

# Disrupting Epistemological Boundaries

## Reflections on Feminista Methodological and Pedagogical Interventions

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I was a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in the early to mid-1990s, and my dissertation research focused on Chicanas' participation and leadership in the 1968 East Los Angeles blowouts. The oral histories I conducted were influenced by early Chicana feminist thought, as well as by the family storytelling I grew up with. However, I didn't have a plethora of Chicana feminist methodologies to guide me in my empirical research. Though I used my experiential knowledge as a first-generation college student, my work experience as an elementary school teacher and community organizer, my cultural history and memory, and Chicana feminist writings to guide my methodology, I could not yet name all this as part of my epistemological perspective or what I later called cultural intuition. In 1998, after completing my dissertation, I published an article, "Using a Chicana Feminist Epistemology in Educational Research," in the *Harvard Educational Review*. In it, I outlined a conceptualization of cultural intuition and a Chicana feminist system of knowing that questioned whose knowledge and realities are accepted as the foundation of knowledge, especially in the research process. I drew upon scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Norma Alarcón (1990), Ana Castillo (1995), Mary Pardo (1990), Emma Pérez (1993), Carla Trujillo (1993, 1998), and others to privilege the ways of knowing and life experiences of Chicanas. I argued that a Chicana feminist standpoint disrupts traditional epistemological boundaries and informs how we develop and enact the research process—from the questions we ask and the analysis of our findings to the political and ethical issues we consider.

In this essay, I point to the power of disrupting epistemological boundaries and show how doing so opens up possibilities for how we conduct research and how we reconceptualize what it means to teach and learn. I reflect on my own scholarly journey, as well as on the feminista methodological and pedagogical interventions of other scholars.<sup>1</sup> I argue that these interventions enact ruptures in normative ways of conducting research and teaching, ruptures that allow us to envision a decolonial futurity or “a world beyond the limits of the present” (Marez 2016, 9). More specifically, my reflections are guided by two questions: what does it mean to utilize a Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology in research, and what are some of the methodological and pedagogical interventions that have emerged from feminista perspectives? To answer these questions, I first share how I came to employ a Chicana feminist perspective in my scholarship. I follow with a look at methodological innovations, highlighting *pláticas*, *convivencia*, and *Chicana movidas*. I then turn to the pedagogical, including *jotería* pedagogy (Alvarez 2014) and border transformative pedagogy (Elenes 2011). I end with hope and confidence in the current and next generation of feminista scholars, who are moving us forward in a project of liberation and toward a decolonial futurity.

## Permission to Disrupt Boundaries

For so many of us, La Gloria’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa 1987) and her subsequent writings gave us not only the permission to interrupt epistemological borders but also the framework and analytical tools (e.g., *conocimiento*, *nos/otras*, *nepantla*, *spiritual activism*) to claim a feminista perspective. My early, and somewhat limited, articulation of a Chicana feminist epistemology gave me a way to name ways of knowing grounded in knowledge that arises from specific sociopolitical and cultural histories linked to a borderland sensibility (Delgado Bernal 1998). It is a system of knowing that acknowledges liminal spaces and embraces tensions, contradictions, and the messiness within our lives and our research. It is informed by a legacy of resistance to cultural domination, class exploitation,

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heteropatriarchy, racism, sexism, and scapegoating of immigrants, and it translates to a pursuit of justice. That is, using Chicana feminist ways of knowing in research challenges the Western notions of objectivity, neutrality, and the mind/body split, and it embodies the goals of advocacy scholarship, linking research to community concerns. It is a step toward decolonizing the research process.

All this is significant because the claim to an epistemological grounding is a crucial legitimizing force within and outside of academia. I more fully realized the importance of this legitimizing force when I was at the Critical Race Studies in Education conference in Tucson, Arizona, in 2009, and three brilliant graduate students, Lindsay Pérez Huber, María Malagón, and Veronica Vélez, approached me to talk about their research methodology. They, and later Dolores Calderón, who was a new assistant professor at the time, pointed out to me how a whole generation of education scholars were using and extending the idea of cultural intuition and rearticulating a Chicana feminist epistemology. Three years later, the five of us published an article titled “A Chicana Feminist Epistemology Revisited: Cultivating Ideas a Generation Later” (Calderón et al. 2012). We pointed to how a Chicana feminist epistemology is a deliberate search for mending a colonized body (Cruz 2001) and how scholars had taken up the significance of place, land, and spirituality in shaping the ways in which one knows and understands. Perhaps most notably, we looked at the queering of a Chicana/Latina feminist epistemology and explored how scholars such as Anita Tijerina Revilla (2004) were redefining it by

also centering a queer episteme that disrupts the confines of heteronormativity. Revilla reminds us that while claiming a CFE [Chicana Feminist Epistemology], we may still bring colonizing mechanisms, such as heterosexism, with us into the research process. Thus, part of working toward a CFE requires us to consider what those mechanisms are in an effort to disrupt them. (Calderón et al. 2012, 522)

Revilla and other scholars emphasize that adopting a Chicana/Latina feminist perspective in research means more than just adopting a theoretical lens, becoming familiar with a literature, learning corresponding methods, and analyzing data. It embodies who one is and requires us to grapple with our activist-scholar role, embrace alternative ways of knowing, and confront those aspects of ourselves that render us the colonized and the colonizer (Villenas 1996). A Chicana/Latina feminist perspective allows us to uncover marginalized voices and see with a decolonial queer gaze (Pérez

2003). It also allows us to change the methodological tools so they align with our world views—world views that are shaped by place, relationships, brown bodies, sexuality, and spirituality. Today, Chicana/Latina feminists continue to unsettle Western heteropatriarchal perspectives, claim a Chicana/Latina grounding, and engage in methodological interventions that align with our ways of knowing.

## Methodological Interventions

Chicana education scholars, in particular, have taken up the call to articulate Chicana feminist perspectives that contribute to a decolonization of the research process and inform our practice as educators and activist scholars. C. Alejandra Elenes (2011, 60) reminds us that the process of decolonization “is not to recover the silenced voices by using hegemonic categories of analysis, but to change the methodological tools and categories to reclaim those neglected voices” (see also Calderón et al. 2012, 514).

Working from a feminista perspective, Chicana/Latina scholars have indeed provided us with new methodological tools and categories to guide our empirical research. Despite this, I regularly receive emails from graduate students who state that their dissertation or thesis committee will not allow them to ground their dissertation methodology in a Chicana/Latina epistemology; or they have been told they need to discard *plática* or *testimonio* methodologies and replace them with more “acceptable” methods such as semi-structured interviews or personal narratives and then cite the corresponding literature. Indeed, the politics of citation is one means by which the apartheid of knowledge is maintained and the scholarship/methodologies of Chicana/Latina scholars in particular remain undervalued (Delgado 1984; Delgado Bernal and Villalpando 2002; Matsuda 1988). This means we must be even more diligent and rigorous in how we employ and cite an array of feminista methodologies such as Chela Sandoval’s (2000) oppositional consciousness, Francisca Gonzalez’s (1998) *trenzas y mestizaje*, Michelle Téllez’s (2005) Chicana feminist ethnography, Lourdes Diaz Soto’s (2009) Xicana participatory action research, Alma Itzé Flores’s (2017) muxerista portraiture, and *testimonio* methodologies of various scholars (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona 2012; Latina Feminist Group 2001; Pérez Huber 2009). In what follows, I briefly highlight *pláticas* (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016), *convivencia* (Trinidad Galván 2015), and *movidas* (Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell 2018) as examples of methodological interventions

that can provide a framework for empirical research that allows for what Emma Pérez (1999) calls the decolonial imaginary.

Pláticas are informal conversations that allow people to share ideas, knowledge, memories, or consejos, and they are also a methodological intervention that a growing number of Chicana/Latina scholars have employed in their research. Yet missing for many years from the research literature was an explicit conceptualization of pláticas as a Chicana/Latina feminist methodology. In 2016 Cindy Fierros and I published an article in *Chicana/Latina Studies* that tracks a genealogy of the use of pláticas from the late 1970s through the time of publication and identifies the ways in which Chicana/Latina feminists have engaged pláticas from within a particular epistemological location.<sup>2</sup> What we found was that in the early “Hispanic” research, mostly in the fields of psychology, mental health, and social work, researchers sometimes turned to pláticas in the belief that traditional research methods like surveys and interviews would not work well with “Hispanic” participants if a researcher did not first get to know the interviewee. Ramón Valle and Lydia Mendoza (1978) identified pláticas as a culturally appropriate way to engage Latina participants and build rapport. But what they proposed was not really a methodology or even a method. It was small talk before or after the interview, and it was during the interview that the “real” data were collected. Within these more positivist research perspectives, pláticas were not viewed as a valid data collection strategy, much less as a methodology.

However, from a Chicana/Latina feminist perspective, pláticas are theoretically and epistemologically congruent with how one sees the world and how one comes to know and understand it. Chicana/Latina scholars see pláticas in their lives and incorporate them in their research. Francisca Gonzalez (1998) is often cited as one of the first scholars whose research on high school Mexicanas employed pláticas from a Chicana feminist standpoint. She did not merely use pláticas as a way into the lives of youth in order to then collect research data. Instead, the experiences and stories that the students shared during the pláticas were viewed as the actual data, and pláticas became a space of theorization where knowledge was shared and constructed by the young Mexicanas.

Based on the Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship we reviewed, Cindy and I proposed the following five principles that provide the contours of a plática methodology: (a) the research is grounded in decolonial feminist thought; (b) there is a relational principle that honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge; (c) everyday lived experiences are connected

to the research process; (d) the plática is a potential space of healing; and (e) the research process relies on reciprocity and vulnerability (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016). These are not rules or a checklist, but are discussed as principles that might offer some guidance to scholars who want to articulate a plática methodology grounded in a Chicana/Latina perspective.

What is crucial to a plática methodology is the relational component: the researcher interacts con respeto, reciprocity, and vulnerability with research participants. This is closely aligned to what Ruth Trinidad Galván (2015) described as a *convivencia* methodology. She understood *convivencia* as a set of social relationships and practices that shed light on the ways Chicanas/Latinas draw from their cultural knowledge and experiences to live, learn, and teach together. Engaging *convivencia* in research means deconstructing power dynamics embedded in the traditional researcher-subject dichotomy and acknowledging the “mutual humanity” of research participants (Trinidad Galván 2011, 555). Working within a space of *convivencia* means working together with communities in a collective struggle for liberation. Furthermore, the praxis of *convivencia* allows us to build bridges between different sociopolitical locations, creating the opportunity for alliances and collective liberation. *Convivencia* as methodology has to do with living together, forging relationships, creating union, and being aware of our mutual humanity (Trinidad Galván 2015). These priorities are too often ignored in methodological discussions or are devalued as too subjective for the research process. *Convivencia* also allows for various alternative forms of data collection such as individual and group pláticas, testimonios, digital projects, and participant observations. When grounded in *convivencia*, these methods have the potential to reveal the resiliency, insights, knowledge, leadership, triumphs, and immense pain that are present in Chicana/Latina communities (Delgado Bernal et al. 2019). Clearly, *convivencia* as a methodological tool is vital to research that is done with and on behalf of marginalized, oppressed, and/or silenced communities.

Dionne Espinoza, María Eugenia Cotera, and Maylei Blackwell (2018), in their book *Chicana Movidas*, propose *movidas* as another type of methodological tool that is vital to recuperating the marginalized and often silenced voices of Chicanas. *Movidas* are often understood as strategic, political, undercover, or covert moves that are not publicly approved. These scholars build on a culture- and gender-based understanding to conceptualize Chicana *movidas* as a “mode of historical analysis that allows us to chart the small scale, intimate political moves, gestures, and collaborations that reflect the tactics women used to negotiate the internalities of

power within broader social movements” (11). In a footnote, they state that mapping *movidas*—a way of reading against the grain of dominant historiography—is a pedagogical strategy developed by Blackwell to teach Chicana feminisms in the classroom. However, I assert that these scholars, in addition to outlining a pedagogical strategy, offer a methodological intervention that operationalizes Pérez’s (1999) decolonial imaginary and extends Sandoval’s (2000) identification of *movidas* as a collection of “revolutionary maneuvers” and “technologies” that provide “a political site for the third meaning” (182). In other words, they not only enable us to see how historians have participated in a politics of historical erasure but also provide a methodology to construct an archive of resistance. Their anthology includes writings that examine traditional sites of activism (e.g., marches, meetings) as well as alternative, often interstitial spaces where Chicanas have engaged in technologies of resistance. They map four interconnected sites of resistance (hallway *movidas*, home-making *movidas*, *movidas* of crossing, and memory *movidas*) that are meant to disorient and allow one to better see with a critical nonheteronormative, nonpatriarchal, anticolonial eye. Grounded in a feminista perspective, the act of mapping *movidas* informs how we develop and enact every aspect of the historical research process, from research questions to data analysis and the dissemination of our findings. Clearly, the methodological contributions of Espinoza, Cotera, Blackwell, Trinidad Galván, Fierros, and others mentioned previously interrupt borders and provide current and future generations of scholars with an array of methodological tools—tools I wish I had had access to as a graduate student.

## Pedagogical Interventions

Disrupting epistemological boundaries has also allowed for pedagogical interventions that rupture the traditional ways of conceptualizing teaching and learning. A traditional understanding of pedagogy refers to the art or science of teaching, including the strategies of imparting knowledge to learners and the evaluation and assessment of that knowledge (Luke 1996). This understanding disregards embodied ways of teaching and learning, political and ideological aspects of teaching and learning, and pedagogical practices that take place in intimate, multiple, and intersecting informal spaces. In 2006, I had the privilege of collaborating with C. Alejandra Elenes, Francisca Godinez, and Sofía Villenas to coedit *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology*.

The first anthology of its kind, it centered on Chicana/Latina feminist and mujer-embodied ways of teaching and learning that reconceptualized and rearticulated pedagogy and epistemology. It includes chapters that redefine women's and girls' everyday teaching and learning in homes, communities, and formal institutions as cultural knowledge, cultural politics, and practices of well-being.

Since that anthology, there has developed a robust body of scholarship that draws from the theoretical contributions of Anzaldúa and other US women of color to center coalitional relations and to think through the intersectional and multidimensional problems of teaching, learning, and schooling (Cruz 2019). Scholars have continued to conceptualize Chicana/Latina feminist pedagogies—pedagogies that emanate from brown bodies, from the insights of living in the borderlands, from queer identities, from the idea of *educación*, and from tensions produced by the intersection of multiple subjectivities. Some of these pedagogical interventions include *sentipensante pedagogy* (Rendón 2009), pedagogies of *nepantla* (Prieto and Villenas 2012), pedagogies of survival (Trinidad Galván 2015), a pedagogy of sisterhood (Burciaga and Tavares 2006), pedagogies of the home (Delgado Bernal 2001), *muxerista pedagogy* (Revilla 2004), spiritual pedagogy (Figuroa 2014), motherist pedagogies of cultural citizenship (Flores Carmona 2018), *rasquache pedagogy* (Morales, Mendoza, and Delgado Bernal 2016), border transformative pedagogy (Elenes 2011), and *jotería pedagogy* (Alvarez 2014). All these challenge a traditional notion of pedagogy and include embodied ways of teaching and learning.

For example, Eddy Alvarez (2014) proposes a *jotería pedagogy* that is influenced by Sandoval's (2000) methodology of the oppressed and a feminist approach that

is intentional, critical, and intersectional, and looks at the role of sexuality and desire . . . sexuality is central and not additive to the study of migration, immigration, and the borderlands. *Jotería pedagogy* focuses on the heterogeneous lives and lived experiences of *jotería* but also on the erasures and omissions of queer bodies of color . . . *jotería pedagogy* is theory and praxis that connects the global, the local, and the individual (217–18).

To enact this type of pedagogy, Alvarez says, educators must be willing to be vulnerable in order to share their life experiences. The educator must be a *nepantlerx*, a bridge builder between different worlds. This in turn requires courageous efforts to facilitate nonhierarchical and critical spaces of learning that allow both teacher and students to witness the text and each



other. This pedagogy calls for healing and a process of decolonization of the mind, body, and spirit within the classroom space. Alvarez also provides a clear example of what he envisions *jotería* pedagogy can look like based on Sandoval's SWAPA, or Spoken Wor(1)d Art Performance Activism, a method of understanding texts, ourselves, and the social world around us. He describes SWAPA in detail:

After reading the text, each student picks a quote that had an impact on her and writes a one- or two-page response. Students are encouraged to explain why the quote mattered to them—not in a mechanical, academic way, but by saying how they felt it in their body; this is the biggest challenge for students. Once they have edited their responses, students take turns reading or performing them in front of the class. Before they begin the performance they do not contextualize or apologize for any shortcomings they anticipate; they simply begin. The other students, as they listen, use three-by-five-inch cards or sticky notes to jot down what stands out for them about their classmate's piece. They write down phrases, words, or ideas. During the witnessing stage of the ritual, the "shaman," as Sandoval calls the performer of the SWAPA, stays in place while the witnesses share what they wrote on their witnessing cards. This is not a moment for them to critique, give advice, or ask questions, but simply to share the knowledge created in them, in their body, by the SWAPA they just witnessed. The shaman does not interrupt the witness or comment in response. She simply says thank you and takes her seat. (219)

Alvarez does not suggest that SWAPA is the only manifestation of *jotería* pedagogy; rather, he uses the method above in his own classrooms to allow for the witnessing of one another and to enact and theorize *jotería* pedagogy. Similarly, Revilla's (2004) *muxerista* pedagogy calls for a type of witnessing grounded in dialogue, questioning, dialectical exchanges, lived experiences, a commitment to social justice, and recognition of multiple, sometimes conflicting identities. She offers a pedagogy that is centered on a queer episteme that interrupts the confines of (hetero)normativity. A powerful illustration of *muxerista* pedagogy "includes the production of knowledge that leads to such things as new, redefined, reclaimed, and/or reconstructed terminology used for self-identification" (87). Revilla's research with Raza Womyn, a student organization at UCLA, took place outside the confines of a formal classroom and demonstrates how members continuously (re)thought terms such as *Queer*, *raza*, and *muxer* to express their fluid and sometimes strategic identities based on their social justice agenda and desire to unsettle dominant power relations. The

pedagogy was enacted among college students, and it allows for both an individual and collective healing as individuals (re)make and (re)claim their identities.

C. Alejandra Elenes (2011) posits that border/transformational pedagogies cut across formal and informal learning spaces. She demonstrates that there is a relationship between pedagogy and popular culture, with the latter being implicated in the production of knowledge. She explores the representation of the critiques of unequal social conditions in popular culture, and more specifically provides “an exploration of the meaning and battles over the representation of cultural practices in the imaginary” of Chicana folk (5). She centers Chicana/Latina agency in border/transformational pedagogies, where women actively incorporate multiple critical pedagogies in negotiating the often complicated (if not misogynist) terrain of popular culture. She does this in part by deconstructing and reconstructing three icons of Chicana and Mexican popular culture—La Llorona, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and Malintzin Tenepal—to highlight how these representations serve to subordinate gender norms for women and reinforce narratives of a passive and obedient femininity. Simultaneously, Elenes demonstrates how women have been active producers of counternarratives against oppressive systems of nation and disempowerment. While others have examined these icons, Elenes translates Anzaldúa in a pedagogical way that allows one to see the transformative and decolonizing power of cultural productions based on the stories of La Llorona, the art and consumption of La Virgen de Guadalupe, and the reclaiming of Malintzin. The feminist-inspired pedagogies of Elenes, Revilla, and Alvarez demonstrate how Chicana/Latina perspectives redefine everyday experiences of teaching, learning, and knowing and are significant theoretical contributions to Chicana/Latina studies, feminist studies, and educational studies.

## Final Thoughts

I think of how feminist ideas and movements are attacked, called unnatural by the ruling powers, when in fact they are ideas whose time has come, ideas as relentless as the waves carving and later eroding stone arches. Change is inevitable; no bridge lasts forever.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, preface to *This Bridge We Call Home*

As I conclude this essay, Anzaldúa’s words are an appropriate reminder of the relentless waves of ideas, concepts, theories, and epistemological

perspectives that feminista scholars have offered us over the last fifty years. These intellectual contributions have eroded (but not completely dismantled) heteropatriarchal narratives, normative systems of knowing, and restricted notions of who is a knowledge producer and what counts as knowledge. Some of those in academia (e.g., faculty on dissertation committees, journal editors) continue to question the use of feminista methodologies, pedagogies, and epistemological perspectives. Nevertheless, we must remember that as the scholarship of the last fifty years has demonstrated, struggle and resistance mean that change becomes inevitable. We see evidence of that change between the covers of *Aztlán*, in other academic journals, in dissertations and theses, and in course offerings in such areas as *joteria* studies, Chicana/Latina feminist methodologies, and Chicana/Latina spiritualities.

My reflections on recent scholarship highlight the power of interrupting knowledge borders and show how doing so opens up opportunities for how we conduct research and how we (re)envision what it means to teach and learn. The methodological and pedagogical interventions I reflect on in this essay, and the many others that space did not allow me to review, are all ruptures to normative ways of conducting research and teaching. Anzaldúa modeled how theory, practice, spirituality, and embodied knowledge combine to offer a specific feminista epistemology. She told us that “Coyolxauhqui represents the search for new metaphors to tell you what you need to know, how to connect and use the information gained” (2002a, 563). In putting Coyolxauhqui back together, feministas have continued Anzaldúa’s search by (re)constructing the ways we hear, interpret, and learn from and within a Chicana feminist epistemology. Just as Anzaldúa was a “theorist of hope” (Sandoval 2005, xiii), there is hope and possibility when scholars unsettle epistemological borders. As a graduate student, I recognized the wisdom of my elders and of those on whose shoulders I stood. Today, as a seasoned scholar-activist, I am inspired as I learn from and act upon the insights and wisdom that are offered by current and emerging scholar-activists who provide the possibilities of a decolonial futurity.

## Notes

1. While my original article focused on Chicana feminist epistemology, theories, and perspectives, today I often use the term *feminista* to include Chicana and Latina influences that include the scholarship of US Latinas of different backgrounds, such as US Mexicanas who do not identify as Chicana, and US Central Americans; see, for example, *Telling to Live*, a collection of testimonios compiled by the Latina Feminist Group (2001). I use *feminista* interchangeably with “Chicana/Latina feminist.”

2. Cindy, now Dr. Fierros, was a graduate student at the time, and after a series of kitchen-table pláticas about pláticas with my graduate student advisees, we all began to realize that there was a dearth of scholarship that went into detail about pláticas as a research method or methodology. Cindy and most of the graduate students were working on dissertation proposals and needed to explain their use of pláticas in their methodology chapters. Collectively, we could point to a number of publications that used pláticas, but the literature seemed to be missing an explicit conceptualization of pláticas as a Chicana/Latina *feminista* methodology.

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