place award, and one for fourth place. By January, my peers and I were up for the next challenge: to compete with students from the sixteen districts in San Antonio. We were seventy of the 600 students from all over San Antonio to show off our academic talents at the Texas Military Institute. While I had taken a second-place trophy at the district meet, I ended up eighteenth in this competition, a considerable drop from my previous record. The newspaper also shows that I entered another UIL (University Interscholastic League) competition in February at Roosevelt High School with over 1100 students from twenty-eight schools. This time, I knew what my academic competition looked like and prepared myself for what seemed to be an insurmountable challenge, earning ninth place in spelling. At the end of my middle school year, I was one of sixteen students at our school to receive a presidential academic fitness award. The letter in my personal archives reads:

By taking advantage of your educational opportunities, you have shown the judgment, character, and determination necessary to succeed in all your endeavors. Whatever you do tomorrow, you will do better for having taken your education seriously today. As you will no doubt discover, the rewards of diligent study and hard work are virtually unlimited. I commend you all for setting an

outstanding example of scholarship, and I encourage you to share your talent and enthusiasm with others.

Apparently, my “educational opportunities” had more to do with personal characteristics such as “judgment, character, and determination” rather than educational inequality. By the time I completed middle school, I had learned one of the most important lessons in my academic career—that race, class, and gender were utilized in systems of domination and privilege that shaped the lives of Mexican, working-class students like me in material ways. While I did not have the language to articulate my miseducation, I recognized I had participated in an inequitable education through a watered-down curriculum by the time I started high school in the fall of 1990.

I became aware of the pervasive pattern of miseducation my peers and I experienced, as I apprehended the educational inequality and social injustice that affected every student who lacked the privilege of race and class. As an insider-outsider of this inequality, I realized that the ninety percent of my peers in high school, who were also Mexican and working-class, had been severely neglected—more so than me—and faced far worse consequences. I, at least, had been tracked into an honors curriculum that, when compared to that of affluent public schools, was water-downed in rigor and content. As water-downed as the curricula was, I had access to intellectual and cultural resources that would support me along the educational pipeline. I learned that school would not provide me with the intellectual and cultural skills and knowledge that I presumed a scholarship girl needed in order to succeed in higher education. So, I sought out the necessary resources myself.

In high school, I made the conscious decision to forego interscholastic competitions. Rather than focus my energies on this, I continued to participate

in pre-college summer programs, completing my third year of PREP in 1992 and enrolling in the Texas Governor's School at Lamar University in 1993. In 1992, I was one of a couple hundred students to participate in this program and the only Mexican in a cohort of about ten young women from all over the state who came from diverse race, ethnic, and social class backgrounds. By my junior year, I came to the awareness that schools privileged a dominant canon that I needed to grasp to succeed in college. Working at my mom's panaderia, I remember meticulously jotting the names of renowned writers in a small notebook—Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis, along with Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez—the latter were authors to which my teachers had not exposed me, but that I knew were important to my quest to become a well-versed scholar. So, my senior year, I checked out as many of those books as possible and consumed them on a regular basis, crossing names of authors off my list. I wanted to become a well-read barrio scholarship girl without compromising my sociocultural identity, *mi mexicanidad*. I had already come to the awareness that dominant educational institutions were inequitable and assimilationist. While I wanted to be a successful student, I also wanted to remain connected to my family and community. I made it a point to read the Western canon without dismissing the important literary contributions of Mexican and other Latin American writers. It was not until I was in graduate school that I read anything by a Chicana/o.

I began to play “catch up”—a process that Raza teachers in my study would place in context for me. Many of the teachers had been schooled in San Antonio public schools in the working-class Westside and expressed the injuries of their miseducation, learning how to read and write as adults, being inundated with remedial courses, and preparing themselves to play “catch up” in community colleges and four-year institutions after having been placed in vocational tracks

in high school. As a result of their racialized schooling experiences—from language oppression, cultural loss, and a differential curriculum intended to reproduce the existing relations of power in San Antonio where Mexicans would continue to be a source of cheap, low educated labor—these teachers enacted a *barrio* pedagogy, implementing a rigorous academic curriculum, a philosophy of caring, and instilling a deep belief of self in the students so they could have a more empowering schooling experience. In observing their practices, I developed a fierce determination to do the same as a Chicana professor, to create a radically different college experience than the one I endured in a predominantly white, conservative institution.

Forging an Interdisciplinary Mestiza Scholar Identity

During my senior year, having applied to various colleges and universities across the country, I decided on attending Boston University (BU) because of its reputation as a world-class research and teaching university. Little did I know that this would be the place where I would experience the most covert racism, not the kind of “in your face” racism, but the “read-between-the-lines” type that was more difficult to decode (Bonilla-Silva 2009). In the fall of 1994, I began my studies as an engineering major, a white-collar profession that seemed to offer the financial security and status associated with being middle-class. Needless to say, I stood out in this white, male, and cutthroat culture. Even though I had taken calculus in high school, honed my science skills through pre-college courses, and sought my professors’ assistance, I barely passed my calculus class, and ended up dropping my chemistry class after weeks of being completely lost and confused. To make things worse, my peers, distrustful of my aptitude, relegated me to the simplest tasks while they took creative and organizational control over major projects. With each week, I began to question my academic “fitness.” After a semester of unsatisfactory grades, the school placed me on academic probation. I felt angry

and embarrassed with the idea of having to return home a failure. Whatever happened to the scholarship girl? I also did not want my peers (especially those who were white) to think that I was indeed a token who could not “hack it.” Rather than returning home, I stayed at BU and pursued what I enjoyed the most that semester—the world of letters. I took countless literature courses, in both the English and Spanish departments, and eventually declared a second major in International Relations, my way of gaining a deeper understanding of my sociopolitical relationship with *el pueblo* in Latin America.

As a newly declared English major, I read the works of Shakespeare, Keats, Austen, Hemingway, and other authors who are considered definitive to the mainstream canon. I read a couple of short stories by Amy Tan, a novel by Zora Neale Hurston, and a couple by Richard Wright—all three writers of color. I remember reading *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (2004), and feeling an immense sense of sadness for Rodriguez because I, unlike him, wanted to succeed in academia without compromising what my family had carefully instilled in me—a love for my language and culture and the desire to create change in the world—beliefs that were at the core of my identity and consciousness.

Throughout my educational trajectory at BU, I struggled academically and internalized the scathing comments my professors wrote about my writing. Little did I know that the English department would be the place where I would experience the most exclusionary and racist treatment or *movidas*. My English professors often told me I lacked the necessary preparation to succeed in literature classes, and that perhaps I was better off in remedial writing courses with the foreign students—this was despite my having gained experience and prominence as a poetry reader in competitions. Others humiliated me in class, telling me I did not know how to analyze poetry. Still, others, like my

journalism instructor, told me I should consider switching to another major without giving me any comprehensible reason. I remember the harsh sound of their words, which came as an unexpected car crash. And I stood in shock, not knowing what to do. Should I hide, run away, or cry? It often took me a few minutes to figure out what had just happened. But their words did not deter me; I would slowly pick myself up and give it the old college try I had long heard would help me overcome their misperceptions of my abilities. Still, I internalized messages of oppression, thinking I was nothing but an undeserving and incompetent “scholarship girl” who made it through the academic pipeline as an affirmative action token. I worked two, three times harder than my peers to prove that I was worthy and qualified to be at BU.

I constantly felt like I was “catching up.” The only places where I felt worthy were in the Spanish Department, where I focused my studies on leftist-inspired literature, and the Department of International Relations, where I declared a track in Latin America and studied radical social movements. I survived the hostility by immersing myself in my education. I was not only trying to heal from my miseducation, both emotionally and academically, but I was also forging a mestiza scholar identity, where I took ownership of my education by busting disciplinary boundaries and synthesizing the knowledge I learned in my home and community with what I was learning in the ivory tower.

As I constructed this new identity, I also worked with other Mexican American students to create *La Fuerza*, a student organization that focused on the retention of Chicana/o and Latina/o students on campus. As a child, I had never embraced the term “Chicana/o,” a word that my Mexican immigrant family considered derogatory. However, my experiences being marginalized, silenced, and considered less-than-worthy of a BU education, politicized me as a Chicana. I was not only the (grand)daughter of Mexican immigrant

mujeres, but also a member of a social group that has been historically and systematically oppressed in the United States. Thus, I identified as a Chicana who as a graduate student began to carve my identity as an activist scholar committed to participatory community-based research that would make a difference in school and community contexts.

The injuries of schooling that shaped my higher education career would come to haunt me with the insecurities that come from not having a cultural cartography for navigating the expectations of becoming a PhD. For example, from the University of Texas at San Antonio, where I clearly excelled in my scholarly pursuits as evidenced by my original masters thesis research and the publication of several articles, I once again had to navigate a culture of schooling from a first-tier institution that raised the bar and the expectations of my scholarship. As an academic, I continue incorporating the culture of the academy as part of my professional preparation so as to keep at bay notions of being an impostor, while carving out new ways of theorizing and creating knowledge in a Mexican American Studies program.

Summary

Like the teachers in this study, I am using the everyday knowledge I gained in my own schooling experience to avoid perpetrating the injuries done to me. This often calls for me to act as a critical and feminist pedagogue in an effort to create spaces for personal and social transformation, as students become critical thinkers and agents of change in their communities of practice. This has not been nor will it become an easy process, for as Anzaldúa posits, it is through the pain that one sheds *desconocimiento*—or the not knowing—to create individual and collective *conocimiento* (Anzaldúa & Keating 2002). For me, researching the lived experiences and classroom practices of *barrio* teachers gave me a mirror in which to see how schooling—as a system of

reproduction—shaped my identity and consciousness as a Chicana scholar. Like the teachers in my study, I draw from the *conocimiento* of my schooling experiences. This embodied knowledge serves as a site for possibility, empowerment, and collective growth in my work as a teacher, researcher, and community activist.

Immersed in the field site, going about my observations, the more I spoke with teachers and visited with those students who approached me to ask what I was doing, the more I realized that our schooling had a point of convergence. As I listened to teachers' stories of cultural violence, internalized oppression, and academic struggles, I tried to retrieve my own memories of schooling to make sense of the ways in which the culture of schooling had shaped my own identity as a Chicana activist scholar. How did I go from being a compliant scholarship girl to a Chicana scholar?

Having listened to each of these teachers' stories as I sifted through and analyzed their narratives of schooling, the arduous, reflexive, and at times, painful, process of placing my own memories to context about the meaning of being schooled within San Antonio public schools in the Southside, I relived the trauma and tensions of the school, home, and community contradictions I had long buried. Upon reflecting on my schooling experiences and the ways in which I negotiated a culture of meritocracy, individual achievement and free-market ideology, I have gained a greater understanding of institutional cultures. Despite having been miseducated, I maintained a cohesive cultural identity in my home where my family valued *educación* and holistic wellbeing, which equipped me to enact the solidarity necessary to engage the participants in my study.

Through the process of unearthing my own memories of schooling, I have come to *conocimiento* about the ways in which my experiences have shaped

my identity as a mexicana working class scholarship girl, who learned the culture of schooling anchored in meritocracy and individualism, as I countered and contested its disciplinary boundaries. I have complied with the culture to succeed academically, although it was not until my graduate studies that I carved my identity as a Chicana activist scholar through my studies and community-based work, where I became an interdisciplinary mestiza-in-the making, drawing from feminist and critical race theory, and other social justice paradigms. My memories of schooling became a point of entry for understanding the lived experiences of Mexican American teachers, as I came to *conocimiento* through the act of remembering, having found a point of connection with the teachers, as we negotiate often ambiguous and contradictory actions while resisting, and transforming the culture of schooling as Chicana educators.

Notes

¹ For a more thorough discussion on the pervasive history of educational inequity and miseducation, refer to Richard R. Valencia's (2011).

² The term "scholarship girl" signals Richard Rodriguez's "Scholarship Boy," a pivotal essay in his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory*. As a child of immigrants, he became the first in his family to advance through the educational pipeline. Rodriguez becomes absorbed in the world of academia as a "scholarship boy" who desires to become like his teachers. In the process, he rejects his culture and isolates himself from his family.

³ Founded by Dr. Manuel Berriozabal in 1979, the PREP program is a national academic program that identifies high-achieving students and prepares students to enter science, math, engineering, and technology careers through a rigorous curriculum for three years. See <http://www.prep-usa.org/portal/main/default.asp> for more information.

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