

# “Mi Hija Va a Ser Maestra” Overview of the Auto-Ethnography

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## ABSTRACT

The educator who takes on the task of the principal leader of a campus must be staunchly in touch with the inner self, the source from which they will draw foundational decisions at the most critical of times, when it is imperative that speech and action be aligned with ideals and beliefs (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005). My doctoral dissertation, an autoethnography that is an illustrative introspective exercise for instructional leaders, is a critical self-reflection that identifies the factors that informed me as a life-long educator and a campus administrator. This article is a window to the content of that dissertation. The manuscript provides legitimacy to testimonio and the concept of story to build relative context and meaning (Ellis, 2004; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2013) between my marginalized childhood in a small Central Texas town and my successful adulthood in the field of educational leadership. The methodology included critical interpretations of the literary selections, utilizing analytical frameworks to derive meaning from the stories. In order to make “personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 277), I chose to share my story, thus giving agency to critical self-reflection as a discipline in leadership effectiveness.

## “Mi Hija Va Ser Maestra” Overview of the Auto-Ethnography

*“¡Ándale! ¡Súbete, m’ija! ¡Fíjate que ya moví la casa!”*

*My father’s face was beaming as he leaned out the window of his little red pick-up truck, right hand on the wheel and left arm reaching out to me, his youngest child and only daughter, standing, tears streaming down my face, in the middle of the barren lot in the heart of the barrio where our little pink frame home used to be.*

The memory of that day is etched indelibly in my mind. I grew up in that pink house, a scant few blocks from my elementary school, across the street from my Abuelito Ramón and next door to my Madrina Pifania. That particular day, much like any other day of the week, I had walked to school in the morning, and our little pink house had been nestled in our small barrio lot, in between the big silver butane gas tank on one side and my mom’s pretty pink roses on the other. The shock of the barren lot and the missing house upon my return from school that day was overwhelming. Nothing other than my father’s familiar face would have been able to calm my fears—Papi!—My Papi always made things right.

## Introduction

The “rightness” in this case becomes increasingly clear as I reflect on my memories of that day, in the mid-1960s, when my father moved our house to the “other side of the tracks” (Montejano, 1987; Rubel, 1966), entering a space and traversing an invisible line that was as tangible as the queue of Anglo homeowners that stood and stared as our little pink frame home was deposited smack onto the once-empty lot in their once-only white neighborhood. The history of that day and other significant experiences in my life are the basis for the autoethnographic study

that comprised my doctoral dissertation, a scholarly work which gave agency to testimonio and the concept of story to build relative context and meaning (Ellis, 2004; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2013) between my marginalized childhood in a small Central Texas town and my successful adulthood as an instructional leader.

This article is a window to the purpose of my dissertation. By making “personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 277), I produced a critical self-reflection, expressed through a narrative mode, which introspectively identified the factors that informed me as an instructional leader. As I acquired a greater self-awareness of my personal history and the experiences that shaped my life, I gained a stronger conviction in the importance of introspection and reflection—not only for myself, but for other educators in the field whose decisions have life altering effects on the many children with whom we are entrusted. The stories included in this article are reflective of the greater body of work narrated in the dissertation and utilized as springboards for self insight and understanding.

## ***Introspective Narrative***

The untapped power of the introspective narrative can serve as a highly effective tool. An exercise in introspection and reflection, expressed through story, can reveal a deeper understanding of personal behaviors, it can create and re-create virtual experiences, and it can uncover strong, meaningful connections. Chávez (2012) states that “stories are essential to human understanding” and that they are “the ways humans make sense of their worlds” (p. 340). Bochner (2012) expresses much the same sentiment by commenting that “emphasizing the stories people tell about their lives...[is] both a means of knowing and a way to telling” (p. 155). Thus, my work utilizes the concept of story to privilege the emotional spaces and inform the reader through the organic medium of lived experience. By deviating from the traditional modality, an auto-ethnographer’s “unconcealed and unapologetic use of emotion” as depicted through the concept of story “contains the possibility to position readers in an unconventional spot: squarely alongside ...the Chicana protagonist” (Chávez, 2012, p. 341).

As the auto-ethnographer, I positioned myself at the center of my narratives, drawing privilege as a “Chicana protagonist” (Chávez, 2012, p. 341) to use my stories as tools which contribute to my effectiveness and inform my work as an educational leader. Thus, this work is an “act of meaning” whose function and “expressive forms [are] for making sense of lived experiences and communicating it to others” (Bochner, 2012, p. 155). My stories provide a critical lens focused on the marginalization of a proud people and the way in which a determined father broke the barriers to create a space of privilege for his only daughter, and the realization of his greatest dream: *Mi Hija va ser Maestra*.

## ***Introspection and Instructional Leadership***

Shapiro and Stefkovitch (2011), “recognizing the complexities of being an educational leader in today’s society” (p. 27), advocate “an understanding of oneself” (p. 23) and emphasize the manner in which “life stories and critical incidents” impact our decision-making. With that in mind, I utilized an introspective approach as recommended by Shapiro and Stefkovitch (2011) to analyze the impact of my upbringing on my professional career and the actions and decisions made in that capacity. I strived to bring meaning to the manner in which I approached my different roles in education by delving into the spaces of stored memory to gain a greater self-awareness, and to understand and appreciate the value of my upbringing. Those memories were shared as organic data to uphold the assertion that understanding the self and realizing that “the value of a reflective life” (Rodríguez, 1982, p. 78) is a vital component of instructional leadership.

This type of critical self-awareness, this self-reflection, can be a revelation for educational leaders. Exploring the personal development of my own identity through autoethnography and critical self-reflection as the “Chicana protagonist” (Chávez, 2012, p. 341) in my own stories “may help inform research in understanding how...students of color experience educational institutions in order to acquire more specific knowledge of their academic successes and failures” (Chávez, 2012, p. 335). Chávez states that “as an auto-ethnographer, my role serves to unpack the repercussions on my educational identity” (Chávez, 2012, p. 335). Recognizing those influences and utilizing personal experience to affect an individual and a schools’ ideology can help

set the tone and environment necessary for student success (Roth, 2005). The ancient Greek maxim, know thyself, can be viewed as an educator's imperative to know "our backgrounds and...the critical incidents that have shaped our lives" (Shapiro and Stefkovitch, 2011, p. 180). As an educator, to know thyself is to be in tune with the visceral, core values from which we draw the decisions we make that affect our students. To that end, Shapiro and Stefkovitch (2011) state that they "have come to realize that life stories and personal experiences can be powerful" (p. 180), and that "such self-disclosures are needed to assist us in a better understanding of our pedagogical approaches and how we influence our students" (Shapiro and Stefkovitch, 2011, p. 180). It is through critical self-reflection that educators can come to know themselves and engage the utility of their own story to affect student outcomes; however, in so many, that power remains unfettered (Roth, 2005).

My autoethnography provided me with great insight into my life and the driving forces that guide my path as an educator. Now, through this article, the reader is invited into the world in which I lived and thrived, with hopes that the journey will provide impetus toward introspection of his own. Through critical self-reflection, I am hopeful that you, the reader, will come to "know thyself," and, as did I, introspectively gain a greater understanding of themselves, their students and their community.

## ***To Serve the Public Good***

It was only after taking several classes in my doctoral program that, through my own critical self-reflection, I realized that my parents very deliberately raised me to be an agent of change (Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005). From them I learned to navigate in a white world, adopting Gloria Anzaldúa's hybrid life (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Hernandez-Avila, & Perez, 2003). Because my parents' "optimism and ambition led them to a house many blocks from the Mexican...side of town" (Rodríguez, 1982, p. 10), I learned to successfully straddle living among the white townsfolk while retaining my brown culture, my Mexican heritage, and my Spanish language. I believed that my stories would produce "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience" (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011, p. 274) which would inform and interest educational leaders. For this reason, I chose the autoethnographic form in order to "link[ing] personal experience to cultural context" and "generate a deeper understanding of what it means to serve the public good" (Gonzalez and Padilla, 2007, p. 149). My autoethnography focuses on my story and the manner in which my life experiences not only facilitated but actually prepared me for the important tasks I undertook as an educator and the many roles I have filled in the educational system, from student to teacher to administrator. As I critically reflected on my past as a vehicle to make sense of my present, I took "the reader on a reflective journey...and reflect[ed] on the critical incidents in our lives" (Shapiro and Stefkovitch, 2011, p. 177), hoping to "awaken educators to inequities in society and particularly in the schools" (Shapiro and Stefkovitch, 2011, p. 15).

My father's dream of "Mi Hija va ser Maestra" was purposefully orchestrated and brought to fruition. I believe that "serve[ing] the public good" (Gonzalez and Padilla, 2007 p. 149) as an educator was the cause which my parents deliberately and strategically fostered in me so many years ago when they paved the road for my success through their own activist efforts. During the 1960's and '70s, the decades during which Jim Crow laws prevailed in the small Central Texas town and the surrounding areas where I was raised (Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; De Leon and Calvert, 2010; Montejano, 1987), my father in particular created a safe and progressive environment in which I flourished. My parents' advocacy for their children called on a strength and boldness of which, at the time, I was not aware. In the innocence of my youth and under the shelter of my father, I loved my childhood, my town, and my school. In my enlightened adulthood and with a more critical perspective, I reflect on the actions and events that are my experience, and I see the marginalization of a people and a disregard for their future.

In her book, *The Autoethnographic I*, Carolyn Ellis (2004) notes that "Sometimes the impetus for writing autoethnography...comes from a desire to remember and honor the past" (p. 111). This autoethnography is written with that intent. Much like author Richard Rodríguez, whose novel, *Hunger for Memory*, is written "for her and for him [his parents]—to honor them," I, too, write for that purpose (Dedication, 1982). However, remembering and honoring the past can also be the catalyst to impacting the future in significant and positive ways. I want my story to have legs. Guajardo and Guajardo (2010) state that "a story with legs is one that lives and moves" (pg. 95), one

that “can help individuals and groups develop the necessary agency to push, resist, and amalgamate the outside forces to allow for the creation of a new reality for the self, the group, and the community in which we live” (p. 95).

## ***School and Community Climate in the Early Years***

My public school experience was in many ways colored by my own naïve, innocent and sheltered perspective—a perspective which I believe was developed as a result of my upbringing and the careful manner in which my parents oversaw my education. For this I am grateful, because through their intervention, I recollect enjoying an apparently successful, engaging and happy experience at school. At home, I was one of “those whose lives are bound by a barrio,” embracing our language, culture and customs as the essence of our family life (Rodríguez, 1982, p. 14). Many years after having graduated from high school, I began to recognize so many of the educational inequities which had escaped me as an unsuspecting student. Minerva Chávez notes that as she “traveled the educational pipeline” her “educational stories [were] unavoidably... impacted by the hegemony of dominant educational practices” (Chávez, 2012, p. 335).

In like manner, relevant literature detailing hegemonic practices of administrators who made life altering decisions for the marginalized student populations in schools back in the 1960’s and 70’s indubitably affected my stories, and ultimately, twenty, thirty, forty years later, those of my students (Blanton, 2004; Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987; Shockley, 1974). Through my research, I began to recognize the manner in which school and community functioned in their routine ways as I was growing up, subtly perpetuating the “two tiered economic and social structure” (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010, p. 98) of the dominant Anglo society which marginalized the Mexican American populace in my hometown and the surrounding communities (Blanton, 2004; Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987; Shockley, 1974). Through manipulation and sometimes deliberate oppression, many opportunities, benefits, and advantages were withheld from Mexican American students (Blanton, 2004; Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987; Shockley, 1974). Common practices such as routine and autocratic scheduling of Mexican American boys in agriculture class while Anglo boys were scheduled into college bound classes “cultivated a dominant... narrative of power, a macro-story where the landowners and farmers wielded power, and manual workers followed their orders” (Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010, p. 99).

The practices described by Guajardo and Guajardo are substantiated by researchers who note that the oppressive educational practices advantageously served to create a social order that guaranteed a subjugated Mexican population that ensured a dependent and subservient workforce (Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; Moll, 2010; Montejano, 1987; San Miguel, 1987; Shockley, 1974). In fact, during most of the twentieth century when I was growing up, “school officials regularly steered Tejanas away from studying academic subjects” in order to groom them for domestic, household work (Acosta and Winegarten, 2003, p. 150). This social construct was not unique to my hometown; in fact, it was prevalent in many of the Central and South Texas areas in which I grew up and in which I now work (Foley, Mota, Post and Lozano, 1988; Montejano, 1987). The stories in the autoethnography provide further illustration and “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) to substantiate these statements, with the hope that educators construct meaning and derive transferrable significance from this work.

## ***The Introspective Narrative: Story as Data***

I believe my story is one that has legs; that is, it is a story that can give agency to others and empower them to take action, initiate change, and make a positive difference in the lives of others (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010). As professional educators, the anguish felt by our students is sometimes as painful to us as it is to them. The sentiment we feel for our kids, “that puzzling, powerful Mexican word, *sentimiento*” (Galarza, 2011, p. 195), is often overshadowed by the policies, rules and regulations that govern our school’s daily operations. We don’t often consult our own story to make a connection to theirs. The dataset used for the dissertation is composed of my personal stories detailing the relationship between my father and me, and the ultimate effect

that relationship had on my development as an instructional leader. I privileged my personal narratives as the dissertation data set because they “join[...] story and traditional analysis” to reach “the inextricable connections between story and theory” (Ellis, 2004, p. 45). Bochner (2012) substantiates that concept by noting that “there [should] be a closer connection between our research texts and the lives they represent” (p. 157). To that end, the data consists of a collection of stories which interact with relevant literature while making meaningful connections to the reader—in essence, binding “the voice of theory” with “the voice of story” (Ellis, 2004, p. 56).

The stories which comprise the data utilize “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) in order to vividly and evocatively “demonstrate the lived experience and humanity...to outside audiences” (Ellis, 2004, p 38). I took license to lace my stories with literary conventions and devices which added texture, depth, and imagery to my work. The resulting “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) was intended to evoke emotion and make accessible organic, lived experiences which would hopefully elicit an evocative, sensory response in the reader (Bochner 2012; Ellis, 2004). Thus, the descriptive narratives utilized the autoethnographic construct as a vehicle to “produce[ing] meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2011). The research data provided in the autoethnography was grounded in the personal experiences between father and daughter and the ultimate effect that relationship had on my work as an instructional leader.

## ***Invitation to the Author’s World: I Tell My Story***

Truth rings like a school bell in the age-old maxim “Teachers make a difference.” The question is, as educators, what kind of difference will we make? Aside from the pedagogy of our profession, in what ways have we prepared ourselves to make a difference in the lives of children? This document is an open door, and its readers “are invited into the author’s world...to use what they learn there” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46). The objectives are to inform educational issues that still persist, to utilize these experiences as a construct for situational study, to personally practice the critical self-reflection demonstrated herein—the possibilities are many. There is “deep utility in story as a tool for change” (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2010, p. 93), but one has to be willing to utilize it. Therefore, so as “...to reach wider and more diverse mass audiences” with the ultimate goal of making “personal and social change possible for more people” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 277) so that we truly do “make a difference,” I tell my story...

## ***La Casa de Piedra / The Rock House***

Right in front of our small, pretty pink frame house in the heart of the barrio stood a giant, lofty cedar tree, planted by my grandfather on the very day that I was born. Next to that was the big silver butane tank, which a bright imagination could turn into anything from an alien spaceship to a gymnastics balance beam. In the corner, casting shade like a big umbrella over the tiny yard, was the enormous mesquite tree with the massive branches curving just right to form a little cradle close to the top—that’s where I would climb and hide to read my books instead of washing dishes. I loved living in our little pink house in the barrio.

When my Papi decided to move our family out of the barrio and over to the “wrong side of the tracks,” he did it quite abruptly (Rubel, 1966; San Miguel, 1987). Walking home from school one day, I arrived at an empty lot, my Mami’s red and white roses stark against the bare ground where, that morning, the beautiful, small pink frame house had stood. I stared in disbelief, rooted to the ground, wondering what in the world might have happened, when my Papí pulled up in his red pick-up truck, honked the horn and called, “¡Vámonos, m’ijita! I moved the house!”

My father might have been a man of few words, but he was one who took quick action. Where others saw risk, my father saw opportunity. He always looked for the productive possibility, for the way in which he could turn a deficit into a positive. That vision was what led us to move to a deserted, overgrown and overlooked lot on the “white side” of town, where the proverbial railroad tracks were used to divide the races (Rubel, 1966; San Miguel, 1987). My Papi bought the lot, one side facing the neighborhood into which we moved, the other side prime frontage property right on Interstate Highway 90. The property was being used as a dumping spot, a perpetual eyesore with mounds of trash, overgrown with thorny cacti, weeds, mesquite trees and scraggly brush. With pick and shovel, an axe and a wheelbarrow, my father toiled for weeks in the hot summer sun and cleared the rubbish himself.

And then he waited...while the rest of us forgot. On that particular day, the opportunity had suddenly arisen; house movers had come by, and before I knew it, our beautiful little pink house had been unceremoniously plucked up from its little nest in the barrio and dropped down like a bombshell on the Anglo side of the tracks (Rubel, 1966; San Miguel, 1987). It didn't help that my dad decided to make the move at a time when racial turmoil was brewing in the political hotbed of nearby Crystal City and the surrounding areas (Foley, 2010; Montejano, 1987; Rubel, 1966; San Miguel, 1987; Shockley, 1974). I remember the Anglo neighbors standing at the fence line, Anzaldúa's (1987) "borderland" set up "to distinguish us from them" (p. 25). They stared in astonishment at our pink house as we drove up in my Papi's red pick-up truck. In truth, I was just as shocked as they were. My address had changed from one moment to the next.

The transition time was nil; suddenly, my neighbors literally sang a different song. Gone was the smell of Jovita's tortillas wafting across the way, no longer could I run across the unpaved dusty street to meet my cousins at my Grandpa's corner store, and the days of dancing in Tia Natalia's driveway after school lost the spontaneity that made them so much fun. However, regardless of where we were, "ours remained a Mexican family" (Galarza, 2011, p. 265). Our beautiful, small pink frame house was at our new location on Highway 90, but like the Barrio Boy, we retained the beauty of our Spanish language and the daily communication and contact with our familia (Galarza, 2011). My Mami and Papi taught us not only to respect and retain the traditions and customs of our people (Galarza, 2011), but to be the "mestiza" who is able to easily and "continually walk out of one culture and into another" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 99).

My father was a family man, "un hombre de familia," in every sense the Mexican patriarch who was nurturing, caring and protective, but who could also stop you in your tracks with a single look (Griswold del Castillo, 1984; Delgado Bernal, 2001). The strong, stern and silent side of my Papi commanded respect—"el respeto," a concept which we were taught at a very young age (Anaya, 1972; Griswold del Castillo, 1984). Without ever lifting a hand or raising his voice, my father got people's attention, so when my Papi said, "M'ijita, aqui vamos hacer nuestra casa de piedra," I never doubted or questioned that we would.

Having moved our small pink frame home across the tracks from the Mexican barrio to the Anglo neighborhood (Rubel, 1966; San Miguel, 1987), he began to build our dream home, the rock house he had told our Anglo neighbor he was going to build. My Papi himself built the home, with help from the compadres and other amigos upon whose handiwork my father relied. Initially, the walls of our rock house, like Robert Frost's (1988) "Mending Wall," seemed to be a tangible border in our new neighborhood, the place where "two or more cultures edge each other...it's not a comfortable territory to live in" (Anzaldúa, 2007, Preface). However, as the house began to take shape, the neighbors began to take interest.

My Papi began by deconstructing our pink house while we still lived in it. Deliberately, one room at a time, one plank at a time, he loosened the lumber and inspected each board carefully until he had a heap of them ready to go. Then, like Dolores Delgado Bernal's (2001) metaphorical "trenza", my Papi interwove the wooden pink boards of our childhood home and the barrio life we brought with us, with the new lumber, the new sheetrock and signature red paint that he had bought at the local lumberyard (p. 135). Though the two houses existed separately, he meaningfully and deliberately utilized construction materials from both to build our new home. "Like the trenza"...Papi was able to "weave together our...identities" (Delgado Bernal, 2008, p. 135), moving us "towards a new consciousness...a new mestiza consciousness...a consciousness of the Borderlands" (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 99) so that "we are often stronger and more complete" (Delgado Bernal, 2008, p. 135) in our final construction.

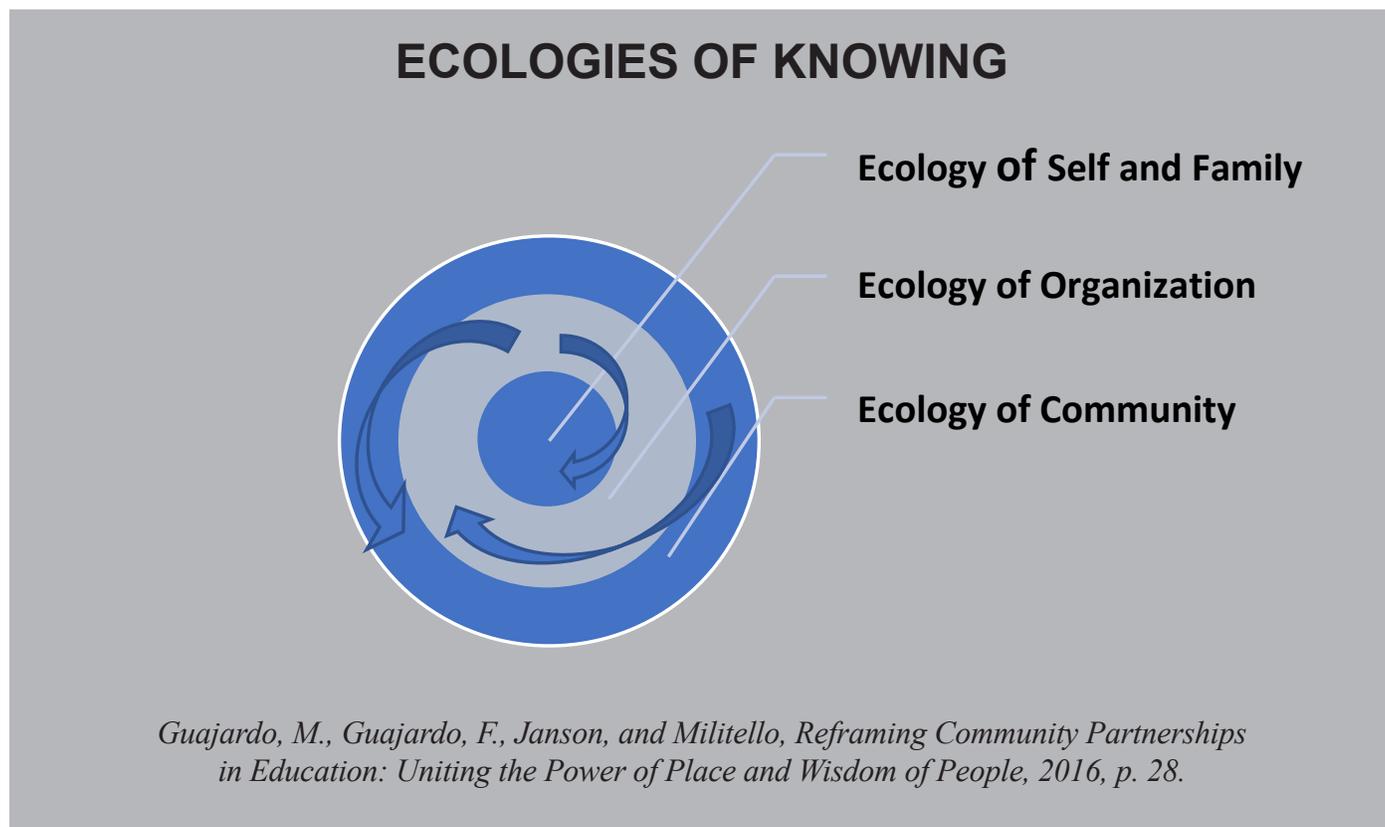
The pink boards of my childhood life fittingly became the anchor, the framework which provided a firm base and a strong foundation for our new rock house. I helped him haul the heavy stones; large, massive rocks, their creamy brown and white colors symbolically blended on the face of each stone. He and I heaved the rocks in place, "wearing our fingers rough with handling them" (Frost, 1988). He carefully examined each rock, turning it this way and that, until he found its niche in the wide expanse of stone wall. So it was that we built our rock house, La Casa de Piedra, which symbolized our new "hybrid" life (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Hernandez-Avila, & Perez, 2003).

"Mi hija va a ser maestra," he would say. Fifty years later, I thank my Papi for helping me find my

niche, for nestling me snugly, carefully, like the stones of our rock house, into my place in life. Through his vision of my future as an accomplished professional Mexican American woman, coupled with my Mami’s understanding of the “Latina holistic approach to life” (Delgado Bernal, 2008, p. 146), I now “stand and claim my space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks, and my own feminist architecture” (Anzaldúa, 2007, p. 44). La Casa de Piedra in which I was raised symbolizes my successful life as an Hispanic woman who bestrides both worlds, just like the brown and white colors which blend on the face of my rock house: each stands, synchronized, yet separate.

## **Story Analysis: The Ecologies of Knowing**

The Ecologies of Knowing, an analytical framework designed to “organize our thinking and learning experiences from the micro to the meso and on to the macro levels” was utilized to “balance and navigate the learning” found in select literary pieces of the dissertation (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., and Militello, M., 2016, p. 27). A research based analytical model, The Ecologies “give appropriate and adequate data analysis depth and breadth” to examine the scope of a story (Ramirez, D., 2013, p. 68). The Ecologies—Self, Organization, and Community, are visually represented by a spiraling strand that interweaves them and our lived experiences in a “cohesive yet developmental complexity that is both simple and dynamic in its construction” (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Jansen, and Militello, 2016, p. 28). The Ecologies of Knowing “are not isolated”; in fact, they “are bordered by permeable boundaries that leave room for exchange and interplay,” spiraling and weaving in a dynamic and developmental process “as our experiences inform our schema” (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., and Militello, M., 2016, p. 27). The Ecologies of Knowing provides a contextual framework to derive meaning from lived experiences and uncover the manner in which people can be “in rhythm with their multiple ecologies,” and collectively, can become “mediating entities” or a “mediating force” that can effect positive change (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Jansen, and Militello, 2016, pp. 28-29). The Ecologies of Knowing will be used as an analytical framework to derive meaning from “La Casa de Piedra / The Rock House Story.”



## **“La Casa de Piedra / The Rock House Story”—Ecologies of Knowing Analysis**

Gloria Anzaldúa calls it “la hoya”, the place [her body] where “All of life’s adventures go... where all fragments, inconsistencies, contradictions are stirred and cooked to a new integration” (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Hernandez-Avila, & Perez, 2003, p. 18). My *Ecology of Self*, central to this vignette, like Anzaldúa’s “hoya”, is an integration that I believe began years ago, in the painstaking construction of a humble rock house in Sabinal, Texas. In the late 60’s, “In Texas, Anglos Mexicans lived in separate worlds, Mexican Town and Anglo Town, with specific rules defining the proper place for Mexicans” (Calderon & Lopez-Morin, 2000). Sabinal was no different. My Ecology of Self and Family, as together our family learned to negotiate both the construction of the home as well as the integration of a neighborhood, took me to the dynamic “third space,” the “balance or tension between the “I” and the “we” in the Ecology of Self that facilitates the ability to “make decisions in the best interest of the self and the organization” (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Jansen, and Militello, 2016, p. 28). The experiences surrounding me, as referenced in the “Rock House Story,” included dialogue and interactions with others regarding our family’s sudden move to our new neighborhood, “conversations and experiences that are made personal and relevant at the most micro of levels” (Ramirez, D., 2013, p. 53). They called for an understanding of the importance of relationships and the development of a collective sense, a mentality that would recognize the importance of others around me, the cousins and friends from the barrio as well as my new Anglo neighbors across the street. As noted in the vignette, the irony of the brown and white blends that color the rock is not lost as I look back at the significance of my father’s construction of the Mexican home on the Anglo side of the tracks (Montejano, 1987; Rubel, 1966). The spiraling, dynamic nature of the Ecologies of Knowing illustrates how an engaging and reciprocal relationship between the micro and the macro ecologies can create “an empowering dialogue that communicates and makes known our abilities to bring about change in our communities...if we act collectively with one another” (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., and Militello, M., 2016, p. 29). I believe that my father’s relationships established the type of dynamic that spanned the Ecologies and brought change to our community.

My father intertwined the Ecologies of Self and Community, “shift[ing]...from an external and immutable constraint to a web of interwoven relationships that can...become more nurturing and just” (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., and Militello, M., 2016, p. 29). This idea of intertwined ecologies is illustrated in the vignette through the interweaving of the pink “barrio house” boards with the new boards that signified our new life in the neighborhood. Metaphorically, the interwoven boards in my life resulted in my ability to “straddle[d] cultures, races, languages...,” transcending the hegemonic barriers in the ecologies of my life (Delgado Bernal, 2001). Thus, I learned I could live in any world I chose to live in—my quick and easy friendship with Jane across the street as well as Irene across the tracks illustrates my transience between ecological spaces, yet it also speaks to that “Chicana consciousness” that Delgado Bernal (2001) recognizes as “living with ambivalence while balancing opposing powers (p. 626).”

And opposing powers there were—from the white next-door neighbor, referenced in the vignette, who commented, eyeing our beautiful, small pink house when it was first moved into the neighborhood, “Is that the rock house you were gonna build, Rudy?” to other skeptics who wondered what in the world we were thinking, moving across the tracks and into the white neighborhood (Rubel, 1966; San Miguel, 1987). The lived experiences of the micro ecology spiraled and intertwined with the macro ecology as I experienced the subtle yet cynical attitude of a people who questioned my Mami and Papi’s motives for moving their family into uncharted territory, into Gloria Anzaldúa’s (2007) *Borderlands, La Frontera*, an Ecology of Community where “people of different races occupy the same territory...where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy” (Preface). As I now reflect on those memorable days, I imagine that perhaps Mom and Dad knew, in their own way, that there would be a few rough and jagged edges in the youthful experiences they destined for me in moving us to our new home, in an ecological space that was to challenge our comfort zone in different ways. From my younger childhood as I grew up playing in

the front yard of the pink house in the Sabinal barrio to my adolescent years living in the rock house on the edge of busy Highway 90, I learned to embrace a “new tribalism,” “a more inclusive identity that’s based on many features and not solely on race,” my Ecology of Self that “adds to, but does not dispossess... [my] own history, culture, or home-ethnic identity” (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Hernandez-Avila, & Perez, 2003).

Like the blending of the creamy brown and white swirls distinctly embedded in the stones of my rock house, my father and mother ensured through my upbringing that I would lead Gloria Anzaldúa’s “hybrid life” (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Hernandez-Avila, & Perez, 2003), a brown Hispana in a white world. I learned to weave the ecologies and transcend their boundaries, living in a world in which I could relate to others, regardless of race, still understanding and maintaining, just like my Mami’ taught me, my Ecology of Self—my cultural “commitment to family...and [my] desire to give back and help others” (Delgado Bernal, 2001). Now, living in the Rio Grande Valley on the Texas, United States / Mexican border, reflecting on my “Rock House Story,” I realize: “I am a border woman”; I have straddled borders all my life (Anzaldúa, 2007, Preface; Delgado Bernal, 2001). “The Rock House Story” narrates lived experiences which provided “compensations... and certain joys,” and an “exhilaration in being a participant in the... evolution” (Anzaldúa, 2007, Preface) as I learned to successfully “negotiate the ecologies in a seamless way” (Guajardo, M., Guajardo, F., Janson, C., and Militello, M., 2016, p. 29) and later navigate in the fast-paced professional and demanding role that was my parents’ dream for me: “Mi Hija va ser Maestra.”

## **The Holly Story**

*“Listen to me—the best thing we can do for her is to convene an ARD and excuse her from the TAAS test; otherwise, that kid will never graduate.” The counselor’s words rang in my ears as I sat facing Holly. After the countless hours she and I spent working on her writing skills, I wanted the best for my student. Perhaps they were right; for her, an attendance certificate might be just as good as a diploma. Her lower lip quivering, Holly raised her tear-stained face toward me. Her poignant plea was heartbreaking. “But Miss,” she sobbed, “I want to graduate just like everybody else. I want a real diploma.”*

I sometimes wonder what Holly’s future would have been like had she not passed the state-mandated TAAS test (Texas Education Agency). Labeled both an Economically Disadvantaged and a Special Education student, she decided to take the exam and graduate with a regular diploma, despite her counselor’s advice to “take the exemption” allowed for her based on her demographics. A senior with all the credits necessary to graduate, all Holly needed was to pass the TAAS, and she was determined she was going to do it. As her English teacher, I knew how tough it was going to be. That year, she and I spent countless hours during class, before and after school, and even during our lunch periods preparing for the test. She struggled with the material, often crying in frustration and despair, but she and I never gave up. The day she received her passing scores, we both cried, and I knew I was exactly where I needed to be.

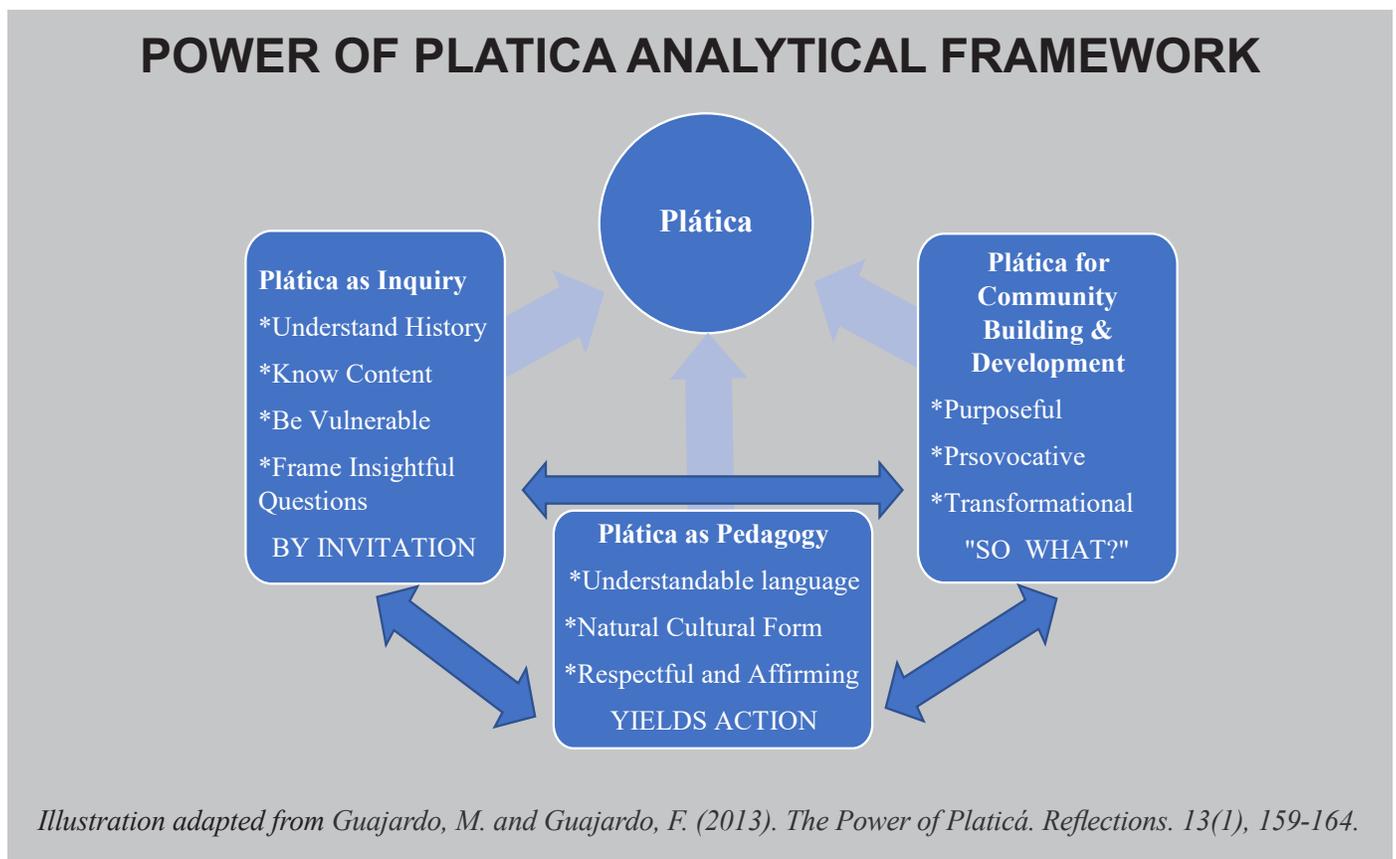
I remember vividly telling my daddy about Holly, my excitement spilling over with the pride and joy of her upcoming graduation. I detailed her struggles and the demands of the exam she had finally been able to pass. I remember well my father’s response to me. It was not, as I had expected, laced with praise and commendation for what I had done; it was full of question and wonder about what Holly was now going to do—after all, “Va a graduar; pos, que vaya al colegio”. My Papi had never met Holly, but his words ring in my ears to this day. I was Holly’s teacher, happy in the vision of her high school graduation; my father was her advocate, staunch in the vision of greater possibilities for my beloved student. I traveled back to Edinburg that day with a different perspective, a new vision, and a greater understanding of how much I did not learn in my preparation for my profession.

I lost track of Holly in the ensuing years; the last I knew, she had married and, having graduated from a local community college, worked in one of the hospitals as a nurse’s aide. Holly was one of my star students, yet I think I learned more from her than she did from me. I learned the importance of the human spirit; I learned the strength of

personal conviction, and I learned that my father’s response to Holly’s story was the affirmation of his hopes for me—now, it was my turn to pass it forward—to build pride, ambition and hope in others, as it was done for me.

## Story Analysis—Plática

Plática is an art. It is an engaging, dynamic, interactive tool that serves several purposes. A structured analysis of the “power of plática” will provide an insight to the collaborative, engaging and interdependent communicative mode which was the major form of dialogue practiced in our home and that of many other families of Mexican descent (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, p. 159). A “cultural form...akin to a nuanced multi-dimensional conversation,” the art of plática is most powerful when it is purposely developed; it can emerge as a form of inquiry, it can be pedagogical in nature, or it can be utilized as a conduit for community building and development (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, pp. 161-163). The robust, animated nature of plática gives its participants agency to transcend and weave among all three of these while the ongoing, engaging activities of “listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story making,” intermingle to give plática its unique and flavorful form. The Holly Story illustrates the “power of plática” and its ultimate value and impact as a communicative tool.



## “Mi Hija es Maestra—The Holly Story”: Story Analysis

In The Holly Story, the introductory vignette sets the stage, describing the heartbreaking plea of a young girl whose ambition is to pass the state mandated TAAS test, despite the fact that her high school counselor recommended that she be exempted from the exam based on her Special Education status. The introductory vignette is expanded as a longer and more detailed story, with vital components that add depth and perspective to the narrative. The basic elements of plática, including “listening, inquiry, storytelling, and story making” are critical components as the story unfolds, and the “personal, relational, provocative, and dynamic” nature

of plática (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, p. 160) is clear as my father was “full of question and wonder” during the course of the dialogue. Guajardo and Guajardo (2013) state that plática compels one to “pay attention to the story...to the environment surrounding the story...and to context” (p. 160). My Papi paid attention to the story and all its details, gaining new knowledge regarding standardized testing, special education accommodations, ramifications of the accountability system, and the impact of state mandated testing on our students and their future. At this point in the story, the Pedagogical nature of plática is apparent in my Papi’s new-found knowledge. In fact, “plática spaces are co-constructions, where conditions are manifest as collaborative and interdependent,” and my father understood Holly’s lesson much better than I.

Having shared with him the joy over Holly’s eventual passing of the exam and pending high school graduation, his pensive response “was not, as I had expected, laced with praise and commendation.” The tools of plática which my Papi had honed over the years, “how to think critically, how to ask the right question, or how to find the logic in an argument,” (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, p. 160) were not taught in the short six years he attended school; they were learned through plática, “en la universidad de la vida” (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, p. 160), and his lived experience obligated him to ask me one important question.

His “[well] framed insightful question” gave agency to plática’s “powerful tool for a relational inquiry process” (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, p. 162) as he asked, “¿Y ahora que?” And, now, what? “Va a graduar; pos que vaya al colegio.” Plática as Inquiry, in his simple question, “emerge[d] as a new knowledge that informs the work we do” (Guajardo, F., and Guajardo, M., 2013, p. 162). My father’s profound statement, a vision way beyond my narrow focus on test scores, turned the Pedagogical tide and taught me a lesson I’ll never forget. I realized that “I was Holly’s teacher,” happy that she had passed her test and was graduating, but, although he had never met Holly, “my father was her advocate, staunch in the vision of greater possibilities for my beloved student.” In “The Holly Story,” my father’s observations and commentary became the Pedagogical Plática that gave me, as I state in the story, “a different perspective, a new vision, and a greater understanding of how much I did not learn in my preparation for my profession.”

## ***Final Narrative--Closing Ode: Una Plática con mi Papi***

The final narrative shared in this article gives artistic license to the cultural communicative form, plática (Guajardo and Guajardo, 2013). Plática, is utilized as a dynamic tool expressed in the creative format of a dedicated poem, an ode, which, through direct address, gave agency to a heart-felt and revealing dialogue with my father. The Plática con mi Papi was used as a construct to weave Delgado Bernal’s (2008) metaphorical trenza of “personal, professional, and communal identities,” (p. 147) into a “mujerista sensibility” that embodies the “Latina holistic approach to life...based on collectivity, wholeness, reciprocity, and transformation” (p. 146). Foundational to the Ode are salient references to Gloria Anzaldúa’s hybrid life (Anzaldúa, Ortiz, Hernandez-Avila, & Perez, 2003), and other apt descriptions of the childhood I led as detailed in the organic data presented in the dissertation. Just as Richard Rodríguez (1982) used his classic novel, *Hunger for Memory*, “to consider the boy [he] once was...to describe the man [he is] now” (p. 5), so I gave agency to the Ode to my Papi to consider the impact that my childhood and my parents had on me and my development as an educator. The Ode, in the spirit of plática, is an open door, an extended story, a personal outpouring of the heart, and its readers “are invited into the author’s world...” (Ellis, 2004, p. 46) to dialogue with the stories recounted there, to make meaning of the traditional, cultural, and historical factors which my father mitigated for me, and which ultimately strengthened me as an instructional leader.

## ***Introduction to Plática con mi Papi***

The day my father left me, December 28, 2008, it seemed that time stood still. “My father was not supposed to die...I can still see him in my mind,” sitting across the kitchen table, eating breakfast and planning for the day (Gonzalez, K., 2008, p. 125). Ten years later, his sweater still hangs in the

kitchen where he left it; his hat is still right by the front door where he hung it. The date on the Virgen de San Juan calendar will perpetually be December, 2008, because even now, as I run my hand along the rough edges of the rock house he so painstakingly built, time stands still, and his spirit still lives.

When I reflect on my Papi's story, I realize it "is one that lives and moves" and has the power to impact others in a positive way (Guajardo, M. and Guajardo, F., 2010, p. 95).

Plática con mi Papi is not his story or mine; it is a "story that speaks to [readers] about their experiences or about the lives of others they know" (Ellis, 2004, p. 195). The ode is a story that speaks to every educator in the profession: a story of strength, ambition, expectation, and ethics. The Plática con mi Papi is not a story of the past, but a story for the future, for my future, and for the future of the many lives around me whom I touch.

My heart shattered when I lost my Papi; he was gone before I was able to say one last goodbye. He passed on, and I was thousands of miles away...how I wish I would have been by his side. So often I wish I could talk to him just one more time. So often I wonder just what I would tell him if I could have one last plática with my Papi...

## ***A Closing Ode: Una Plática con mi Papi***

"Mi hija va a ser maestra," así lo dijiste  
Assuredly, believingly, confidently, knowingly,  
You said it to all:  
"My daughter will be a Teacher,"  
A father's dream, your quest for my success.

*Yo creo que nunca te dí las gracias*—did I ever say a proper thank you?  
*Gracias, mi Papi,* for all that you did to make my life successful... for believing in me, and for giving me a vision of whom I could become.

I reflect on my past, my happy childhood, and on me, myself in particular.  
Papi, there is nothing singularly striking about me that one might say signaled success, yet somehow, you and Mami taught this too-tall, too-skinny, gawky little girl of yours to believe in herself.

You made me feel special, and loved, and capable,  
you not only gave me license, you gave me an obligation, an imperative,  
to succeed in an environment that might have otherwise worked against it.

*Yo creo que nunca te dí las gracias, thank you, mi Papi.*

*Como Casa de Piedra,* Sheltering, defending, protecting, providing,  
The strength of your presence my stronghold, my shield.  
Paving and pushing my path to unmapped places and spaces,  
Straddling cultures to champion my cause.

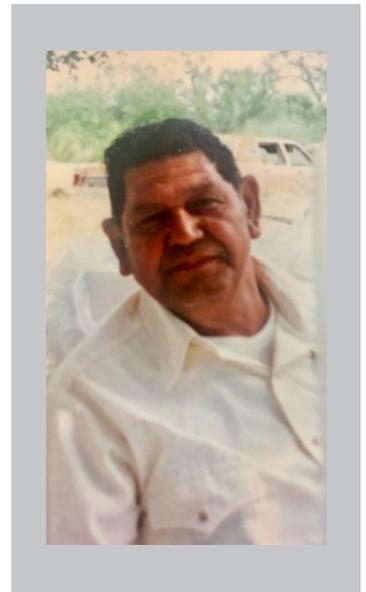
Remember when we built our rock house, Papi? La Casa de Piedra...

Tu, Mami y yo...living in sections of the pink house as we tore it down to clean the boards and weave them in with the new ones, so we knew we would always live in our pink house too. I remember platicando as you chipped and molded each stone, and I helped you put each rock in its own place as we formed the walls of our rock house... "Every rock has its place," you said, "cada Piedra tiene su lugar."

*Fuiste mi Piedra*

Living the borderlands, you knew what to do:  
Rough, rugged and sharp, or silent, solid and true,  
You were my rock, my pillar of strength.  
Strong, steady, stable and staunch, I knew all would be right if I was with you.

*You were my Rock, mi Piedra, mi Papi.*



Maybe because you were my Papi, and I was your “consentida,” your little girl, but somehow I felt that no matter the situation, you would make everything all right, no matter what. Remember when there was nothing that Mami could find to feed our family?

Money sometimes was sparse, but I never knew!

All I knew was that suddenly you would step into the kitchen with a flourish and a flair, becoming the chef of the hour, with your special “bomboline” recipe —Where did you get that name??—With whatever provisions you found, you somehow put a meal on our table, delicious and special, because you made it so. Never realizing all the hardships you and my Mami went through, we ate like kings, our “Bomboline Stew.”

*Entre La Hoya todo obstáculo cayó,*

The inequality, the injustice, the prejudice, the power  
All shards and fragments of life unfair, into the oya they flew  
You faced and embraced a new integration  
Living the Hybrid Life, you worked your way through.

How did you do it? I never realized the courage you had in ensuring we were given our rightful due. I remember when they assigned Mami to serve plates and clean dishes in the kitchen at the fireman’s barbecue—she was the only Mexican American there. You walked in there and brought her out of the kitchen to the front, to handle the money as people paid for their plates. No one was more qualified than she, you said, because she’s been handling money at our store for years. I was there that day. No one questioned you, and no one ever put Virginia in the kitchen again.

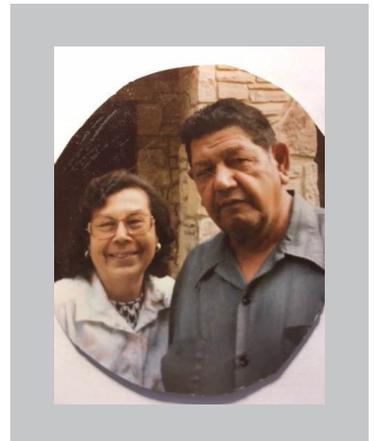
*Juntos tejieron la trenza,*

Papi the ambition, the resilience, the drive  
Mami the compassion, the kindness, the heart  
Weaving together the traits of the two,  
I stand in nepantla—Mexican American Mujerista,  
Your legacy true.

*¡Mami! Bella Roca!* How we’ve missed her, all of us, since she passed on. She was your rock; she stood by your side, every venture you took. I think I’m a lot like her; I do. She managed the store and took care of the business as well as taking care of all of us, and she still had time to make our birthday cakes, fix our Cream of Wheat atole every morning, and make sure my brothers and I always went to school with our clothes nicely starched and ironed. She was a Mujerista, taking care of it all, as I think I am now, weaving together the intellectual, spiritual, and familial sensibilities into the holistic Latina approach to life. From you, mi Papi, I learned to negotiate and navigate among any and all. I gained the *conocimiento* needed to know that awareness isn’t enough—it takes action to truly benefit the public good. From you I learned the value of hard work. I learned to never leave anything unfinished. From you, I inherited that passion, that drive, that burning ambition that springs from the soul, saying, “*¿Y ahora, que?*” and “*Now, what? What’s next?*”

*“Mi hija va a ser maestra,” así lo dijiste*

Assuredly, believably, confidently, knowingly,



Locked in my memory

*“Mi hija va a ser maestra”*

A father’s dream became a daughter’s legacy.

To be a teacher, el ser Maestra...a dream come true, for both of us, Papi. My career success came from a seed you planted many years ago, my loving father, a seed you nurtured and nourished throughout my life. I often wish that you and Mami could have lived to see me now, as I’ve advanced in my profession. I love my job, Papi, and I hope that you and Mami somehow know, can somehow see, that the dream for which we worked came true in such a wonderful way for me.

*Sientate. Vamos a platicár.*

Your coffee cup is waiting, pan dulce on the kitchen table.

*Andale, mi Papi...Vamos a platicár...*

You continue moving, inspiring, caring and loving, Mami and Papi, still watching over me, still speaking to me softly, alive in my heart.

*Anoche senti tu presencia; anoche bailaron bajo la luna...*

I know your presence is still here,  
platicádo con nosotros in your own way.

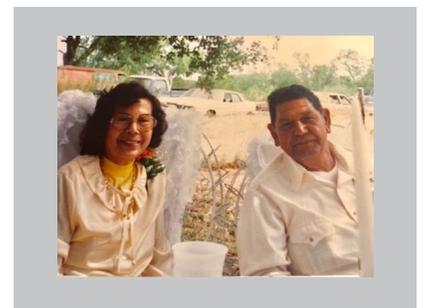
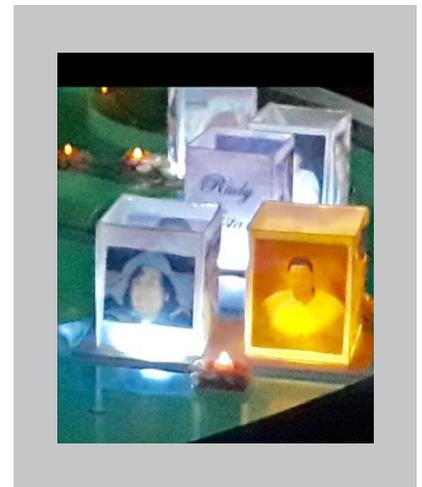
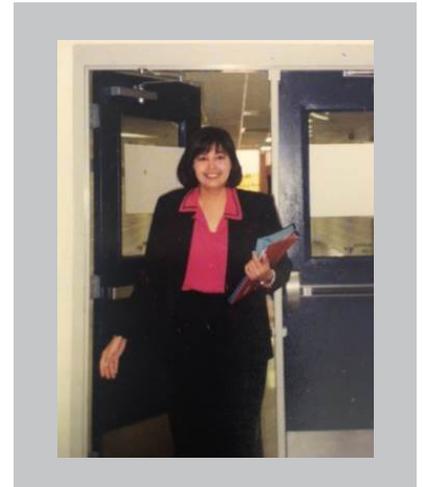
Last night, at JoAnna’s wedding, we lowered paper lanterns with pictures of departed loved ones on them into the calm waters of a moonlit pool, her beautiful way of sharing her special day with you.

As my brother and I each set,  
first your lantern and then Mami’s,  
gently into the water, you floated lightly amongst the others,  
and somehow, under the starlit sky, you found your way to my Mami’s side,  
and, as if enchantment ruled the night, in the stillness of the water,  
you twirled together, like paper lanterns, dancing in the moonlight;  
Mami and Papi, I heard you, speaking to us so softly, your pláticas of love.

**Author’s Note:** The creative piece above, titled *“Una Platica con mi Papi”* requires rhythm, flow and imagination. Literary and other references in the “Ode” are either referenced earlier in the article or are a part of the public domain.

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