

5

Between the Telling and the Told

Latina Mothers Negotiating
Education in New Borderlands

Sofia A. Villenas

Autobiographical Introduction

While this chapter tells the story of a group of Latina mothers who were trying to make sense of how to raise children in a new community in the United States, it is also my own story as a daughter of Latino immigrant parents from Ecuador—a story of trying to broker between cultures, between my mother’s voice and powerful institutions such as schools and hospitals and between self and collective identity formation within Los Angeles-based multicultural wars. My experiences growing up as a daughter of immigrants are in many ways similar to the experiences of other second-generation or U.S.-born children. For example, like so many language minority children, I served as a language broker or translator for my parents, particularly for my mother. I remember translating at hospitals, banks, grocery stores, and over the phone with real estate agents, telephone companies, police, and classroom teachers. I also grew up watching television in both English and Spanish; I watched *Laverne and Shirley* and *Little House on the Prairie*, but also *El Noticiero 34* (News on Channel 34) and memorable *telenovelas* (Spanish-speaking soap operas). I went to theaters in the suburbs of Los Angeles to see *Rocky*, *Jaws*, *Grease*, and other Hollywood hits of the 1970s. But my parents also took us to *El Floral* drive-in theater in East Los Angeles to see Mexican comedian icon Mario Moreno Cantinflas, among other favorites. The Spanish-language television station offered Latino-focused news, which made me aware of Latin America as a vast part of the northern hemisphere. I also remember vividly the fear I felt at the nightly news of immigration raids in the Los Angeles *fabricas*, or sweatshops such as the ones in which my father worked. I feared that one day he

72 LATINA/LATINO COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN

would not come home because, even though he had legal residency, he might be picked up and sent back to Ecuador with no questions asked. I often wondered, do other kids know these things, share these fears, and understand what it is like living in these linguistic/cultural borderlands? But I also knew the answer. Schools and teachers pretended that this life did not exist—at least it wasn't in the textbooks, the songs we sang, the histories we studied, the families we learned about. And I certainly was not given the tools to comprehend cultural differences and coercive relations of power in our society. Without the language to articulate these life experiences, I became ashamed of speaking Spanish. I was tired of translating. It was not until college that many of us Latinos/as with the same experiences came together in Chicano and ethnic studies courses to learn how to question and articulate our bicultural realities and our histories. We felt rage at the silence we experienced in our schooling, but we also felt passion for working in our communities. We became teachers, public health workers, and *politicos*. I worked with Latino adults, mostly women, teaching English as a second language (ESL). Later I became a Spanish bilingual elementary school teacher and also taught the children of Latino immigrant parents. In both these settings, I listened to mothers' stories of dealing with hospitals, schools, and other institutions. I listened to their frustrations in trying to understand their children's lives and classroom experiences. I translated mail and explained school, all the time remembering and reliving my mothers' and my own experiences. I knew well the huge gap that existed and continues to exist between Latina mothers' lives, their children's bicultural experiences, and the school environment. I have carried this sensibility to the research, writing, and teaching I do about Latino families, including the research with Latina mothers in North Carolina.

Context

In 1993 I arrived in North Carolina, bringing with me my mothers' pedagogies—certainly a lifetime of teaching and learning in my family—as well as my bicultural experiences and my own middle-class, “professionally-informed” notions of mothering to conduct research about Latino family education in Hope City. Hope City¹ is a rural town in a central county with one of the fastest-growing populations of Latino families in the state, mostly recruited to work in the poultry industry. When I arrived in Hope City in 1993, there was barely a hint of a Latino community, but the population started to increase rapidly thereafter. By 1997, Latinos/as made up approximately 37 percent of the total population. In this rapidly changing landscape, I was interested in documenting how mothers forged community and family in a place with no previous Latino

settlement. Would they face the same issues as Latina mothers in heavily Latino-populated Los Angeles, and to what intensity? How would they be positioned within differing racial/cultural dynamics (different from the U.S. Southwest), and in turn how would they position themselves vis-à-vis schools and health/social services? In this different borderlands context, was there hope for a different set of cross-cultural relations and a bridging between mothers' lives, their children's emerging biculturalism, and the public schools?

I spent two years in Hope City interviewing Latino parents, conducting oral life histories with Latina mothers, and working with Latinas² in ESL adult classes, parenting classes, and health classes. In conducting this study as ethnography, I was a participant observer in different home and institutional settings. I attended and taught ESL classes, served as bus driver for mothers attending parenting and health classes, attended family and town celebrations, and participated in school and social services meetings. In addition, I also conducted archival research using town documents and newspapers. I view this study as a small piece of history, as a snapshot of a historical moment of change in one community, particularly through the lens of the "new" arrivals.

In Latina mothers' life history narratives and conversations, they addressed the question of what it meant to raise children in the United States. Although at first, in hearing what was said or *told*, I listened to descriptions of their superior traditional family education with words of confidence, self-assuredness, and pride in their family values. But it wasn't until I carefully considered my feelings about the event of conversation itself, the *telling*, or how things were said—the various positionings they took vis-à-vis each other and imagined audiences of English-speaking *americanos*—that a fleeting picture emerged of the very processes of negotiating the challenges of raising bicultural children in these new borderlands of the rural Southeast. It was precisely in the spaces between the telling and the told where the terms of a viable family education were always in the process of being worked on and worked out. I have addressed some of the larger questions noted earlier elsewhere (see Villenas, 2001, 2002); however, in this chapter I examine the job of negotiating the ambiguities and "exigencies of living in the borderlands" (Gonzalez, 2001)—borderlands that are between nations, between beliefs about "proper" parenting, gender roles, community rights, and citizenship in terms of who does and does not belong. In analyzing one conversation that took place among a group of Latina mothers one Sunday afternoon, I consider a particular moment in time as a creative and contested *performative* space where personal histories, local contexts, and larger power relations marked by race, class, gender, language, and citizenship status came together in negotiating the challenges of raising "successful" children and in constructing identities of dignity as capable mothers. Hence, this chapter also highlights the value of the struggle to recuperate the situational and bodily experiences of ethnography—to

recuperate the saying from the said, as cultural anthropologist Conquergood (1991) writes, and to “shift the emphasis from space and time, from sight and vision, to sound and voice, from text to performance, from authority to vulnerability” (p. 183).

Between the Telling and the Told: A Borderlands Analysis

Inspired by folklorist Victor Turner’s work on social drama and cultural performance, Conquergood (1991) explains how performance-sensitive ethnography “privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, and precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology” (p. 187). This sensibility to the body, kinetics, and emotion within particular historical contexts can also be elaborated from a borderlands perspective. “The border” and “Borderlands” refer to a shared historical and collective naming of the cultural and bodily experiences born of the physical border between the United States and Mexico/Latin America. As Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) so aptly describes it, “The U.S.-Mexico border *es una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (p. 3). In this way, the Borderlands refers to a brutal yet dynamic place of not only stark inequalities but also cultural survival and invention. For example, linguistic anthropologist Norma González (2001) discusses borderlands in terms of multiple and overlapping linguistic worlds that are used by the mothers in her study to invent, improvise, tinker with, and reproduce new social lives and ways of mothering that do not simply reproduce “tradition” in the Borderlands of Tucson, Arizona. In this way, borderlands are also the overlapping experiences between traditions, cultural sensibilities, ethnicities, gender roles, spiritualities, sexualities, and generations, as Anzaldúa has so often emphasized (see Keating, 2000). Thus, living in the physical and metaphysical B/borderlands has meant experiencing fragmentation and the dislocation of self under a history of colonization and domination responsible for continuing inequalities and discrimination in employment, housing, and schooling in the U.S. Southwest (see San Miguel Jr. & Valencia, 1998, for a history of Mexican American education). But it has also meant developing modes of survival to maintain integrity and dignity in living with the ambiguity that comes with straddling multiple realities. This ambiguity and straddling of multiple realities is often unseen and unheard; but they are in the body and emotions, in the said and in the unsaid—indeed in the interstitial spaces between the telling and the told. Thus, bringing together the idea of performance-sensitive ethnography with a borderlands

sensibility allows for an embodied and engaged understanding of what is at stake in Latina mothers' conversations about themselves as mothers raising children in the rural American South.

Certainly, performance-sensitive ethnography and narrative analysis have been approached and developed from many different disciplines, including folklore, communications, social theory, feminism, cultural studies, theater, rhetoric, psychology, and counseling to name a few. While it is not my intention to do a detailed narrative and performance analysis of the Latina mothers' conversation in this chapter, I do want to briefly focus on two pieces of work that are personally relevant for me in articulating performance and borderland sensibilities in a close examination of narrative and discourse.

Communications scholar Soyini Madison (1998) provides an example of storytelling as an empowering act, particularly as it is "read" and coperformed through the lens of Black feminist and intellectual thought—just as I also am indexing a Latina *mujer-* or womanist-oriented borderlands perspective. Madison elaborates on the distinction between the telling and the told (from Bauman, 1986) in the oral life history narrative of Mrs. Kapper, an elderly African American woman. Mrs. Kapper tells about her life as an exploited fieldworker who at one point talked back to the landowner. As Madison explains it, Mrs. Kapper was forthright and bold in confronting the landowner in the told or narrated event. In the telling, however, she spoke in a cautious, barely audible whisper as if the landowner had transcended time and space to hear her as she spoke miles away in a little room at the senior citizen center. Madison explains how "the years of resentment and fear embodied in her voice were present at this performative moment" (p. 330). But this performative tension between Mrs. Kapper's telling and her told story is important, as Madison continues, because it suggests a "broader performance tradition in African American culture, a tradition in which the contradictions and tensions in performance were a matter of survival: the tradition of the 'mask' or presentation of self constructed for white people" (p. 330). And yet, as Mrs. Kapper continued her story, it was through its performance, or the telling, that she experienced personal transformation. Although one may feel powerless and stripped of one's will and dignity in the event, it is in the retelling of the event that one can claim dignity and satisfaction. Mrs. Kapper reclaimed her dignity in also describing and euphorically performing her "real occupation" as someone who could nurture and raise farm animals. As Madison explains it, for Mrs. Kapper, who labored for others, work served as a site of repression devoid of creativity and pride. But it was in the telling and recasting of her work with pride that she was in control and independent because she owned the site of her labor and thus had ownership of herself.

Madison's experience with Mrs. Kapper and her attention to the performative aspect of storytelling resonates powerfully with my own experiences in

76 LATINA/LATINO COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN

North Carolina. Indeed, what struck me most about the oral life histories and conversations with Latina mothers was not so much the content, but the performance of their words (both passionate and matter-of-fact) in reclaiming dignity in a context where they were often cast in deficit ways by majority culture (see Villenas, 2001). I felt the urgency in their voices to speak beyond me as they recast their traditional family education and their gendered identities (or what it means to be a Mexican or Salvadorian woman) as superior to U.S.-based cultural practices. And yet at the same time, they were also struggling with continuity and change in terms of how to go about raising children and supporting their schooling. And of course, I was a cop performer in the storytelling, positioned at times as a bicultural “daughter” who had much to learn but also as a cultural broker who could offer information about “how things worked” in the United States. Thus, our performances were about “disambiguating” (González, 2001) the often conflicting borderlands between traditions, cultures, and generations. But what are some important aspects to attend to in terms of how to imagine and be attuned to these negotiations of the borderlands in the spaces between the telling and the told?

The work of linguistic anthropologist Stanton Wortham (2001) provides some very useful conceptual and analytic tools for examining discourse and narrative. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide the kind of detailed and rigorous analysis described in his work, I would like to call attention to some important conceptual tools that loosely guide my interpretations in this chapter. First, Wortham situates his social/cultural perspective of discourse and narrative as one that is opposed to approaches that rely solely on the cognitive content of talk. Instead, he emphasizes that power lies in the *interactional* event of storytelling where relationships are established and where narrator and audience are positioned in particular ways (e.g., as teacher and student, religious figure and potential convert, as “we” or me/you, as good taxpayer and welfare recipient, etc.). Drawing from Jakobson (1957/1971), Wortham distinguishes between the event of storytelling (referred to as the storytelling event) and the narrated event. Whereas most analyses may stop at the content or narrated event, Wortham argues for the fruitfulness of considering the performance of the storytelling event, how people are positioning themselves, and who is being addressed even if that audience is not in the room. Transformative power in autobiographical narrative, for example, is possible because it helps narrators “express and manage multiple, partly contradictory selves and experiences” (p. 7) in the event of storytelling vis-à-vis an audience and to possibly construct identities of agency and self-worth as Mrs. Kapper did in her life history narrative. But how does this happen?

Wortham develops his understanding of the storytelling event and the narrated event with powerful conceptual tools from the work of literary

scholar and philosopher Bakhtin. From Bakhtin, we can understand language as dialogical in nature because humans are always responding to each others' words. In this way, words in any utterance have already been spoken by others and so people are taking positions with respect to past utterances. Wortham (2001) explains,

Bakhtin claims that any utterance must take some position with respect to past words. . . . As Bakhtin sometimes puts it, all words "echo" with the "voices" of others, and, as interpreters, we try to understand the speaker's position with respect to the others who characteristically speak this way. . . . The speaker enters into dialogue with those past speakers, such that part of the current speaker's meaning and part of what he accomplishes interactionally through speech involves his relationship to prior speaker's positions. (pp. 21–22)

Drawing from Wortham's ideas, when I say I felt Latina mothers often talking "beyond" me, particularly in the event of oral life history narrative and in public settings including in-group conversations, I intuitively knew they were addressing past "words" about them as new arrivals in Hope City. While in the real-world undocumented immigrants' voices are denied a dialogue, in the performative event of storytelling they can "talk back" or enter into a dialogue with those past speakers who hold anti-immigrant and deficit views about Latino families. Often and in many different contexts, the storytelling events in Hope City involved Latina mothers (and other Latino adults) addressing rhetoric about "illegal aliens"—a use of language that signals something less than human—and positioning themselves in relation to those *americanos* who produce these utterances. In doing so, Latinas also called into dialogue and positioned themselves vis-à-vis social groups within their own cultural milieu, for instance, "echoing" people who spoke like them with dignity as *personas bien educadas* (well-educated in the moral and holistic sense), as "good" and virtuous women, and as competent mothers. Of course, the meanings attached to definitions of *mujer* (woman) and motherhood were contested, but Latinas' positionings in relation to these various meanings were strategic depending on the storytelling event and the different "we" or "them" created and positioned with or against. These strategic positionings were part of the process of negotiating the ambiguities, uncertainties, and challenges of raising bicultural children in the midst of conflictive voices across cultural milieus and in the context of race relations in Hope City. Wortham (2001) thus provides effective analytic tools for highlighting the borderlands spaces of meaning-making between the telling and the told. As we shall see, these are the spaces where Latinas expressed and managed multiple and contradictory experiences in forging identities as competent mothers and dignified human beings.

The Story: A Conversation One Sunday Afternoon

A small group of *mujeres* (women)—Alba, Lydia, Marisela, Rocio, and I—gathered at the Hope City Memorial Library in North Carolina to discuss the transcripts of their life history interviews. As part of a project for the Southern Oral History program at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, we were charged with producing a booklet based on the oral life histories about education from the Hope City Latino community. The following conversation took place that day:

Kindly
check the
character

- Sofia:** *¿Pues, hmm, que piensan que es importante de sus entrevistas para incluir en este librito?* (Well, hmm, what do you think is important from your interviews to include in this booklet?)
- Alba:** *Pues todo es importante.* (Well everything is important.)
- Rocio:** *Acerca de nuestros países . . .* (About our countries . . .)
- Alba:** *Hablar de lo que se vivió antes, la vida en México, una vida muy activa porque trabajábamos y aquí la vida es muy monótona. Podemos hablar de las diferencias.* (Talk about how we lived before, life in Mexico, a very active life because we worked and here life is too monotonous. We could talk about the differences.)
- Rocio:** *También deberíamos incluir como sufrimos en llegar acá.* (Also we should include how we suffered coming here.)
- Sofia:** *¿Y acerca de vivir en los Estados Unidos?* (How about living in the United States?)
- Rocio:** *La mujer americana no es hogareña.* (The American woman is not of the home space.)
- Lydia:** *En México, se pasa más tiempo con los niños. . . El cambio es más difícil cuando los niños crecen y se acostumbran a la vida de acá.* (In Mexico, you spent more time with the children. . . The change is more difficult when the children grow up and they get used to life here.)
- Alba:** *Quisiéramos que viviéran como uno se crió.* (We wish they could live the same way one grew up.)
- Marisela:** *Es difícil el cambio, el horario, la comida. El cambio más grande que van a sufrir es en la escuela, con el idioma. Aunque se crien en nuestro ambiente, van a absorbar las costumbre de aquí [de este país]. Van a sufrir, humillados.* (It's difficult the change, the schedule, the food. The biggest change they suffer through is at school, with the

language. Even though they grow up in this environment, they absorb the customs from here [this country]. They'll suffer, humiliated.)

Rocio: *Y el problema para nosotros es que no nos van a entender [riéndose].*
(And the problem for us is that they won't understand us [laughs].)

Alba: *Pero entonces los niños van a dominar el idioma porque son pequeños.*
(But then the children will master the language because they're little.)

Marisela: *Y otra diferencia es que aquí una trabaja y se descuidan las madres.*
(And another difference is that here one works and the mothers neglect their responsibilities.)

Rocio: *Por amor, no porque muchas madres se descuidan.* (It's for love, not because a lot of mothers just neglect their children.)

Alba: *No es para descuidar a los niños, es mas bien para darles todo.* (It's not to neglect the children but rather to give them everything.)

Lydia: *Pero el tiempo que se les da, se da bien [riéndose suavemente].* (But the time that you give them, you make it good [laughs softly].)

Marisela: *Allá [en nuestros países] se tiene a las tías y la familia. Los padres deben explicarles, inculcarles la razon osea la necesidad porque tienen que trabajar los padres.* (There [in our countries] you have the aunts and the family. The parents should tell them and explain to the children, inculcate the reason, the necessity of why the parents have to work.)

In our dialogue that Sunday afternoon, there was pride and self-assuredness, as well as ambivalence and insecurities about raising children and keeping their families "culturally" and emotionally intact while forging life in an unfamiliar context. The women, who were recent arrivals from Mexico and Central America, were gathered to talk about what to say publicly about their lives and how to portray themselves, their struggles, and their concerns to an English-speaking audience that had not the slightest knowledge of who they were. Certainly, on this occasion the women dialogued as competent and knowledgeable mothers with shared assumptions about their abilities to pass on values and a good family education to their children. At the same time, they also shared concerns about what it might mean to raise children in a town where they were economically, politically, and culturally marginalized (see Villenas, 2001). For example, Marisela's words, "*van a sufrir, humillados*" (they will suffer, humiliated), echoed some of these concerns about the effects of discrimination on children. And yet, there were other positionings that were

80 LATINA/LATINO COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN

taking place in this conversation related to “cultural” authority (the authority to speak on behalf of community) and to gender ideologies. For instance, Marisela’s performance stands out as the “teacher” or authority advising the other mothers, even naming “the problem” of working mothers who might neglect their child-rearing responsibilities. But Marisela, whose children were living in Guatemala, was here under political asylum. How might the other women have viewed her child-rearing responsibilities and how was she positioning herself in this context? Moreover, as an unattached mother in Hope City, she also had to negotiate the gender rules of *honor y vergüenza* (honor and virtue; Villenas & Moreno, 2001) vis-à-vis the other married women, who were often critical of unattached mothers. These diverse positionings were thus not only in relation to a remote audience of English-speaking Hope City residents (and myself as representative link to this community) but also in relation to each other as women, mothers, and community members. We can consider these positionings, on a Sunday afternoon in Hope City, as a multilayered performance in history—that is, performances taking place in the context of structures (i.e., the racialized and gendered dimensions of economic restructuring and simultaneous migration), in the social world of discourses about gender and race (i.e., Latino patriarchy, beliefs about the “third world” and “legitimate” family lives), and finally in the context of personal lives of past and present.

It is important to begin by considering whom we were speaking to and how we were performing in interaction with each other while imagining and evoking a social world of people, discourses, and ideologies. Recalling Wortham (2001), in order to understand the power of narrative in transforming the self, one needs to ask about the particular positions that a speaker takes up with respect to an audience and where the speaker places herself interactionally. In this case, it is important to consider how all of us women in the room were taking up certain positions as speakers with respect to different audiences—English-speaking Hope City residents, social service providers, academics, *los americanos* in general, other members of the Latino community, and a community of Latina mothers, including those in the room. While we all consistently positioned ourselves interactionally as “good mothers,” our diverse performances highlighted our “theories of the flesh” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983) carved from our complex, paradoxical, and ambiguous understandings of ourselves in relation to our social worlds.

What did our performances look like in relation to majority culture and to a situation of cultural and social marginalization in Hope City? The purpose of our meeting, to decide what to include in a public document about Latino education, and my own words that begin the discussion certainly signaled an outside audience of *los americanos*, as well as a context of “difference,” alienation, and belonging/not belonging. From my own self-positioning as a

hicana academic, daughter, and mother, I was responding to what literary scholar Leticia Garza-Falcón (1998) refers to as the “rhetoric of dominance”—that is, the invalidation and stereotyping of the people of Greater Mexico in the service of a dominative academic cannon. In other words, I was responding to the silencing of Latinos’ histories and bicultural lives in the public arena and school curriculum. Like Chicano historians and literary scholars, I too wanted to counter the rhetoric of dominance in Hope City, one that referred to Latinos and Latino family life as a “problem” by also “uncovering” voices unheard. Indeed, my own standpoint and actions as someone having experienced a rhetoric of dominance are powerfully evident in the artifacts I left behind in Hope City, including my talks at community gatherings, my voice in the town newspaper, and my addresses to town agency professionals. My own performance over the period of time I spent in Hope City is certainly not without its problems, to say the least, and illuminates missed encounters, understandings, and perspectives. Entrenched in Los Angeles identity politics, I am like Latino artists in the United States who, as Mexicano/Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1998) explains, work in the “flammable context of the multicultural wars and identity politics” (p. 135), defining ourselves as a culture of resistance. In defining ourselves as such, we sometimes miss differing perspectives about race, relationships, and alliance building. For example, as anthropologist Roger Rouse (1995) explains about the Latino migrant families he worked with, reciprocity and pragmatic affiliations, not identity politics, was primary in viewing the possibilities for building relationships across racial/ethnic groups. Nevertheless, my resistance to a rhetoric of dominance in terms of my personal history and my struggles as an educator and professional against deficit notions of Latino families continually framed my performances in Hope City, as I positioned myself in relation to *los americanos*, even when they were not present, as on this Sunday afternoon.

Yet, from different backgrounds, Alba, Lydia, Rocio, and Marisela were also responding to a rhetoric of dominance. They were positioning themselves in interaction with discourses that questioned their right to live, work, and raise children in the United States, as well as responding to their cultural subordination and relegation to an inferior social/cultural status as “illegal aliens.” In the conversation, the women stressed valuing the whole of their lives, emphasizing their cultural integrity and histories. In response to my question of what would be important to include in a booklet, Alba exclaimed, “*Pues, todo es importante*” (Well, *everything* is important), including as Rocio added, information about their countries of origin. As Alba elaborated, “*Hablar de lo que se vivió antes, la vida en México, una vida muy activa . . .*” (Talk about how we lived before, life in Mexico, a very active life . . .), I felt the women’s urgency in presenting themselves as people with full and rich lives, lives full of meaning, activity, and knowledge. This urgency and response to dominance was true

82 LATINA/LATINO COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN

in so many different contexts. For example, in an interview for a newspaper story about our upcoming community meeting on Latino family education, Marisela very powerfully explained in Spanish, “The purpose of our meeting is to let people know that we have a rich education. Language and regulations hold us back. In some ways, things are worse here than in Guatemala [her home country]. Language prevents us from being ourselves” (October 19, 1995). Marisela’s words for the newspaper story echoed similar positionings. With nods of agreement, the women were concerned with how the context of being undocumented in the United States changed how they were allowed to “be” in a new borderlands—or as Marisela suggested to the newspaper reporter, how language and cultural intolerance (not simply difference) rendered them different people. Rocio’s suggestion that they should also talk about how they suffered in coming to this country highlighted how experiences of suffering and triumph were critical to portraying their humanity and in reframing the border-crossing experience not as an illegal act but as an act of courage. Stories of suffering in border crossing, poverty, and civil war were certainly central in the life history narratives of most of the women, particularly as stories exemplifying the value and valor of their humanity in response to a rhetoric of dominance in the United States.

In similar ways, the “rhetoric of dominance” (Garza-Falcón, 1998) was also explicitly challenged in the performative life history narratives of many of the women I interviewed. These women constructed their identities as “educated,” intelligent, and resourceful mothers despite poverty and illiteracy in their home countries and racism in the United States. They performed their “special” and “better” education by actually teaching me through *consejos* (narrative advice) and stories. They positioned themselves interactionally in relation to me (an immediate audience) and to *los americanos* (a remote audience) as better educated—that is, highly educated in morals, values, respect, and the ethics of hard work. For example, Marisela continually emphasized learning the value of hard work from her mother. Lydia emphasized learning how to “*llevar el hogar*,” or how to keep house in terms of not only the physical work but also the emotional work, and to keep moral religiosity as good, kind, and noble family and community members. Lydia, Alba, and Rocio also emphasized the teachings of women’s morality, how to keep clean, and how to serve in one’s role as a single woman or as a married woman. Indeed, all the mothers (including me) at one point or another performed conversations and stories in relation to an audience of Hope City residents, social service professionals, or a generic group of *americanos*. Undoubtedly, these positionings in the *event* of storytelling (the telling) informed the narrated events in the stories (the told) concerning Latino working-class parenting and the embracing of dignity and a moral education.

Moreover, in positioning ourselves in relation to a “rhetoric of dominance” (Garza-Falcón, 1998), we also asserted difference. This strategic assertion of

difference on my part came from my own experiences of cultural silencing in schools and of Los Angeles multicultural politics. In addition, as an ethnographic researcher, I was also wrapped up with the exigencies of an anthropological tradition, which despite much deconstruction, still depends on cultural boundaries and cultural “others” for its survival.³ The women, too, strategically created boundaries at times to assert the value of their own education and child-rearing practices. Although Rocio’s earlier comment that “*la mujer americana no es hogareña*” (the American woman is not of the home space) is certainly a stereotype, it is important to note how this critique served to position Rocio and her family education as “superior” vis-à-vis a supposedly “superior” American way of life. In her own oral life history, Rocio juxtaposed her perception of a licentious and morally lax U.S. society with the teaching of women’s virtue and morality that are “*costumbres de nuestros países*” (traditions or customs from our home countries: “*Yo he visto que ya tienen novio se van se duermen con ellos y en México no es igual; es muy diferente la vida de allá. Alla es muy rara la mujer que fuma . . . como mexicanos tenemos que enseñarles las costumbres de nuestro país, pues aquí hay gente muy viciosa.*” (I’ve seen how when they [women in the United States] have a boyfriend they go and they sleep with them and in Mexico it’s not the same; life is very different over there. There a woman who smokes is very rare . . . as Mexicans we have to teach them the customs from our home country; well here there are people with too many vices.). Rocio articulated what I might believe to be double-standard ideals with regard to women’s sexuality, as cultural values of a better and superior Mexican family education. However, Rocio’s strategic assertion of difference certainly made sense in the context of Latina mothers’ deficit framing in Hope City—evident in automatic assumptions about their need for parenting classes—and in the context of them as vulnerable “noncitizens” in this country. Drawing from and privileging a particular cultural frame of reference in which virtue and honor for women resided in their role as homemaker, Rocio positioned herself in a superior way vis-à-vis *las mujeres americanas* (U.S. women) as representative of *americanos* who echo voices of domination and discrimination.

Other positionings of difference stressed positive family lives and childhoods in the context of healthy environments and lifestyles in the women’s home countries. Lydia’s comment, “*En México, se pasa más tiempo con los niños*” (In Mexico, you spend more time with the children), and Alba’s nostalgic remark, “*Quisiéramos que viviéran como uno se crió*” (We wish they could live the same way one grew up), pointed to a valuing of their “better” way of life and a real apprehension of the environment in which they found themselves in the United States. For example, in her life history narrative, Alba emphasized the monotony of life in Hope City, where she found herself and her children “*encerrados*” (locked up inside) all the time because of real and perceived dangers. In contrast, life in Mexico was about being outside

84 LATINA/LATINO COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN

surrounded by familiar people and feeling safe. Alba explained these sentiments in her life history interview:

Allá [en México] la vida es muy diferente. En el pueblo todo el día pues se está uno pues afuera y los quehaceres adentro son pocos . . . se van corriendo los niños bien contentos todos a la escuela y aquí también no les gusta porque se van en autobús . . . y ya que llegan también corriendo de la escuela y todos a jugar con los demás niños pues afuera también.

Over there [in Mexico] life is very different. In our town we spend all day well outside and our chores inside are few . . . the children go running, everyone happy to school and also here they don't like it because they have to take the school bus . . . and [in Mexico] when they get home also running all the way from school, everyone gets together to play with the rest of the children well also outside.

Alba's and Lydia's desires for a continuation of their own way of life—one that allowed for more time with the children and provided community and collective support for child rearing—contrasted sharply with assumptions in Hope City implying that Latinas did not have a good cultural basis for mothering. “*Cómo uno se crió*” (the way one grew up) was about safe and community-oriented environments and about a *buena educación* (good education) in terms of morals, respect, and dutiful behavior. These were performances of cultural continuity, of a taken-for-granted education, and of apprehension for change.

But on this Sunday afternoon, it was precisely at this nexus of apprehension and the desire for continuity of traditions and Mexican or Guatemalan ways of life that the women began to position themselves in relation to each other as parents dealing with assimilation, English language hegemony, and the conflicts of doubling as working mothers in Hope City factories. The audience was not *los americanos* anymore, but rather each other and other Latina mothers of the community. As parents, they worried about their children growing up in this country, about what “*el cambio*” (the change) represented for them when the children assimilated to this environment, as well as the effects of *el cambio* on the children themselves in struggling to fit in the U.S. mainstream. These changes also included language and the possible loss of communication in the family if English were to substitute Spanish. However, while Rocio emphasized with humor, “*Y el problema para nosotros es que no nos van a entender*” (And the problem for us is that they won't understand us), Alba highlighted the positive feelings that many of the mothers felt toward their children's language learning, including pride in learning English and in being bilingual. Although it was unclear to me which language Alba was referring to when she said, “*Pero entonces los niños van a dominar el idioma porque son pequeños*” (But then the children will master the language because they're little), her positioning was one of confidence and pride in her children's language learning abilities, including the acquisition of English. And yet, as noted earlier, these words came from

someone who was very apprehensive of the “dangerous” environment and lifestyle of isolation in Hope City (and the United States in general) as a place to raise her children. These ambivalent, often contradictory feelings were certainly the everyday negotiations of a newly forming Latino community who would face and were facing a situation of “subtractive schooling” (Valenzuela, 1999) for their children—an education that takes away rather than builds from the families’ linguistic and cultural resources.

Moreover, the women positioned themselves not only as parents or educators but also as women and mothers who were workers in the burgeoning restructured economy of Hope City, now dependent on cheap immigrant labor (Fink, 2003; Griffith, 1995; Murillo Jr., 2002). Marisela, who brought up the issue of working mothers neglecting their children, was herself mothering across borders (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997) and working to send money to support her children in Guatemala. As a political refugee, Marisela felt forced to leave her children behind in the care of her mother, grandmother, and sisters. As briefly mentioned earlier, Marisela had much to negotiate vis-à-vis her status as an unattached woman and one who was not directly caring for her children. In this light, Marisela’s harsh critiques about *el ambiente* (the environment) of the United States and about how much children would suffer here also might have been about trying to make sense of her own mothering across borders, even while performing with competence, self-assuredness, and authority as someone who was *bien educada* (well-educated in the holistic and schooling sense) and intelligent. Time and again, I witnessed Marisela position herself not only as different from *los americanos* but also as different from other Latinas in Hope City because she was a *political* refugee and not an economic refugee. Both of these critiques and assertions of difference, however, were embedded in response to U.S. cultural and economic dominance as well as to Latino patriarchy and gender ideologies. Marisela often explained that as a political refugee she *had* to leave her country, something she would otherwise not do for anything in the world because being in her country even while poor was better than mothering in what she believed to be a licentious and morally corrupt environment in the United States. At the same time, in the face of gendered ideologies about honor and virtue and women’s place alongside their children, these performances positioned Marisela as a “better” mother. In contrast to other Latina mothers who were “willingly” raising their children in the United States because they were here for economic reasons, Marisela’s children, as she often emphasized, were receiving a “superior” Guatemalan home education in the care of her mother and sisters. It seemed to me that, for Marisela, the spaces between the telling—how she positioned herself in this and other storytelling events as “different” from other Latina and U.S. mothers—and the told—the superior Guatemalan education versus inferior U.S. environment for child rearing—were the paradoxes and contradictions of maneuvering between

86 LATINA/LATINO COMMUNITIES, FAMILIES, AND CHILDREN

U.S. cultural hegemony, Latino patriarchy, and governmental abuse in her own country and now as an “invisible” transnational worker in the United States.

But Rocio, Alba, and Lydia would not let Marisela get away with her indirect criticism of their situation as working mothers in the United States. Rocio insisted that it was “*por amor, no porque muchas madres se descuidan*” (It’s for love, not because a lot of mothers just neglect their children), whereas Alba, who was not working outside the home at the time, added that to work is “*para darles todo*” (to give them everything). Marisela again pointed to the differing context of mothering in the United States, where extended family is absent. Marisela acquiesced that adjustment and change to these new circumstances required, however, that parents make explicit or *inculcar* (inculcate) the reasons necessitating mothers’ work outside the home. Thus, unlike Marisela, who faced the challenge of mothering across borders, these women were faced with the challenges of mothering in an unfamiliar environment and in the absence of kin and community support networks. For Rocio, Lydia, and even Alba, the spaces between the telling and the told—about negotiating the difficult tasks (and gendered ideologies) of mothering and working to cosupport households—were spaces of improvisation requiring resilience and the forging of new narratives about themselves as women, mothers, and educators of their children. For, indeed, the paradoxes of honoring and legitimizing their work *outside* the home ran alongside gender ideologies about women’s place *in* the home, particularly as claiming the space of *el hogar* (the home) and criticizing U.S. women for not being of the home, positioned Latinas as good, if not “better,” mothers. As I have written elsewhere (Villenas, 2001), the women’s resilience in Hope City in the face of their deficit framing required a discursive commitment to *el hogar*—a cultural difference between Latinas and “*la mujer americana*” vehemently emphasized, albeit stereotypically, by Rocio and other Latinas. In these ways, all the women positioned themselves in relation to each other as parents, working mothers, and women within patriarchy, with a mixture of confidence and vulnerability, humor and seriousness, all the while laying open the very paradoxes and contradictions of mothering from the margins and across borders.

Conclusion: Toward Borderlands Pedagogies

In this chapter, I have discussed how a group of women at a moment in time positioned themselves in relation to different audiences, particularly in referencing *los americanos* and each other as parents, mothers, and “women.” At this moment in time, the “rhetoric of dominance” (Garza-Falcón, 1998) was challenged as the women positioned themselves in interaction with racialized discourses that questioned the very legitimacy of their lives in the United States.

The event of storytelling—that is, the performances of dignity and the strategic assertions of difference—ran alongside the narrated events or descriptions of the challenges they faced in supporting a Latino family education of traditional morals, values, and customs. At the same time, in positioning themselves in relation to each other as parents, working mothers, and gendered beings, the spaces between the telling and the told began to unfold as ambiguous sites of contestation and negotiation. Women and mothers talking about their struggles with assimilation, English language hegemony, bilingualism and biculturalism, the perils and necessity of doubling as working mothers in an unsupportive environment, and gendered ideologies about women's place in *el hogar* (including their strategic claims to this space) was a process of teaching, learning, and negotiating life in new borderlands. And, certainly, my own positionings and performances as a Chicana coming from “a flammable context of multicultural wars and identity politics” (Gómez-Peña, 1998) and as a second-generation Diaspora Latina daughter and mother influenced and added to the context and content of these borderlands pedagogies. While being somewhat excluded from the conversation when the women addressed each other as their audience, I positioned myself and was positioned in that moment as the second-generation “daughter” who had much to learn from their experiences. This was often the way I performed and was positioned in the company of my mother and aunts even as a grown married woman with children. There were certainly uncrossable boundaries between myself, a U.S.-born, middle-class, English-speaking “professional,” and the group of Latina mothers in Hope City, as we became aware of our different class and social locations. But as a U.S.-born “daughter” who didn't quite get things right, including the Spanish language and culturally appropriate social etiquette, I still felt as though there was familiarity and hope in their advice-giving performances.⁴ For better or worse, I might have served as a reminder of what their own bicultural children might be like growing up in Hope City and the responses required on their part.

In short, our performances and positioning were but a glimpse of the “interstitial spaces” (Pérez, 1999), or gaps between the telling and the told, where the terms of a viable family education and identities of dignity were always in the process of being “worked out” in a borderlands context. Although these spaces were shaped by difficult political and economic circumstances like those of the border region between Mexico and the United States, it still remains that these were also borderlands spaces of improvisation and creative imaginings. For example, in terms of cross-cultural relationships, Latina mothers both retreated into strict categories of us/them as a mode of self-preservation, as in the conversation described in this chapter, and recast categories and refashioned identities as they accommodated and related with *mucho cariño* (much caring) to those *americanos* (both African American and White) who reciprocated genuine respect. As I've emphasized throughout, this

borderlands sensibility was also required in terms of continuing a process of teaching and learning between adults and between adults and children in order to refashion a viable family education in a new place (see also Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994). Following Elbaz-Luwisch's (this volume) vision of a space where learning might take place, I would argue that more educators in the schools of Hope City and in the social services need to recognize the borderlands spaces they embody and the dialogic relationships they already inhabit with respect to the "other." In Hope City, as in other borderlands around the world, the processes of negotiating dignified identities, family education, and public schooling are wrought with injustices and pain; but there are always possibilities, some which cannot wait any longer to be realized.

Recommended Reading

This chapter highlights and raises a number of issues with respect to Latino education, including the context of Latino migration, work, and education in places with little previous Latino presence; Latina mothers' cultural and linguistic experiences in negotiating continuity and change in the experience of raising their children; Latino children's and their parents' experiences in the schools; and finally the processes of Latino immigrant parents' empowerment and advocacy on behalf of their children's schooling. *Education in the New Latino Diaspora* (2002), edited by Stanton Wortham, Enrique Murillo Jr., & Edmund Hamann, is a collection of writings detailing issues and experiences of newly forming Latino communities in Maine, Georgia, Kansas, Colorado, and North Carolina. In general, these chapters compare and contrast the host community's (especially school's) responses to Latinos as well as the Latino communities' views. Norma Gonzalez's (2001) *I Am My Language: Discourses of Women and Children in the Borderlands*, on the other hand, focuses on the women of a long-established Mexican community in Tucson, Arizona, and details the intimate processes of language learning and teaching in families representing different generations (from first to third or fourth generation in Tucson). To get a sense of bilingual children's experiences in mainstream classrooms and schools, Guadalupe Valdés's (2001) *Learning and Not Learning English: Latino Students in American Schools* is an excellent study of how middle-school children actually fare in English-dominant classrooms. Although the instructional situation is bleak, Valdés gives recommendations for improving the educational opportunities for Latino English-language learners. So what roles do Latino parents play as advocates for their children's schooling, and how can they transform home-school relationships? Concha Delgado-Gaitan's *The Power of Community: Mobilizing for Family and Schooling* (2001) is an ethnographic study of a 15-year-old organization started by Latino parents

seeking to help each other understand, work with, and change schools to meet the needs of their children. Like the Latina mothers in Hope City, we hear the voices of these parents express their pride, hopes, fears, and frustrations in carving a future for their children. Finally, for an overview of Latino education in general with historical and contemporary accounts to issues of Latino parental involvement, testing, bilingual education, and policy, Richard Valencia's second edition of *Chicano School Failure and Success* (2002) is an excellent resource.

Reflective Questions

1. Tell about an experience you have had with a storytelling event in which, thinking back, you were really attuned to what was happening in both the telling and the told. What positionings were taking place, and what was being negotiated? Did these feel like borderlands spaces of some sort?
2. This chapter argues for a performance- and borderlands-sensitive analysis of narrative and discourse. Were some issues illuminated or highlighted that might not have been with a content analysis? What role does my (the researcher's) personal history and interpretation of personal experiences play in this analysis, and what are other possibilities for interpreting the conversation among this group of Latina mothers?
3. What are some of the issues and challenges facing Latina mothers with regard to education (family and schooling) and specifically in the context of building new Latino communities in places with no previous Latino immigration and settlement?

Notes

1. Hope City is a pseudonym for a small town-like city in central North Carolina. According to the 1990 census, the town's population was close to 5,000.

2. I use the term "Latina" to refer to women of Latin American heritage. In Hope City, I met Latinas from many different parts of Latin America, including urban and rural Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Colombia. I also use both Chicana and Latina to refer to myself, the first when indexing a political orientation—specifically to the identity politics born of *el movimiento*, the Mexican American Civil Rights movement—and the latter to identify a pan-ethnicity across generations and Latin American nationalities.

3. Cultural anthropologists are undoubtedly posing very serious questions about political engagement, continued colonialism, and issues around space, territory, and globalization.

4. I am inspired here by Edén Torres's (2003) conversation about the differences, tensions, and hope in the relationships between Chicanas and Mexican women nationals.

References

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/La frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Conquergood, D. (1991). Rethinking ethnography: Towards a critical cultural politics. *Communication Monographs*, 58, 179–194.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001). *The power of community: Mobilizing for family and schooling*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Fink, L. (2003). *The Maya of Morgantown: Work and community in the nuevo new South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Garza-Falcón, L. M. (1998). *Gente decente: A borderlands response to the rhetoric of dominance*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gómez-Peña, G. (1998). 1995–Terreno peligro/Danger Zone: Cultural relations between Chicanos and Mexicans at the end of the century (C. Ross, Trans.). In F. Bonilla, E. Meléndez, R. Morales, & M. A. Torres (Eds.), *Borderless borders: U.S. Latinos, Latin Americans, and the paradox of interdependence* (pp. 131–137). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- González, N. (2001). *I am my language: Discourses of women and children in the borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Griffith, D. (1995). *Hay trabajo: Poultry processing, rural industrialization and the Latinization of low-wage labor*. In D. D. Stull, M. J. Broadway, & D. Griffith (Eds.), *Any way you cut it: Meat-processing and small-town America* (pp. 129–151). Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, P., & Avila, E. (1997). “I’m here but I’m there”: The meaning of Latina transnational motherhood. *Gender & Society*, 11, 548–571.
- Jakobson, R. (1971). Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb. In R. Jakobson, *Selected Writings* (Vol. 2, pp. 130–147). The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton. (Original work published in 1957)
- Keating, A. (2000). *Gloria E. Anzaldúa: Interviews/Entrevistas*. New York: Routledge.
- Madison, S. D. (1998). That was my occupation: Oral narrative, performance, and Black feminist thought. In D. Pollack (Ed.), *Exceptional spaces: Essays in performance and history* (pp. 319–342). Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. (1983). *This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color*. New York: Kitchen Table–Women of Color Press.
- Murillo, E. G., Jr. (2002). How does it feel to be a problem? Disciplining the transnational subject in the American South. In S. Wortham, E. Murillo Jr., & E. Hamann (Eds.), *Education in the new Latino diaspora: Policy and the politics of identity* (pp. 215–240). Westport, CT: Ablex.
- Pérez, E. (1999). *The decolonial imaginary: Writing Chicanas into history*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Rouse, R. (1995). Questions of identity: Personhood and collectivity in transnational migration to the United States. *Critique of Anthropology*, 15(4), 351–380.
- San Miguel, G., Jr., & Valencia, R. R. (1998). From the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to *Hopwood*: The educational plight and struggle of Mexican Americans in the Southwest. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68, 353–412.
- Torres, E. (2003). *Chicana without apology: The new Chicana cultural studies*. New York: Routledge.

- Valdés, G. (2001). *Learning and not learning English: Latino students in American schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Valencia, R. (Ed.). (2002). *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present, and future*. New York: Routledge/Falmer.
- Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Vasquez, O., Pease-Alvarez, L., & Shannon, S. (1994). *Pushing boundaries: Language and culture in a Mexicano community*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Villenas, S. (2001). Latina mothers and small-town racism: Creating narratives of dignity and moral education in North Carolina. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 32(1), 3–28.
- Villenas, S. (2002). Reinventing educación in new Latino communities: Pedagogies of change and continuity in North Carolina. In S. Wortham, E. Murillo Jr., & E. Hamann (Eds.), *Education in the new Latino diaspora: Policy and the politics of identity* (pp. 17–35). Westport, CT: Ablex.
- Villenas, S., & Moreno, M. (2001). To *valerse por si misma* between race, capitalism, and patriarchy: Latina mother-daughter pedagogies in North Carolina. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(5), 671–687.
- Wortham, S. (2001). *Narratives in action: A strategy for research and analysis*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wortham, S., Murillo, E., Jr., & Hamann, E. (Eds.). (2002). *Education in the new Latino diaspora: Policy and the politics of identity*. Westport, CT: Ablex.

