

Cultural Knowledge: A Foundation for Educational Aspirations

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Abstract

This story describes how my immigrant parents from Mexico City transmitted their Mexican cultural knowledge to their U.S. born children to inspire us to understand the wealth of our culture. Their experiences and stories helped us to navigate as bilingual and bicultural Chicanos. We were a family that was very proud of our Mexican heritage; we knew our language, history, politics and possessed strong cultural ties. My parents used their cultural knowledge to lay the foundations for our educational pathway. Now I have passed it on to my daughter.

Mamá, you packed my bathrobe, but it needs to be washed!! I know, I did wash it, and now I have packed it with your winter coat, boots and the mohair blanket. It's mailed, insured with a track number.

I heard a slight laugh.

¡Pero claro que sí! (But of course!) I don't know what came over me to think that you wouldn't have thought of everything before I take off.

This short interaction over the phone with my daughter took me into the past, to memories that have most recently become bittersweet. Three and a half decades later they are reminders of my own coming of age. My story is not unlike those of many Chicanos/ Latinos who have gone off to distant universities from their hometown. Looking back at my young adult life, I cannot help but feel pride at how so many of us, second generation Chicanos/Latinos, who were products of the Civil Rights Movement, succeeded in college due to our own perseverance and collective social/cultural consciousness. It doesn't lessen the achievement of our more privileged children; rather it inspires compassion and admiration for those who succeed against all odds. In this essay I share snapshots about three generations of my family in the US. Like most people we all have unique stories that could easily become major novels or films, yet there are commonalities that we share as an ethnic group within the US. My story attempts to capture the uniqueness of one family within a historical and political context where social movements have influenced the individual's cultural identity. One of the motivations in

writing this story is to highlight how socioeconomic conditions can alter one's pathways as well as one's social consciousness. My parents were products of a popular nationalist movement in Mexico, while I am a proud product of the Chicano and Civil Rights Movement. My daughter is influenced by the global anti-war movement with an emphasis on social justice. We are individuals, but we also function and form ourselves within a larger social context, which to a great extent contributes to our identity. Social movements influenced how my parents perceived their world, just as the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s made an impact on me. My daughter's self-concept is still in formation. How can we as second and future generations born and raised in the US sustain, re-imagine and reinvent who we are as Chicanos, Mexicanos and Latinos within our communities and within the larger US and Latin American spheres? Where we stand politically does make a difference for future generations. I share my journey in hope that some elements resonate with the reader's own experience and their aspirations.

My Background

I was a second generation, described by Garcia (2004) as US born children of immigrants, young Mexican woman going from the barrio to a university. It was 1971 and the Civil Rights Movement was still going strong. Many Mexican high school students were just beginning to hear about the Chicano Movement, Cesar Chávez and the Farm Workers' Union. Yet for semi-urban teens such as myself the Chicano and Civil Rights Movement appeared too removed from our experiences, or so we thought. If we had lived in the heart of Los Angeles, where the Chicano Movement permeated the everyday lives of the neighborhoods, our process of becoming culturally and politically aware would have been different. Chicano art, political slogans, and activism were everywhere in communities like Boyle Heights, East Los Angeles, and Lincoln Park, but this was not the case in my unincorporated barrio. I lived in a developing industrial and low-income area where most of the residents were working class Mexicans and Euro-Americans.

A Second Chance to Reinvent Themselves: My Parents Move to Los Angeles, California

My parents immigrated to Los Angeles in 1948, in the post WWII climate, the beginning of the Cold War and politics of McCarthyism. Nevins (2002) states that WWII created a demand for labor both in industrial and agricultural sectors. Like so many immigrants they felt they did not have a choice. They came out of necessity.

Manuel and Altagracia were from Mexico City where they had lived a comfortable life as part of a new developing middle class. My father was one of the first tourist guides in Mexico City. In the 1940's tourism was a mostly geared to wealthy travelers. He was trained as a tourist guide whose aim was to educate travelers about the glorious history and culture of México. My mother was a highly skilled secretary. Due to some unfortunate business transactions my parents lost literally everything

they owned. Their shame and rapid financial ruin prompted them to come to California. They went from dining in the best Mexican restaurants to living in a garage in the Boyle Heights neighborhood in East Los Angeles. Their suffering, especially my mother's, was immense. My father at least spoke English, although with a heavy accent. She did not speak a word, and to complicate things further, suffered from severe hearing loss that emerged around the time they immigrated. Neither of my parents had ever done physical labor.

Within a few years of residing in the U.S., my father learned the trade of piano refinishing. My mother cleaned houses, did childcare, and sewed in factories. While working multiple jobs, she also began having children, one every two years totaling four within eight years. My mother spent a year alone, while my father returned to México to wait for his green card. Prior to his departure she gave birth to their first son. She had two other preadolescents who had stayed in Mexico City, which added to her hardships. Life was hard for poor women. They needed to make an income, but they still had to raise children and do all the domestic work. My parents sacrificed immensely, never treating themselves to any small luxuries.

Yet, in seven years they had enough to make a down payment for a house in the San Gabriel Valley. They were overjoyed because it was not in Los Angeles, which was jarring for them as newcomers. In our new location there were avocado and orange groves within walking distance. Our first house was very small, but we had a huge yard with fruit and nut trees.

Altagracia finally felt some relief. She continued to work as a seamstress, but sewed only at home. This allowed her to work 12 hours days while she also cared for us and provided childcare for at least two to four children at a time. She also did all the cooking and housecleaning. She had learned all the traits that young Mexican women were taught to

prepare them for marriage. She was an excellent seamstress, cook and baker. You could say she, like so many working and middle class Mexican women, were rarely recognized for their skills, they were the unsung, brownskinned *Martha Stewarts*.

Within two years my parents bought a new ranch home for \$11,000.00 right next door to our home. They did not have the money for the down payment, but my eldest brother, who worked and lived at home, gave them the money because he saw this purchase as an opportunity for the family to improve our living situation. It was a major sacrifice as my mother took on more sewing jobs to pay for our groceries. Two of my brothers began working at the age of ten, first as newspaper boys, and then the older of the two, who was eleven, began working at a fruit stand. The owners of the fruit stand were a kind Italian- American family who gave us huge boxes of vegetables. Later as teenagers, my brothers worked as gas attendants. Everyone in our family worked.

Manuel and Altagracia's main dream was for their children to have an education. Throughout our upbringing we were always told that education would give us a more fulfilling life. Fortunately, they focused on knowledge as the most important element of an education as opposed to making money. Yes, they knew the obvious, that an education would insure better job opportunities but they were more concerned about our knowledge of the world and our life choices. My parents did not have a college education, but they were raised in a bustling, dynamic urban center. Their experiences formed their cultural knowledge.

Mexico City in Transition (1930's to 1940's): Hope and Education as a National Goal

Mexico City was historically a metropolis that supported intellectual growth and amazing artistic creativity. In the 20th century it went through a revolution resulting in the ratification of a constitution in 1917 that provided protection to two significant sectors of the population, the peasants and laborers. In

the 1930's when my parents were young adults, Mexico City was thriving. They experienced a populist government under the leadership of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). He gave hope to a ravaged, war torn country whose working class and peasants were the most affected. Cárdenas' nationalist program created extensive institutional structures that supported universal education, strong union organizations, a revolutionary muralist movement, land distribution for farm workers, and the nationalization of its major natural resources—primarily petroleum, telecommunications, and electricity. In addition, the post revolutionary Mexican governments were secular (Shorris, 2004).

The government had stripped the Catholic church of its sovereignty. This break with the Catholic church-oligarchy radicalized young urban people. My parents, particularly my father, were opposed to the hegemony of the Catholic Church over the private lives of people and its political power. Not unlike many people who supported the separation between Church and State, they were still committed to their Catholic spiritual beliefs.

Although all this significant social, economic and political restructuring took place under Capitalism, it had psychological and political impact on Mexican citizens. The workers and skilled workers, like my parents, were able to freely access information through newspapers, journals, and were inspired by the great artistic/cultural movements of the time. It was not uncommon for average people to attend popular political theater, museums, rallies, and educational forums. Cárdenas supported these "liberatory" manifestations while simultaneously the bourgeois and government administrators feared these contestations. My parents attended many cultural and intellectual events. They were strong supporters of Cárdenas' nationalist agenda. Becoming educated was strongly embedded in the minds of the Mexican people. Unfortunately, the Mexican presidents that followed during the decade of 1940's

completely rejected Cárdenas' social and educational transformation; instead they focused on industrialization and development of the tourist market (Shorris, 2004). In the 1940's the government fostered a consumer oriented, image of prosperity, especially in Mexico City. My parents were caught between consumption and their real economic limitations.

Experiencing Dislocation and Adjustments as Newcomers to Los Angeles, California

Naturally Altagracia and Manuel brought their funds of knowledge (Moll, 2001) to the US, but they were extremely naïve because they thought their social capital would be valued here. They were disappointed at the contrast between their urban life in Mexico City and that in Los Angeles. They couldn't find similarities between their experiences in Mexico City and Los Angeles. Most of their fellow Mexican workers were not from Mexico City. They were either born or raised in the U.S. or from provinces in Mexico. My parents were transported into a new geo-cultural and political environment that turned them into rote workers with few pleasures, except from their children.

Due to their financial limitations they were careful not to spend on anything that was frivolous. They were accustomed to attending cultural and educational events for free. Since my father's English was limited and my mother couldn't speak any English, they couldn't find time or even the motivation to visit the library, let alone museums. This isolation soon cut them off from their previous attachment to the arts. Manuel attended a couple of social functions sponsored by the Communist Party U.S.A, but he didn't want any problems with the law so he stopped attending. Their isolation was compounded when they moved out of Los Angeles, where thriving Spanish-speaking communities existed.

While we were growing up my parents could rarely afford attending entertainment events. Periodically they attended the Spanishspeaking variety shows at the Million Dollar

Theater in Los Angeles. It was a central variety theater for Mexican immigrants. The audience went to listen to famous singers from Latin America and watch Mexican films; but more than anything, people went to remember their homeland and loved ones. My parents loved going because it was considered a "big night out". I have very special memories of the joy and heartfelt emotions when they would go to listen to Augustín Lara, Pedro Infante, María Felix or Los Hermanos Martínez-Gil. When they were financially better off they would take one or two of us to the theater. I got to go more than my brothers. These experiences taught my brothers and I to view our culture as highly diverse and sophisticated.

Once we were in school, they would diligently send my two brothers and me to the philharmonic once a year and perhaps to one or two plays. This of course, depended on getting student discounts. They wanted to expose us to many cultural offerings from Mariachis and boleros to classical music, Mexican theater, films, art, and history. They also wanted us to learn about North American cultures. They believed that each culture had universal values and immense social capital, embodied in language, values, and social skills. They embraced multiculturalism well before the social movements of the 1970s. Our home thrived with conversations and huge debates about history, and politics both in México and the US. I value those experiences because they helped form my social and political consciousness. I have intentionally replicated many of these social practices with my own daughter.

Planting Foundations in the Next Generation: Sustaining and Redefining Our Cultural and Historical Knowledge

My own history, educational views and political convictions were easy to transmit to my daughter because these views and experiences formed my daily life. As Chicano parents we wanted our daughter to be fully bilingual and biliterate. We wanted Sofia to

grow up feeling the strength that I had experienced about being Mexican. We took her to México while she was growing up as well as to Chicano/ Latino artistic and political events. She was exposed to rich children's literature in Spanish. I spoke only Spanish to her through most of her early childhood. We went to great lengths to make sure to find a Latina caretaker, and then I placed her in a small preschool where the director believed in bilingualism. There were also two well-prepared Latina teachers who were wonderful role models. When it came time to attend school we placed her in a Spanish immersion program in San Francisco. Although we had to do a lot of juggling in our schedules, we were willing to drive her to a school outside of our neighborhood district because we wanted her to spend a good part of her day immersed with Latino children, our cultural heritage and in a bilingual setting. As Moll (2001) contends, it is not only the presence of cultural artifacts, but also how these artifacts are used that mediates how people come to think of themselves and their use of the artifacts. As parents, we consciously planned ways to support the reinforcement of our culture and Spanish.

In their research, Howard and Sugarman (2001) found that more second and third generation Chicano/Latino parents are placing their children in Spanish immersion programs throughout the country. As parents we know that schools cannot impart all complexities of cultural identity and sustain bilingualism, but schools can serve as support structures for families. Schools can be centers that expand our Latino children's cultural history; and teachers can be collaborators with parents to revitalize our heritage language. Our confidence in transmitting our multidimensional political, cultural and linguistic identities has immensely benefitted our daughter. As an educator, I have witnessed similar benefits for other Latino children and youth.

Latinos in the US are daily confronted with anti-immigrant, anti-Latino and antibilingual

attacks that permeate deeply in peoples' psychology. These xenophobic messages come through the government policies, laws, media, in the schools and other public spheres (Arce, 1998; Eviatar, 2006). One example of how beliefs can transfer to actions was when in 1998 California voters passed Proposition 227, an anti-bilingual education initiative that dismantled most bilingual programs (Arce, 1998; Crawford, 1992, 2004). As parents it is a challenge to guide our children to question and challenge these dehumanizing political positions. We can counter these at the familyhome level, but we must create partnerships with others, especially educators to reject persecution and negative representations of Latinos while arming Latino children's with cultural, educational and social resources for the future.

Cultural Knowledge as Source of Strength: Navigating New Spheres

My daughter has recently left for college. She has moved from the West Coast to the Midwest, landing at the University of Chicago. Like most parents I feel a mixture of elated happiness and sadness that she has gone so far from California. Overall I am happy for this big step toward independence. She embodies a strong Latina identity with feminist and progressive political foundations. Sofía views herself as a citizen of the world where she voices opposition to imperialist wars, racism, violence against the poor, and violence toward females. Perhaps many Latino youths do not have an articulated identity or political consciousness before they attend college, but they do understand "otherness" and their awareness and personal experiences can heighten if they are able to tie these to our history of resistance and social movements. One can say that Sofia along with other middle and working class Latinos are part of a larger community of youth culture who resist various forms assimilation into the mainstream conservative ideology. This generation is redefining, reinventing and appropriating what

they see as significant markers of their identity. Certainly their ability to obtain information rapidly through technology has greatly influenced youth and college age Latinos. This is a major resource that helps them navigate and redefine themselves in ways that first and second generations could not do.

Two Generations Going to College

My daughter's passage has triggered so many memories, most of which have been dormant for thirty years. Our brief phone conversation a week before her departure triggered my recollections of my own transition to college. What would college life be like? What expectations did my parents have for me? What did I know about the university I was attending? How did I select the school? I tried to recall, but decided to put these questions aside while I kept on with my work, ran errands, and planned with my daughter her imminent departure. There was so much to do before she left, and I wanted her departure to be smooth.

Sofía's journey to the university forced me to retrace my past. Her father, stepfather and I took several days off to accompany her to Chicago. We thought it would be good to help her acclimate before the start of school. I also agreed to stay a few extra days with her after the official parent drop-off. My stay proved to be very valuable to Sofía and myself. The first week at the University of Chicago was perhaps her hardest. She needed reassurance about being on her own and fitting in.

My memories came back with poignancy while in Chicago. Every conversation between Sofía and I drew images of my youth. I was dreaming about my family when I was 18, and my conversations with Sofía took me back, always to my mother, sometimes to my father.

The Role of Mentors and Advocates

My pathway to college began when I dropped in to visit my former Spanish high school teacher, Mr. Henry Dalton, a highly intelligent and eloquently bi-literate individual. He cared about his students. As a Mexican-American who later identified himself as a Chicano, he had a broad view of the world shaped by his travels as a Peace Corps teacher in Latin America. I respected him very much.

He informed me about a scholarship offered by the US government to go to the University of the Americas in Cholula, Puebla. I was excited about the possibility to study in México. It was this pivotal encounter that changed my life path forever. A few weeks later I was called to go for an interview with Congressman Edward Roybal, who was among the first Mexican-Americans in the House of Representatives. In the 1950's the California Democratic Party had given him very limited support, thus it was his keen organizational skills in the Mexican communities that helped him get into public office (M.T. Garcia, 1994). He was a strong advocate for educational achievement in the Mexican community. Through him I, and at least ten other Chicanos, received a full-four year college scholarship to study at the university. My family was elated. My parents believed that the best education was in México. We were a family that was very proud of our Mexican heritage; we knew our language, history, politics and possessed strong cultural ties. We spoke mostly Spanish at home. Going to study in México seemed like the best possibility.

Since my family didn't know what questions to ask or to whom to ask before leaving to the university there wasn't much discussion about my needs. I recall they wondered what would this private university be like and how I would live. We received only a basic brochure and sparse information. We learned that I would live in the dorms and I had a meal ticket. We never contacted the school other than sending the application. I was going 2,500 miles away without any preparation for what was in store.

My mother's primary way of preparing me for college was through emphasizing my appearance. I was the second to the youngest. Only my younger brother and I were living at home by 1971. Going off to college meant that she would buy me some clothes and sew several nice dresses. My parents thought that one had to dress well to go to a university. Their image was based on the way students dressed in México during the 1930s and 1940s. Giving me clothes, cosmetics, toiletries and an iron were my mother's concrete contributions to my

college preparation, but her grandest gift was her confidence in me.

There is a vast difference between my daughter's experiences and mine, but there are also some key commonalities. Our Mexican culture and language continue as strong foundations in our lives. In her case, I provide the same support my mother gave me, but with more social, educational and financial resources. I have resources and knowledge that my mother could never obtain due to her limited command of the English language and limited financial resources. In addition, our school system rarely informed parents on how to access information regarding educational pathways. I have command of English, the language of negotiation in the US. I demand my fundamental right to equal access, something she did not believe was her right as an immigrant.

My mother's fear of asserting herself spilled into many areas. Though she and I have the same form of hearing loss, I quickly moved to get medical help, while she felt that her hearing disability was another personal flaw contributing to her unimportance. The contradiction between my mother's strong demeanor at home and her timidity in the mainstream English-speaking world were magnified by her sense of cultural dislocation. As her translator, confidant and advocate I made a point to acquire her strengths and challenge what made her feel timid.

Unlike Altagracia, when I became a mother I felt confident in providing a healthy world for my daughter. Although my divorce and demanding professional life have not always been easy for my daughter, her experiences have been generally secure. However, I felt a pang of fear the week prior to the orientation at the University of Chicago. Now that Sofía was on her own, would she face racism, sexism? How would she deal with these tensions without her parents as protectors? I had to trust that we had provided her with the foundations to make wise decisions and face tensions with

assertiveness. She, like all young adults, will encounter conflicts. It is part of growing up. Like most parents, I want the best for my daughter. The question I ask myself, as a Chicana/Latina, how do I define "best"? In this retrospective journey I realized that I want what my parents wanted for me - the opportunities to learn, to explore the world, to gain knowledge, to use knowledge wisely, and to act with conviction. Perhaps I have a broader vision of these values than my parents, but ultimately they are the same.

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