

Cultivating a Guerrera Spirit in Latinas: The Praxis of Mothering

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Abstract

In this article I argue that mothering in the home is an educational tool for creating positive self-agency in Latina girls. This essay articulates the ways in which my lived experiences as a Latina mother informs the socialization of *guerrera* girls. I engage in a process of *testimonio* to demonstrate how mothering, by using tools such as stories-*cuentos*, advise- *consejos*, conversations- *pláticas* can create instances where learning can occur for both mother and daughter that disrupt the racist discourses Latinas face in their everyday lives. I discuss how the use of a decolonial imaginary process provides both mothers and daughters ways to re-create the daily lived experiences of marginalization so that they become instances of regenerative resistance. As a tool of Latina mothering, I propose the use of suspended spaces within moments of everyday life where individuals simultaneously suspend the social hierarchies that constrain personas to have *pláticas* that promote a *guerrera* spirit. Finally, this essay is testament to the strong *guerrera* spirit Latina mothers carry and share for future generations of *guerreras*.

Introduction

Arizona passed SB 1070 in April of 2010, which makes it a crime to lack proper immigration paperwork in the State. In addition, Arizona also passed HB 2281 a month after SB 1070, which officially prohibits public schools from conducting courses or classes, which “promote the overthrow of the United States (U.S.) government” or “resentment towards a race or class of people.” In practice, this targets the highly successful Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District. As recently as January of 2012 Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) also released an initial list of seven books to be banned from its schools that contain historical information about Mexican American and Latino history. Similarly, during the 1990s in California, proposition 187 denied undocumented individuals the right to social services like healthcare and education, and proposition 227 eliminated bilingual education in the classroom. These laws and restrictive policies, which target Latinos in the United States, negatively impact our system of education and the psychological wellbeing of our children by marginalizing the histories of communities of color in the U.S.

Given the current climate in the U.S. about non-white individuals what histories do Latin@ children learn in school? How do schools practice equity when racist legislation suppresses histories of oppression and resistance? As a Latina mother¹⁴, cognizant of the power of education, I argue that the home is an extension of the classroom in that it is a learning environment that can be utilized to promote agency and positive self-image for Latin@ children. I am also suggesting that until there is a radical transformation of the U.S. educational system which acknowledges the contributions of Latin@s and other minorities, much of the responsibility for promoting the psychological wellbeing of Latina girls, falls within the home. The home is the first educational setting for children where loving mothers¹⁴ and family members have the ability to inoculate and potentially offset some of the negative effects of a racist society and educational system.

By definition I will be using the term “*guerrera* spirit” to signify a sense of positive self-agency in Latinas. To expand on this definition, when I use the term *guerrera* I am referring specifically to a warrior spirit that invokes resistance and resilience. To be a *guerrera* is to courageously disrupt the deficit discourses perpetuated about our communities through a healing and transformative self/community love manifested in a decolonizing counter-narrative. Moreover, I offer an analysis of my own mothering practices with my two teenage daughters as a *testimonio* to what mothering tools can be utilized develop a *guerrera*.

As a community psychologist who teaches Chicana/o Studies at an urban university in the Los Angeles area, I acknowledge that I have a relatively privileged position in terms of my education and socio-economic

14. The argument is not to minimize the role that fathers or male family members play; however, the emphasis is to examine the roles that mothers have played in the division of household.

status and therefore I may have more access to knowledge about certain types of mothering than other Latina mothers have. In this sense, my mothering and class status are inextricably linked. It is also the case that this is a tentative privilege because although I received all my education in the U.S. and hold a professional degree, it does not discount the fact that I am an immigrant woman who was mothered by an immigrant single mother with few economic resources. My mothering practices are in constant dialogue with the history of my various class positions. At heart I still retain the working class ethic my mother and my Latino community taught me. Therefore, while I do have some newly attained privilege I continue to also have the history of my working class heritage. This I argue allows my mothering analysis to be useful to many different types of Latina mothers. Furthermore, I propose to use a method of *testimonio* to analyze my mothering practices, which I will explain in more detail in the following section.

Testimonio to theorize Latina Mothering

In order to fully understand my mothering analysis I must first discuss why *testimonio* is the most appropriate choice for my analysis. Bertaux and Kohli (1984) have written an extensive paper on why using the “Life Story Approach” or *testimonio* is a powerful tool in explaining the lived experiences of individuals in countries like Europe, the United States, Canada and Latin America. This type of testimonial narrative has come to prominence in the social sciences in recent years in part because it intertwines the desire for objectivity and the desire for solidarity in its very situation of production, circulation and reception (Beverley, 2005). *Testimonio* has been used effectively to provide the often-chilling stories about the human rights atrocities that have occurred in Latin America (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). So, in essence, *testimonio* is a powerful form of storytelling methodology which privileges the voice of the storyteller while illuminating the political context from which it emanates.

The definition I will use for *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length narrative produced in the form of a printed text, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she recounts (Beverley, 2005). Its unit of narration is usually a significant life experience. Furthermore, the word *testimonio* carries the connotation in Spanish of the act of bearing witness to an event. Within Chicana/o studies *testimonio* has been used to provide a historical context to breathe life to the oppressive experiences of Latinos. Some of the early Chicano and Latino scholars that have used *testimonio* narratives include Galarza (1971), Villarreal (1959), and Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983). During the 1980s and 1990s, as cultural studies and postmodern methodologies began to frame critical scholarship as subjective and political, Chicanas in particular drew on the reflexive form of *testimonio* utilizing such concepts as agency, hybridity, subaltern, and indigeneity (Anzaldúa, 1999; Lomas, 1994; Pardo, 1998; Perez, 1999; Sandoval, 2000). Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado-Bernal, 1998) also influenced Chicanas and empowered them to develop the narrative format as redemption—as takers of the stories, as readers of the narratives, and as creators of the analysis. Therefore, this is not a new methodology in the field and it has been used successfully to provide a framework for understanding the lived experiences of individuals.

More recently, Latina scholars such as the Latina Feminist Group, who analyzed their own education experiences as marginalized, used *testimonio* as a way to narrate their stories and/or collective histories (Latina Feminist Group, 2001). In this anthology, eighteen Latinas share *cuentos* and *consejos* with each other and provide a framework for a type of *testimonio* that critically analyzes their own experiences, thoughts, beliefs and behaviors. Based on the information about *testimonio* reviewed here I find that this is the most useful methodology to examine how my own mothering practices impact my daughter’s sense of positive self-agency or *guerrera* spirit. Moreover, I offer that sharing mothering practices is a dialogical and experiential learning process that simultaneously transforms both my daughters and myself. The following section provides a framework by which to examine mothering.

Defining Latina Mothering

According to Merriam-Webster mothering is “to give birth and to care and protect.” Since everyone

has, or has had, a mother or mother figure, most people have strong feelings and opinions about the institution of mothering. In the mainstream media it may appear as though mothers are primarily defined as apolitical and perhaps isolated with their children in a world of pure emotions. While I acknowledge that motherhood is an individual and highly personal experience it is also a social institution that by its very nature cannot remain apolitical. When we discuss Latina mothering¹⁵ in particular it is important to point out that as mothers we belong to a historically oppressed group in the U.S. and by this very notion we transmit life lessons through our daily actions and rituals which become pedagogical moments or moments of teaching and learning that are political (Villenas, 2006). Delgado-Bernal (2001) has referred to this as the “pedagogy of the home.” It is through mothering that many of us develop coping skills, empowerment strategies, and ultimately agency. For the current analysis I propose that mothering is a form of compassionate teaching for Latina girls that involves learning while encountering conflicts and contradictions that require healing and transformative modes of cultural practice.

In order to examine the mothering practices that advocate for a “pedagogy of the home,” I will use the framework of Bernal (2006b) who proposes that mothering occurs for Latina women through *consejos* or advice, *cuentos* or stories, and *pláticas* or conversations (Villenas & Moreno, 2001). *Consejos* are usually a unidirectional form of nurturing advice and moral lessons designed to influence behaviors. *Cuentos* are stories that are usually told to teach a moral lesson, and *pláticas* are bidirectional conversations that involve the sharing of personal thoughts and experiences as a means of healing the mind, body, and soul. These relational tools assist Latina mothers to teach their daughters how to survive everyday life by providing them with the understanding of how certain situations occur, why certain conditions exist, and how to handle these situations/conditions in and out of school settings. In the following section I will examine how the decolonial imaginary also determines the “pedagogy of the home” in which my mothering is nested in as both a teaching and learning experience.

Decolonial Imaginary and Mothering

Emma Pérez (1999) offers the decolonial imaginary to describe the space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated, a space that is intangible, almost a shadow in the dark, a liminal space where women of the Americas—generations of mestizas and Indias learn to survive sexism, class oppression, and discrimination, while making their mark on the world. As a mother, I am challenged with this concept of the decolonial imaginary in my own home and what that means for my daughters. Emma Pérez introduces a “third space” for negotiating the decolonial imaginary in which we can unearth the voices of silenced *mujeres* (Pérez, 1999). This decolonial imaginary helps me to understand how teaching and learning between and within mothers and daughters also becomes a space of teaching double meanings, where I teach what my culture traditionally expects of women, while also teaching lessons of resistance. By way of illustration, during a *plática* one day I asked my fifteen-year-old daughter if she had shorts under the mini-skirt she was wearing. She looked at me and asked, “Why?” I replied, “because there are men out there that will look at you in a sexual way, and I don’t want them to do that.” Shocked at my words, I stopped and thought back to the times my mother told me, “Women are not supposed to provoke a man, sexually,” adding that wearing short skirts, dresses, or tight pants invites trouble. My utterance at that moment sprang from a subconscious well of internalized patriarchal discourse.

I instantly wished I had not responded to my daughter in that manner. Although I believe that Latina mothers who are teaching their daughters about Latina feminism should not respond as I did, I understand that my immediate response is to protect my daughter from being objectified. I realize that the internalized conversation that I have inherited from my mother is that women who wear short skirts are whores- *putas*. Aída Hurtado (2003) describes the *virgen/puta* dichotomy as a cultural ideology in which Latinas have been historically viewed as either being the good woman who is a *virgen* and sacrificing and *putas*, on the other hand, framework makes me wonder: Could I really be thinking about my daughter as either a *virgen* or *puta*? This is painful because I realize that the subconscious *machista*/patriarchal beliefs I have learned from my Latina mother have colonized my mothering.

15. Although the focus of this essay is on biological mothers it does not negate the ability of mothering that may occur with a mother figure that is important in the lives of Latina girls to have an equal positive effect on their self-agency

Before my daughter responds, I apologize for asking her about the shorts, explaining that I said this out of some culturally ingrained ideas about women either being good girls or bad girls. She looks at me and says, “Mom I know, but you can’t shake the old school.” I ask my daughter, “What do you mean by old school?” She says, “anything old like your way of thinking about clothing, girls, and life.” She does not seem to be as affected by the dialogue that we just had. She is happy and bouncy. This is when I realize that this interaction was more about how I judged my own mothering than the impact my mothering has on her. In this instance, the interaction between my daughter and me can be seen as “feminist mothering theory” in which both mother and daughter are re-creating their relationship to traditionally held, deeply internalized beliefs and culture through this process of decolonial imaginary. It has also become a way for me to think about how my mothering continues to be re-negotiated.

In general mothers and daughters often have special moments throughout the day, which can be, during any small moments of time to informally discuss their daily lives through *pláticas*. Last year my daughter began high school and she is in a private all girls’ Catholic school where the majority of the girls are not Latina. She is a bright, bubbly, and happy girl. Last year, as a freshman in an honors English class, she had to take the Proficiency of Writing Exam (POW). In California, all students must pass the POW in order to graduate from high school, but students do not necessarily need to take the exam during their first year of high school. During one of our morning *pláticas*, she talked about how nervous she was about the exam. She felt that she was not as smart as the other girls particularly some of the white girls that were in her class. The issue about being smart could possibly be an adolescent issue in general; however, the issue of comparing herself against her white classmates was clearly an issue of racial positioning. We talked on the twenty-minute drive to school I said “*mija* you know you are smart right?” She said, “yes” with a roll of the eyes and lots of attitude. Her body language said I heard this before and it is not working this time. I believe she does this oftentimes as her way of rebellion. This is her way of letting me know that this conversation is over and she no longer wants to talk about it. In her silence she is speaking volumes about her letting me know that she can handle the situation—it is a way of exercising her agency.

Two days later as I am picking her up from school she shouts with tears in her eyes “I did not pass the exam okay!” I tell her “you not passing the exam has nothing to do with your intelligence.” She says frustrated with me, “Yes Mom. I get that. But, ten girls passed. And, they were all either white or Asian. It was mostly the brown girls that did not pass.” She also says that if she does not pass the POW she will not be eligible for honors English next year. I think for a long while as she listens to her music as her way of tuning out the world when necessary. I return to the conversation by telling her “*mija* you are smart and you have to believe in yourself.” I try to ignore the racial implications she has made, however, I understand that private school settings are often a site of racial inequality that many Latina girls are unable to tackle regardless of the nurturing they receive by their mothers. Despite my thoughts at that moment I wanted to just deal with her self-worth and psychological wellbeing because I need her to be strong so that school does not become a disempowering place. She returns to the racial issue by saying “I know the teacher is partial to white and Asian students and I know she graded my paper differently!” As a mother, how do I engage discourse about decolonial imaginary as Perez (1997) has suggested, so that my daughter can recreate her experience as a positive event that is a site of resistance and mobilization? Is this possible in the face of these happenings? I give my daughter *consejos* about my own experiences in taking standardized tests with fear because I have never told anyone this before. I share with her that I never did well in any test, not the SAT, GRE or any other standardized exam. I point out to her that the mere fact that she is in an honors class is an act of rebellion against white society that believes that Latinas are not smart enough. She looks at me and says “I know, I know I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

She takes the test the following week, and she fails again. This time she is not as angry, and shares her test with me. We review it and strategize on how to pass. It just so happens that the book that she will be writing about is *Bless Me Ultima* by Rodolfo Anaya¹⁶. This is a book she knows well. The previous book was a standard book read in English class and she had no attachment to it. It is fortunate that she has come with me on

16. Rodolfo Anaya, *Bless Me Ultima* (New York: Warner Books, 1999).

several occasions to hear Rodolfo Anaya speak about his writings. All of a sudden, I see how history and culture can empower the next generation. I see her light up and build confidence by the mere fact that the reading is something she understands and can relate to even if the gender of the character is not female. I remember her reading the book late at night laughing and talking endlessly about the characters to her sister and me.

Her father and I help her write a practice essay, and she does well. She is able to fully express how the book captures the coming of age of a young boy. She takes the test the next day and passes. On the way home she tells me “Mom, I passed that test because I got what the book meant.” I asked her what she meant by this and she says, “I got what it means to learn with examples of your own culture. It just makes learning easier.” As Delgado Bernal argues my daughter is learning about being a Latina through her own experience of racism. It is important to note that she also has an advantage in that her father and I both Latinos with post-graduate degrees bring our educational capital and experiences to help her process her experiences. In terms of her psychological development she has used her own form of decolonial imaginary to construct her positive experiences with the exam. She determined that it was culture that allowed her to understand the assignment and she gained a sense of pride for being Latina. This is not to negate the idea that she fully understands that her private school setting continues to perpetuate a racist stance but she now has some tools and experience by which to resist the onslaught of the assaults that will continue to come her way in the next four years of her high school experience. Moving beyond mothering practices that use a decolonial imaginary there are also mothering practices that can be used in moments of everyday life in which social hierarchies can be suspended in safe spaces.

Mothering in Suspended Spaces

Gallegos-Castillo (2006) has described, suspended spaces as moments of everyday life in which individuals can simultaneously suspend the social hierarchies that constrain their persona and operate in a space where there is safety and room for dialogue. My daughters and I have moments throughout the day in which we participate in these suspended spaces in which I share *consejos* and *cuentos*. For example, in the morning while we complete our morning routine my daughters and I discuss topics that have come up in school or contemporary political/social issues that impact Latinas. These moments are usually short blips of time. It is through the day-to-day *pláticas* with my daughters that we gain strength and confidence to carry out our daily tasks. I also use these spaces as a way for my daughters to see how my thoughts translate into how I create myself daily as a Latina professional woman.

Latina scholars have argued that it is important for Latinas to know their collective history in order to better appreciate their culture (Anzaldúa, 1999; Hurtado, 2000). Teaching Latina history in the home also becomes crucial given that the political environment of the United States at the moment is hostile towards the teaching of ethnic history in school settings. As mentioned previously, bills like Arizona’s H.B. 2281 have prohibited public school teachers in the state from teaching Chicana/o and Latina/o history for fear that the teaching of this history would promote the “overthrow of the U.S. government.” Therefore, my practice of teaching history as a *cuento* in the home is a rebellious act. This evidences the notion of “La Cultura Cura” when knowing our cultural history heals the wounds of our oppressive experience and creates young Latina feminists with a *guerrera* spirit (Hurtado, 2000). In teaching Latina history to my daughters I may be at some advantage because I have been teaching an introductory Chicano/a Studies course that involves learning about historical Chicano/a and Latino/a events for several years. I often share the information I have learned with my daughters. We have lively conversations and all of us have benefitted from reading Chicana feminist theory. This knowledge informs our *pláticas* as we discuss the ways in which women are erased from historical accounts. We have also discussed the point that when men write history, women are usually in the background of the accounts given or they are passive at best and completely invisible at worst.

Just recently my eleven-year-old-daughter shared with me that her school is no longer going to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. I ask her why the school was no longer going to celebrate this holiday and she says, “Because the principal said that it is unfair to only celebrate Mexican holidays.” I think to myself “aha!” some scholars have suggested that claiming unfairness is code for saying that the history and culture of certain ethnic groups is not “American” history (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Takaki, 2008). I am torn about how to respond. I do not want to tell her

something that in my mind makes me sound like a racist. Bonilla-Silva (2010) suggests that contemporary white Americans have learned to be racist without racism—the idea of a post-racial, President Obama colorblind society provides white America a passport to continue to be complicit with racist outcomes without the moral burden of overt racist intent. According to Bonilla-Silva, white Americans have learned to “Talk nasty about minorities without sounding racist” (2010, 2). He also points out that as the normative racial climate of the U.S. has changed dramatically the language of colorblindness is slippery, apparently contradictory and often subtle. It is in this context that the principal’s comment and change in curriculum is an example of this type of colorblind behavior. Paradoxically, the principal justified her actions as not being racist in that she eliminated the history of all ethnic minorities. Apparently, it is not racism if all minority groups are discriminated against equally.

So instead of trying to explain this concept to my daughter I ask instead “what do you think about what Ms. Kirk said?” She says “I think that sometimes the principal is being fair because then we would need to celebrate too many holidays for all the other cultures.” She goes on to say, “mommy I don’t know why but even though Ms. Kirk’s explanation makes sense it doesn’t feel right.” We discuss how it is important to listen to our feelings. I ask her why she thinks something does not feel right. She says, “Because it feels like we are leaving stuff out.” We discuss how these feelings are good indicators that give us information about how individuals might really feel about an issue. I tell her “sometimes individuals are being racist and that it might be what they have been taught to do or say. These individuals have the wrong idea about individuals from other cultures and they might sometimes make us feel bad and we may not know why.” She says “yeah” as she thinks about what I have said. “Mommy can a principal be racist?” I respond with “*mija* unfortunately anyone can be racist even your principal.” She thinks about my response for a while and says “but Ms. Kirk is nice.” I tell her “Yes Ms. Kirk is nice and it does not prevent her from being racist.” I can sense that she is feeling confused. So I tell her “*Mija* sometimes I feel confused about what people say and the way they act.” She says “Yeah me too but mom I still like Ms. Kirk.” I tell her “*Mija* it is okay for you to like Ms. Kirk I just want you to think about how she may not always be right.” She says, “Okay but I can’t tell her that.” I respond “You don’t need to tell her anything else unless you want to.” She says, “No I’m good.” My hope is that she has learned that even people she admires can be racist and that we must always be vigilant about the reasons behind why people act the way they do. I also hope that what I teach her at home provides some buffering for what she experiences in school and she can continue to build positive self-agency despite the cognitive dissonance she experiences.

Conclusion and *Un Consejo*

Anzaldúa (1990) points out that we must create our own Latina feminist theories and scholarship to understand, embrace, and celebrate our *mujerismo*. Therefore, one of the goals of this essay was to demonstrate how Latina mothering is a feminist praxis that creates *mujerismo* through the cultivation of a *guerrera* spirit. Although there has been much written about Latina feminist theory, there is relatively little written about how mothering is a feminist practice. Therefore, pedagogical theories of mothering can teach the next generation of Latinas to disrupt the current systems of oppression in a way that ensures their daily survival and allows these young women to avoid being complicit in their own subordination. This essay is one of the first to explore the pedagogical implications that Latina mothers can teach their daughters how to resist racism and sexism through cultural tools like *cuentos*, *pláticas* and *consejos*.

As other scholars have done I have used the decolonial space coined by Emma Perez (1999) as a way to suggest that Latina mothers can use this tool as a way to provide nurturing spaces that allow daughters to develop counter-narratives that facilitate their agency and wellbeing. I have also discussed the use of suspended spaces or instances in time where mothers and daughters can safely examine how racist behaviors impact the psychological wellbeing of both mothers and daughters. I propose that examining motherhood and daughterhood in this manner allows for a holistic, decolonizing education that gives Latinas the power to thrive despite the endless degradation they face in their daily lives. Finally, *un consejo*: I challenge Latina mothers and daughters to look closely because somewhere in the dark shadows of a woman’s psyche we might find that *guerrera* spirit waiting to be unleashed.

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