



I Am Aztlán: The Personal Essay in Chicano Studies

Edited by
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CONTENTS

Autobiography Without Apology CHON A. NORIEGA AND WENDY BELCHER	v
Exile and Going Home	
Subterranean Homesick Blues MAX BENAVIDEZ	1
Phantoms in Urban Exile HARRY GAMBOA JR.	11
The Maguey: Coming Home SANTA C. BARRAZA	19
Home / Work	
Research Note CHON A. NORIEGA	25
Beyond the Cinema of the Other, or Toward Another Cinema FRANCES NEGRÓN-MUNTANER	33
Entre Familia	
Heroes and Orphans of the Hacienda: Narratives of a Mexican American Family VINCENT PÉREZ	41
The Measure of a Cock: Mexican Cockfighting, Culture, and Masculinity JERRY GARCIA	109
Testifying	
Activist Latina Lesbian Publishing: <i>esto no tiene nombre and conmoción</i> TATIANA DE LA TIERRA	141

Silencing Our Lady: La Respuesta de Alma
ALMA LOPEZ 177

Breaking Down Glass Walls
RUBEN Ochoa 195

Field Reports

Turning Sunshine into Noir and Fantasy into Reality: Los Angeles in
the Classroom
ALVINA E. QUINTANA 201

Ethnicity, Fieldwork, and the Cultural Capital that Gets Us There:
Reflections from U.S. Hispanic Marketing
ARLENE DÁVILA 211

Bibliography of Chicana/o Autobiography & Personal Essays in Spanish & English

Primary Literature 231
 Books
 Anthologies
 Personal Essays
Secondary Literature

Index 249

Autobiography Without Apology

Chon A. Noriega and Wendy Belcher

In Rudolfo A. Anaya's novel *Heart of Aztlán* (1976), the protagonist leaves the barrio of Barelas in Albuquerque to search in the mountains for Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs:

Time stood still, and in that enduring moment he felt the rhythm of the heart of Aztlán beat to the measure of his own heart. Dreams and visions became reality, and reality was but the thin substance of myth and legends. A joyful power coursed from the dark womb-heart of the earth into his soul and he cried out I AM AZTLÁN! (131)

We take this cry as the starting point for this anthology. Anaya's protagonist had been looking for a myth of origins by returning to the sacred lands he had been forced to leave in order to seek employment in the city. But he finds, instead, himself—a “plural self” (Sommer 1988, 130), a singularity that nevertheless embodies a collective experience and call to action. Anaya's novel—published in the latter years of the Chicano civil rights movement—weaves together the communal and the personal through a narrative about labor relations, social protest, ethnic identity, and pre-Colombian spirituality. Indeed, the protagonist first learns about Aztlán at a meeting of striking union members!

We focus on the process of self-naming—the ubiquitous “I am . . .”—because it is found not just in early Chicano literary, performing, and visual arts, but in Chicano scholarship as well. Consider, for example, *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, which was founded in 1969 by a group of graduate and undergraduate students associated with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. As the first issue announced, the center's publications “were created to provide responsible and reliable sources for materials on Chicanos” (1970, vi). The journal in particular was seen as “a forum for scholarly writings” and as the first university-sponsored serial publication on the Chicano

population. Given this academic orientation, then, it is of note that the first text to appear in the new journal is an excerpt from “El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán,” which ends by explicitly linking its political agenda with self-naming. “We are AZTLAN” it declares (1970, iv).

In so beginning, the editorial staff—which included Juan Gómez-Quiñones (history), Roberto Sifuentes (Spanish), Reynaldo Flores Macias (education), Andres Chávez (political science), and Deluvina Hernández (sociology)—not only challenged the earlier scholarly literature on Chicanos for its biases and prejudices, but also opened up a space for a “Chicano voice” within academic publishing. That is, by using the first person (“I” and “we”) as part of a larger social and academic project, the editorial staff articulated a worldview and set of collective experiences that had been excluded from higher education, public policy, and popular discourse within the United States.

To be autobiographical, then, often represented an applied dimension within a scholarly article. By using “I,” the Chicano scholar made particular claims within a field of study or discipline, often in sharp contrast to the general and more stereotypical arguments put forth by some non-Chicano scholars. But by drawing upon personal experience and self-reflection, the Chicano scholar also provided an arena within which these ideas could be tested, put to use, and improved. Thus, in the second issue of *Aztlán*, Gilbert Benito Córdova wrote a brief memoir on his experiences teaching, which started with a very atypical academic essay opening:

During the summer of 1969 I was in charge of Head Start at my little community—Abiquiú, New Mexico. For the first time I was on my own professionally! Now I could try out all I had learned at college about child education. (103)

Arriving at the school, Córdova was quickly struck by the inappropriateness of both the English and Castilian Spanish storybooks provided to the children and invited local elders to the school to tell the children stories. This worked marvelously well: “The children fell in love with their storytellers and stories” (104). The article includes a transcription of a unique folktale by Steven Suazo, one of the elders, for use by other teachers of Chicana and Chicano schoolchildren.

Córdova did not offer a close reading or analysis, but neither was he content to just reproduce the tale. Instead, he expressed concern about the general approach to Chicano children as “underprivileged children, underachievers, underdeveloped children, culturally deprived, and so on” (104). After citing some scientific sources on the topic, Córdova wrote

It seems to me that if any of these experts would stop for just a minute and think, it might occur to them that there is no such thing as a culturally deprived child. Either a child has a culture or he does not have a culture; and if the child does not have a culture, then he is not a human being. He is some other form of animal than human. As for the other terms, how about underprivileged children? Would its counterpart be overprivileged children? (105)

Córdova's use of the "I" in this brief, four-page essay is not only moving, but important. From it, we get insights into the motivations and efforts of early Chicano scholars and their intertwined educational and political struggle. It encapsulates the commitment of so many Chicano scholars who have sought to return their own advantages in education to the community, but who have also approached their community as a resource in its own right and not as a "disadvantaged" place.

Since Córdova's article, many scholars have commented on the necessity of expressing the self and "drawing from our own specific racial and cultural experience" to contribute to public knowledge and overcome the strictures of the dominant culture (Herrera-Sobek and Viramontes 1988). Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarno points out that in the context of oppression, to focus on the self is not a selfish act: "The Chicana writer finds that the self she seeks to define and love is not merely an individual self but a collective one" (141). Indeed, "individual subjectivity [emerges] ... through the articulation of collective experience and identity" (143-44).

And yet, as a recent book observes, "At no point in the evolution of higher education was the autobiographical or personal as a mode of learning or genre of writing considered valid" (Freedman and Frey 2004, 2). As such, there has always been a defensive tendency among those who champion autobiography as a literary or scholarly form. The traditional disciplines reject our work! But in looking at Chicano studies, which has always been interdisciplinary, we see something different: autobiography without apology. This phrase is an allusion to Edén E. Torres's *Chicana Without Apology* (2003), itself an excellent example of the critical self in cultural studies. But such an approach is not new. Consider Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy* (1971), written as an anecdotal response to the "psychologists, psychiatrists, social anthropologists and other manner of 'shrinks' [that] have spread the rumor that these Mexican immigrants and their offspring have lost their 'self-image'" (2). In contrast to this scientific "rumor," Galarza wryly notes, "I can't remember a time I didn't know who I was. . . . It

seemed to me unlikely that out of six or seven million Mexicans in the United States I was the only one who felt this way” (2). What is of special interest here is that *Barrio Boy* is not *just* an autobiography. It was written and published as part of the United States–Mexico Border Studies Project at the University of Notre Dame and sponsored by a grant from the Ford Foundation. In other words, not unlike Torres’s more recent book, Galarza’s memoir was positioned *institutionally* as a scholarly contribution to the emerging field of Chicano studies. Ramón Saldívar, echoing Renato Rosaldo, situates the text in this broader context: “Replacing the political or philosophical essay, his autobiography is a personal document where historical self-explanation, philosophical self-analysis, and poetic self-expression merge to tell with irony and humor a social story: an individual’s participation in one of the grandest migrations of modern times—the influx of Mexicans into the American Southwest” (168).

In this volume, we bring together several important personal essays published in *Aztlán* under our editorship since 1997. We also include one new essay that had been submitted to the journal and successfully peer-reviewed but that we felt rounded out the selections in this volume. The contributors are Chicana and Chicano, but also Puerto Rican and Cuban American; and they include scholars as well as writers and artists. The common thread involves their contribution to a Chicano studies journal and its thirty-five-year mission of creating “a forum for scholarly writings” related to the Chicano community. In these essays, the authors ask not so much the traditional autobiographical questions of “Who am I?” or “How did I become who I am?” but “How did we live and think?” They focus on where their lives intersect history writ large and small. In other words, the presence of the self is a given within the text. It is done without apology, which is not to say without being self-critical.

In the first section, “Exile and Going Home,” three writers/artists reflect on exile and the process of going home as an integral aspect of the creative process. Max Benavidez writes about internal exile and displacement as a Mexican Angeleno. He writes lyrically about constructing his own identity through the process of recollection. He remembers learning English, listening to his great-grandmother’s stories, reading *Don Quixote*, seeing the bruises on a beautiful bride, and following a Hopi Indian painter. Through the human drama of family, we absorb, struggle and grow up. And having created an identity through home, we must learn to tell those stories. Harry Gamboa Jr. documents and interprets the contemporary urban Chicano experience through almost a dozen electronic communications first circulated on

CHICLE, an electronic discussion list. He deconstructs the freeway, perceptual pollution, stereotypes, fine dining, call-in shows, anti-representatives, solipsistic conversations, and the death of self. Santa C. Barraza, the painter, remembers her journey home, after a twenty-five-year absence, to the Texas town where she was born. Reflecting on what she has learned in the interim, she offers that her artistic vision has been shaped by the land of South Texas and in particular the maguey, the symbol of home and identity.

In the second section, "Home / Work," two scholars examine their work and find some notion of "home" informing their intellectual inquiries. Chon A. Noriega writes about the influence of his father, the man "who inspired my ongoing intellectual quest." After discovering that his sister has saved all of their father's Mexican LPs, Noriega uses his skills as a historian and critic to examine the albums and come to a "more compassionate understanding of my father" and his career as a journalist, and thereby gain insights into his own career as a scholar. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, an award-winning filmmaker, writer, and cultural critic, asks how we can move beyond the supplemental status of the "cinema of the other" in order to produce "another cinema"? Originally presented at a panel, the essay went unpublished as too controversial. Negrón-Muntaner addresses the idea of home as an unresolved and politically charged problem to which film gives witness.

In the third section, "Entre Familia," two scholars critically challenge the code of silence about "internal" matters within the Chicano community signaled by the phrase *entre familia*. To identify an issue, such as sexism or homosexuality, as *entre familia*, was to say that it could not be talked about in public, and, hence, not at all, since doing so was believed to betray or undermine the Chicano community in its political struggles. Jerry Garcia, with one of the most provocative opening paragraphs in academic discourse, addresses the role of cocks in his father's life. Playing with ideas of masculinity and machismo, he describes the illegal cock fighting that the men in his family, Mexican immigrants, participated in. Garcia considers how cockfighting shapes familial relationships and its role in the daily life of his family. Vincent Pérez engages with both the literary tradition and the critical scholarship on Mexican American autobiography in telling the story of his grandfather. Through anecdotes, secrets, and personal memories he brings personal and national history together in telling us about Francisco Robles Perez and the secret rape that shaped his family history. Any biography has a complicated relationship to the truth; he examines testimonial memory as a form of repression and resistance.

In the fourth section, “Testifying,” three writers/artists address the creation of public works of art and politics. Here the authors recount or reflect on their roles within public history. Alma Lopez, a visual and public artist, creates digital artwork of fantastically surreal images that recontextualize major cultural icons, bringing issues of race, gender, and sexuality into relationship with transnationalist myth and the urban environment. She reports from the field on recent censorship attempts against her work in New Mexico. Her response is a modern day *respuesta* to the Catholic Church, among others; and it provides an inspiring model for challenging institutional policies. Next, Tatiana de la Tierra offers a fascinating and thoughtful account of two Latina lesbian journals she co-founded and co-edited in the early 1990s. In addition to this important history, her essay offers a model for a self-critical account of Latino and Latina publications and their role within cultural and intellectual production. Last but not least, artist Ruben Ochoa responds to the glass walls and ceilings that have limited Chicano access to social and cultural institutions with . . . a glass zoot suit! In the fine tradition of Chicano conceptual art—for example, Asco’s *Spray Paint LACMA, 1972*—Ochoa turns his own body into a cutting commentary on the exclusionary “white cube” of the American museum.

In the fifth section, “Field Reports,” two scholars offer personal reflections on their pedagogy and research methodology. While in some ways less “personal” than the other essays in this collection, these also hit closer to home in terms of how we work in the academy. Alvina E. Quintana considers her experiences as a native Californian and a Chicana professor teaching East Coast students about Los Angeles. As the University of Delaware’s resident multiculturalist, Quintana gives us a slice-of-academic life in the post-diversity moment. Her thoughts on multicultural pedagogies, particularly the responses of her mostly white students to course readings on ethnicity and social change, are illuminating. Arlene Dávila draws upon her recent ethnographic research on U.S. Hispanic marketing in order to raise questions about methodology and to offer a larger critique of the challenges posed to fieldwork and ethnography in the age of globalization. She argues that there is much to be learned from the predicaments of fieldwork and how researcher’s ethnic backgrounds intersect with their research. In particular, she describes how her access to marketing agencies and employees were mediated by their perceptions of her. Dávila’s concerns and insights echo those found in the first issues of *Aztlán*, for they speak to the necessary presence of the Chicano and Latino scholar within the very world he or she would study and thereby change.

We hope that these essays will prove useful not only to scholars of Chicano studies but also to students just embarking on their academic careers. The scholars—from history, anthropology, cultural studies, and literature—demonstrate the diverse ways in which personal voice and experience can inform both disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. The writers and artists demonstrate the continued importance of the arts within Chicano studies—not just as an object of study, but as a form of historical and analytical thinking central to the field’s larger social mission.

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