

Un Cuento del Camino: A Literacy Journey

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This critical autoethnography uses driving plática and community mapping methodologies to examine my own lived experience, literacy learning, and the ancestral knowledge of the community of women who raised me. Following Carmen Guzman-Martinez, I use a framework of home pedagogies, specifically, cuentos, consejos, y educación to contextualize my upbringing juxtaposed against the colonial constructs of schooling. Research has documented the strong tensions between the individual achievement imposed by schooling and the more collective, communal nature of ancestral knowledge. This caused a perpetual state of nepantla (or in-betweenness) in my journey toward the academy. I highlight the physical journey my mother, aunt, and I took in search of my grandmother's one room schoolhouse and my own memory and photo journey through my school years in rural Northern and Central New Mexico. One finding illustrates how literacy learning that is insular and structured in Westernized ways of knowing sought to erase and silence the knowledge of my home and how this journey back in time and memory has strengthened my dedication to create change and disrupt these colonial narratives. An additional finding in this critical autoethnography sheds light on how a loss and subsequent reclaiming of ancestral knowledge has contributed to a research praxis steeped in community and grounded in a counternarrative about the Chicanas of New Mexico.

*The sacred scents of Palo Santo, Sage, Copal, and Lavender linger
Meditation, connecting with myself... owning my story.*

Driving in a rented SUV through the winding mountain roads of rural Northern New Mexico, my mamá, tía, and I laugh and scold, discuss our fears, our spouses, missing my dad, and Gramm. Pat Mora's poem, "Sonrisas," echoes through my mind every time I am with the women in my family. "I live in a doorway between two rooms" (1). She writes about looking through a doorway between sterile talk of tenure and budgets to a second room where "laughter whirls/ with steam from fresh tamales/ sh, sh, mucho ruido" (12-14). The conversations around the table and the lessons I've learned from the women in my family contrast deeply with the "quick beige smiles" (Mora 7) of academic spaces. The openness with which they tell stories of their past, admit to their failings, and share their lives contrasts starkly with the reserved nature and careful conversations I have with the women in the academy. None of the women in my family have a neutral face or neutral voice. There is nothing crisp about any of these women—their softness belies lives filled with trial and triumph, with heartbreak, and deep love for one another. This journey back in time and memory has strengthened my dedication to create change and disrupt the colonial narratives of schooling and learning to read and write (i.e. literacy learning) that was insular and structured in Westernized ways of knowing that sought to erase and silence the knowledge of my home.

The story that follows seeks to reclaim that ancestral knowledge. The stories told in my early education, through books and teachers, spoke of worlds far away from the tiny *pueblito* (little town) of Algodones, New Mexico (see Image 1) with her large *ranchos* (ranches) and tiny schoolhouse, her vast open space, and narrow education. I feared that my existence would be lived out in this small world, and that that was not enough. Now, returning to my hometown, and searching for the hometown of my grandmother, I think back to that little girl and her desire to live

a huge life and to escape. The trope of education is that it is a way out: out of the hood, out of poverty, out of the families to which you are born, out of a marginalized existence. What if, for more people of color, it became a way *in* instead? This is the question I now have about the impact I want my research to have. In my academic journey, from preschool through-working in higher education, I've been met with roadblocks and obstacles. I've also bought into some of the tropes that I too must be a gatekeeper who holds—my ancestral ways of knowing separate from my academic life. Unraveling and breaking down the barriers, both those set by others and those I set in my own mind, is at the heart of this story. The discussion that follows shows how I found a way into the academy and how the pedagogies of my home—as defined by Dolores Delgado-Bernal as the way that Latinas take the knowledges of our home to navigate the often hostile, racist, and classist spaces of the academy—pulled me back to the rural New Mexico roads.



Image 1. This sign marks the entrance to the town in which I was born and raised until the age of 10. Coming home feels like crossing a threshold into an in-between space. *Image courtesy of the author.*

Nepantla and the Temporality of Place

*I am on this journey to find the little girl whose wild tongue wished for so much
Who read about worlds beyond her colonia
Who dreamed of adventure, fantasy, a glamorous existence*

*Words have always been my refuge, my escape
Written words on the page my voice
I need to write about this
I need for this story to be told*

This driving plática—the most basic translation means driving and talking—is also a way to frame research. It gathers information conceptualized by Latina feminist ways of knowing (Delgado-Bernal; Gaxiola-Serrano). For me it was a way to have conversations that helped me map my memories. Having a plática with my mamá and tía created a space in which to begin to analyze my memory of a physical space and my experiences in that space. In her work, Gaxiola-Serrano, takes the concept of plática and adds to it the idea of movement as well as place and time. Her “*walking plática*” methodology informs the ways I think about how my journey with my elders “exposes the brown body’s facultad by privileging the brown body as a site of memory that is central to understanding the spatial experiences of Communities of Color” (1647). I use a driving plática methodology to situate a physical journey as viewed through the temporality of memory and how memory can shift the perception of physical space (Del Mar del Pozo Andrés).

I keep thinking about how this physical journey—back to my childhood home and in search of the childhood home of my grandmother—is like my own academic journey. I think about how these back mountain roads, like academia, are bumpy, and windy, full of potholes and steep cliffs that threaten to pull me over the edge. My tía has snacks, my mom has her ever ready soda at hand. Each of them grips the door handles as if their hands can keep us from sliding into the canyons. As I navigate this journey, I begin to form an understanding of how my identity is tied to the temporality of place. I contemplate the ways that time changes the physical perception of places that shape and define who we see ourselves to be. As a child, I viewed my existence juxtaposed against a seemingly vast world that I could only view through books that did not reflect my own experience. While time proceeds in a linear fashion, the same is not true for memory. Memory is much more circular and sensory; it can be marked by a song or a scent. In acknowledging this fact and viewing the knowledge of my ancestors through the prism of time and memory, I have the opportunity to disrupt this notion of “less than” within my critical autoethnographic account of my driving plática. How it is that the ways I learned to be a literate person—as defined by colonial constructs—contrasts with the pedagogies and funds of knowledge (Moll) of my home.

Halfway through a particularly difficult and steep pass of dirt road alongside a cliff with no guardrails, my mother and aunts’ fears become palpable.

My tía remarks, “I am scared, I am becoming mom.”

My mamá answers, “I fight not to be afraid. I don’t want to be like mom.”

In the colonial constructs of academia, the knowledges of our ancestors and homes are not valued. So then we, as women of color, are taught to look at our mothers and grandmothers as being less than or people we need to liberate. I am challenging that notion with this work. I sit with the phrase, “I don’t want to be like mom,” because I have also felt that way in so many instances. While the women here are talking about the debilitating fear of leaving the house that my grandmother struggled with toward the end of her life, for me, it is a deeper fear that has been instilled in me by a narrow, Westernized education that ignored the pedagogies of my home.

Tanya Gaxiola Serrano reminds us about the ways the “brown body incites memory and language” that helps us to construct knowledge. Within our brown bodies, these knowledges find a home for the stories of our ancestors. They teach how to navigate the world (1646). For the women in my family the tangible fear of taking up too much space permeates my own memories.

Fighting fear has become a theme in my existence as an academic. Really it defines my entire peregrination through school. The fear that I am not good enough. Even though I entered kindergarten knowing how to read, with stories already in my curious mind ready to write, I was not allowed to dive deep into reading, or write what I wanted and how I wanted. Instead, teachers hated my lefthanded scrawl and forced my wild imagination into a formalized box. This fear speaks so clearly to me as I delve into the memories of my childhood where my very existence in the classroom was shut down based upon my unruly body, hands, and restless mind. I was what my mom often described as *traviesa* (or one that is disobedient). Teachers described me as unwilling to sit still or sit quietly. My body holds this memory even as my mother's body holds the fear of fear. Now, sitting in my academic office or teaching a classroom full of future teachers, this memory of being the unruly niña sits in the back of my mind. While it sometimes makes me feel like I am trespassing on some level, more often than not, it propels me to ask these future teachers to look more closely at those unruly students in their classes and to find ways to help the traviesas feel seen rather than silenced.

Literacy Learning Reclaimed

There is a theory in literacy research developed by Deborah Brandt called literacy sponsorship. This theory posits that those who teach or give the keys to literacy to students, like teachers, do so with a specific agenda that benefits the sponsor. Examining this colonial and Westernized theory of literacy learning through the lens of temporality, I can clearly see the agenda of school. Literacy sponsorship is a very Westernized and colonial look at literacy and also furthers this idea that learning to read is a transaction. Louise Rosenblatt, an educational literacy researcher who describes reading as a transaction between reader and writer, would agree with this assessment that reading and learning to read is a two-way interaction. In my view and in the ways in which I am examining my own literacy learning, reading is more reciprocal than transactional. Transactional reading can be thought of as a single interaction between readers and writers and implies one correct way to read and interpret something. Reciprocal reading is more complex. It invites the idea that a reader brings all their understandings about the world to a text where the writer has also brought all their understandings about the world. Interpretations then become multifaceted and bring multiple possibilities. I can't help but think about the definition of literacy and the assertion of Brazilian educational theorist, Paulo Freire, that before we learn to read the word we learn to read the world. That is to say that reading, and learning to read, in my view has multiple prismatic facets. The multiplicities of lived experiences that have shaped my identity are part of the reading process, as are the writers'; however, there are also the experiences of my community, the outside factors and ideas from teachers, and the teachings of my family. In spending time mapping my communities and the educational experiences within those communities, I had the opportunity to gauge what reading my world and community really means.

En boca cerrada no entran moscas (flies do not enter closed mouths). Part of my literacy story is one that is rooted in the patriarchal idea that women and children should be seen and not heard. While I did hear encouraging words and there was always this expectation that I would do well in school, it was often the case that my wild tongue (Anzaldúa 75) and my unruly mind was silenced. One of my earliest school memories involves my teacher asking me to stop raising my hand when it was time to answer questions during "carpet time" in kindergarten. "Mónica, I know you know the answer," she said, "but you have to learn to let others speak more". In another instance, the same teacher, at teacher conferences, told my parents that once I learned to keep my

mouth shut, I would get better report cards. I just talked too much and asked too many questions. Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodriguez writes about the ways in which advice or dichos in the Latinx community can often be a tool for the colonial patriarchy to control and silence women (132). Many of the stories I am bringing forward are filtered through the idea of temporality and cyclical nature of memory; they are as accurate as I remember, and they are interpreted through my present-day knowledge and all that I have experienced up until now.

I discuss these dichos to help myself situate the knowledges I gained through the teachings of my grandmother, which happened simultaneously, but which I ignored. In deep contrast to these traditional “consejos” meant to silence was the rich world of words in which my Grandmother immersed me. While her books of choice were often biblically based, she did encourage me to study and learn about the world through words. She encouraged me to disagree when my own study of concepts or ideas differed with the authority of the time. Once, during an evangelical retreat for young women at our church, a preacher was discussing a particular passage in the Bible regarding virtuous women and their worth. Gramm had her marked Bible on her lap, along with her ever-present notebook and multi-colored pens. She kept writing notes and muttering, “He’s wrong.” When we got home, she sat us all down and said, “ok, we are going to study and figure out what a virtuous woman actually is. So, me and three of my female cousins and Gramm sat at her kitchen table and studied text after text all afternoon. I can remember that the preacher’s definition of a virtuous woman was one who obeyed her father first and stayed a virgin so that she could then be valuable to a husband who she would then obey as well. We collectively decided that obedience to men didn’t mean virtue, but it would keep us safe in this world, and we decided that our value wasn’t our virginity, it was our intelligence and ability to adapt to all situations. I was fourteen.

Now, as I listen to my mother talk about who she wanted to be in life, I wonder about the young woman she was. During our plática my mother said to me, “I always wanted to be a teacher, but no one spoke of college in my high school years.” My aunt was surprised by this as was I. My mother had never spoken of this, neither as a young woman to her siblings nor to me. So I wonder about the young woman who became a wife at 18, a mother at 19, whose educational dreams were put on hold, whose voice was silenced, but who nurtured and guided my own dreams and encouraged me to reach for everything I wanted. She did find ways to curb my constant chatter, but those ways opened windows to possibilities through books for me. Growing up, and even in my early years of college, I would not have admitted that my mother and my grandmother were my first literacy sponsors. It is through this driving plática that I find am grateful for their way of supporting and guiding my literacy development.

Cuentos de Familia: Told through the Prism of Time

I am from piñon and creosote

From Lavender and vaparoo

I am from “que chingon” y “no sabo”

I am from roasting green chilies and fresh tortillas with butter from potted meat and sardines with saltines

Every November the women in my family gather to make tamales for Christmas, this communal tamalada (tamale party) is a fiesta of stories. Multiple generations of women sit around the table, the makings of tamales in bowls, preferred tools in hand, and either cafecito (sweet milk coffee) or mimosas nearby, while we laugh, scold, and talk over one another. It is at this table

where I learned about love, and family, and the lessons from the ever-present Bible according to Lissie (my grandmother and the matriarch of the family). The literacies learned at this table were not the literacies of the academy, and I often did not even view them as valuable to my education. But now, reflecting on photos I took, and the family stories that were shared at this table, I am grateful for the time and regret my inattention. I wish I could go back to that table and listen again to those family stories—the silly stories, the sage advice, and painful truths all shaped my worldview. Image 2 showcases a tamalada from 2015 side by side with some of my early graduate work.

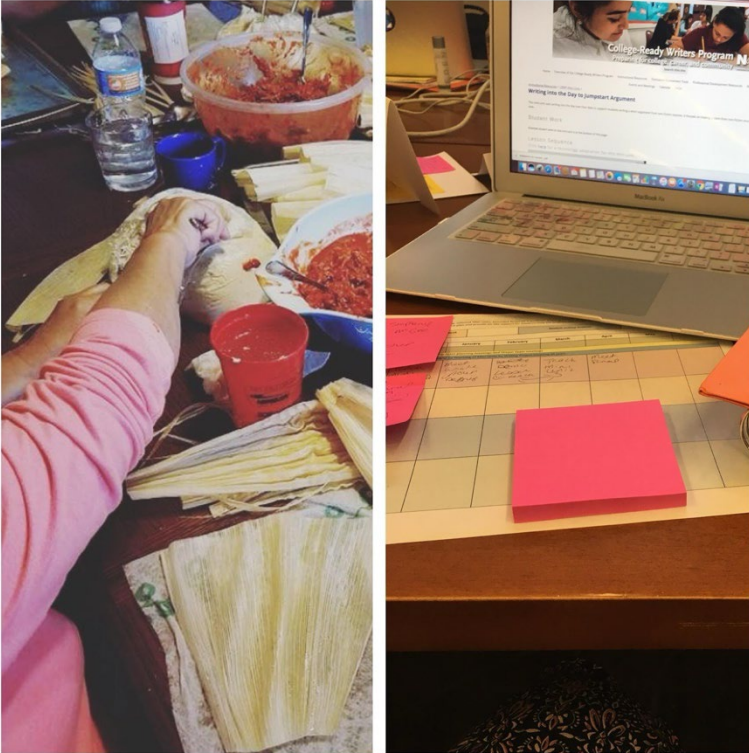


Image 2: Juxtaposition of early graduate work with a family tamalada. For me it symbolizes the contrast of the ways I have learned, the ordered thinking of academia, versus the barely controlled chaos of a group of women in my family. *Image courtesy of the author.*

Physical and Temporal Gates

The familiar bandera Amarillo y Red Zia

Pueblo adobe and colonial structures

The colonizer's language

The colonizer's knowledge

I am Spanish I was taught

Pero Mexicano en Español

English, Spanglish

But what about Tewa

What happened to my Indigeneity?

Lost to a Military Draft Card

Lost in all languages

Caught in the in-between

Robbed of heritage, ancestors' knowledge

A re-written history

I am from Nuevo Mexico

Yes it's State

Once a territory

The Unceded Land of the Tewa, Tiwa, Keres, Diné and Southern Athabaskan peoples

Yes, I belong here

Though Gates now block my way

Gates, like broken treaties, seek to erase.

Yet we are still here

When I asked my mother and aunt about the reading they did in their own literacy learning experiences, there was a long pause of silence, they had both just described, at length and in great detail, their favorite part of school—dances. But when I asked them about reading or writing, both were silent for a moment.

My mom finally said: “Well I remember one teacher in high school, Mr. Rinaldi, used to give us a book at the beginning of the week, I don’t know where he got them, but then we would do an oral book report on Friday. Then the next week a new book and an oral book report. My aunt said: “No, I only remember learning to read but not really how. The nuns used to read the catechism to us, but we didn’t read it ourselves. The reading I remember most was when Gramm was born again then we read the Bible more, but I was already an adult.”

By the time we had this conversation we had reached my grandmother’s hometown and found it behind a chained fence with the warning, “Private Property, no trespassing” (Image 3).



Image 3: No Trespassing sign at what used to be my grandmothers' hometown ranch. This physical barrier to my mother, aunt and I almost derailed our search for Gramm's schoolhouse. *Image courtesy of the author.*

The feelings I experienced upon reaching this “gate” shot me quickly back into my early experiences as a high school English teacher. I had my first teaching job in my hometown of Bernalillo, New Mexico. My classroom demographics reflected my own early educational experiences; I taught Indigenous students from the pueblo communities that surrounded the “town” and students who, in New Mexico, would have identified as primarily Hispanic. I had been trained in the traditions of Nancy Attwell and Donald Graves and a workshop approach to teaching both reading and writing. As an English major, I privileged canonical literature and ignored the works that better reflected my students. In essence, I put up gates and barriers for my students and wondered why they struggled. My early experiences with reading and writing had shaped what I believed to be the “right way” to teach high school English. Now in teaching aspiring teachers, and through this driving *plática* I have found that what is important in teaching adolescents, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, lies in how we cultivate the learning they do before they come to the classroom, and the ancestral knowledge they gain from their communities. The no trespassing signs we put up as barriers that force students to be receivers rather than creators of knowledge have been arbitrarily designed by the erasure that comes with colonialism and a capitalist industrial education model. Something someone told me while I was

interviewing for my current academic appointment sticks with me and I think solidifies this erasure and the no trespassing metaphor for me. His message was essentially, there was a lot of good or at least better work that happened at that institution, but at the end of the day none of these institutions are built for us or by us (meaning minoritized people). I think about this idea and realize that the educational system will put up barriers, but I can still work toward pulling them down and move my students beyond them. Just as I did not let the barrier of the physical gate deter me from my goal of finding my grandmother's childhood home, I won't let the gates of academia keep me from my goal of finding ways to make literacy education work better for minoritized folks of all ages.

We sat in front of this sign for a moment and then I asked my aunt and my mom about my grandmother and her educational dreams. When I was a first-year teacher, I conducted an oral history project with my grandmother. At the time she told me that after 8th grade, her father forbade her to continue to high school because it meant taking a school bus to another town at least three hours away and he was worried for her to go, even though her older brothers attended. She was the top of her class and really wanted to continue her education. However, the metaphorical gate of the patriarchy decided that continuing her education would threaten her very existence. My mother and aunt had a different story. They claimed that Gramma was allowed to go to high school but only for half the day because her mother needed her to help in the fields. Whichever story is ultimately the truth, the fact remains, furthering her education after 8th grade was not possible for my grandmother. Sitting in front of this gate while discussing the metaphorical gates we all had in our educational lives gives me the sense of intense loss and an even more intense desire to reclaim the language, knowledge and value that was taken from me and my family and so many countless other women of New Mexico.

While we ultimately breached the gate (we met up with an elderly caretaker who allowed us entry) and found my grandmother's schoolhouse (see image 4), I had been confronted with a physical gate that, like all barriers to a literacy education that reflected my lived experience, sought to keep me out. I come back to Mora's poem and think about those doorways that I needed to move through and how, instead of conforming to the "beige smiles", I have decided to, in my research, embrace the warm smiles, trapped in "dark Mexican eyes."

*I am from the legacy of the women who came before me
Remedios, Margarita, Elisaria, Maryann
and from them I unlearn to learn and begin
A New Sacred journey
Memories unearthed in a desire to find
My home.*



Image 4: My mother, MaryAnn and Aunt Tomasita in front of my grandmother’s schoolhouse we came to this place at the end of the day during our driving pláticas. *Image courtesy of the author.*

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