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Ethnography in charting paths toward personal and social liberation: using my Latina cultural intuition

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Drawing on a Chicana feminist epistemology, the author, a Latina immigrant, presents how she used her cultural intuition to engage in a two-year ethnography with Latino immigrant families. She argues that for her engaging in ethnography with her “own community” is an endeavor that calls to the fore her homegrown epistemologies and her positioning as a Latina immigrant. The themes of doing ethnography en familia, using collective remembering and sense-making, and developing a libratory pedagogy point to an ethnography that strays from traditional, presumed “objective” data sources. Further, she argues that in these contexts of ethnography she was able to reclaim and integrate her various knowledges and identities toward a potential process of liberation.

Keywords: Chicana Feminist Theory; Latino; ethnography; cultural intuition; epistemology

Lilia: En mi opinion, Marco no debe estar en este programa. Han puesto a los alumnos equivocados en este programa. Marco decifra las palabras bastante bien y además comprende mucho de lo que lee. Yo veo que él lee mucho mejor que los otros niños que no los pusieron en el programa (In my opinion, Marco should not be in this program. They have misplaced students in the program. Marco decodes quite well and also comprehends much of what he reads).

Marco: Nosotros somos los más inteligentes y nos han puesto en ese Breaking the Code y los otros están en Open Court. Yo veo que algunos niños no saben casi nada y están en Open Court (We are the most intelligent ones and they’ve put us in that Breaking the Code and the others are in Open Court. I see that some kids don’t know almost anything and they are in Open Court).

Sr. Ruíz: ¿Y yo no puedo ir y decir que no quiero que él este en ese programa? (And can’t I go and say that I don’t want him in that program?)

Lilia: Sí, claro que sí. Vaya con la coordinadora del programa bilingüe y le preguntar que porque lo han puesto en ese programa. Yo le acompañaré si usted quiere (Yes, of course. Go with the bilingual coordinator and ask her why they have placed him in that program. If you would like, I will accompany you).

An important concern for Latinas is carving out spaces in academia that allow us to reclaim our subaltern, what Delgado Bernal (2001) refers to as “pedagogies of the home.” For many of us Latinas, our epistemies have been submerged, perhaps lost,
in our efforts to move successfully through a world that values Euro-American ways of doing and being (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990). This is not surprising since Latinas and Chicanas in the ivory tower are both a numerical and a political minority (Ek, Cerecer, Alanís, & Rodríguez, 2010). For those of us who do enter the academy, finding ways to recuperate and draw upon our personal knowledge systems is a critical way to challenge the epistemocide that non-dominant communities have endured. It is also a way to be true to ourselves and support Latino communities.

The conversation above, excerpted from my fieldnotes of a two-year ethnography with Latino immigrant families (a fuller version of this story will come later in the paper), demonstrates the relationships and opportunities for support that can be developed when we reject notions of distance and neutrality, often encouraged in traditional research, in favor of solidarity, advocacy, and intervention. As a Latina immigrant, I know firsthand how our social and material realities circumvent access to opportunities in the US. As a young Latina, I often wondered if the deficits through which the world saw me were indeed real, if our economically impoverished community was thus through some personal or cultural flaw that we held and that could not be eradicated through schooling. In those days I learned to survive school rather than thrive in it. As I began working as a researcher with Latino families and students, I realized I could not, would not, work with them and silently stand by as the system failed them if there was perhaps something I could do in their favor. I unapologetically drew upon my knowledge of schooling, my academic credentials, and my personal experiences and shared these with the families and the children and intervened with them when they desired. I would argue that my shared experiences, cultural intuition, and the investment of prolonged time and relationships en familia (discussed later) allowed me to access information that I would otherwise not have been privy to and to co-construct our understandings, advocate, and intervene in multiple cases.

At the time, I was not aware that what I was doing was using my homegrown episteme, one rooted in responsibility to community and developed as a result of my own positioning in society. I was simply doing what I had to do – for doing anything less would have been personally unforgivable. Indeed I wish, now that I have begun to understand the political ramifications of research through praxis rather than as an abstraction, that I had been more systematic in this approach, for then I would not only have been of support when it was necessary but would have made advocacy and intervention (co-constructed with children and parents) a central part of my work.

This paper is an initial foray into reclaiming my homegrown epistemologies. My initial attempt to understand what it is that I brought or could bring to my research and my teaching as a Latina immigrant proved to be a difficult task. Forcing the white mask on has become almost instinctual, initially a means to belong, to preserve my self-respect as a Latina in a world dominated by whiteness and more recently a means to succeed, part of “playing the game” (Urrieta, 2005). Yet, almost on a daily basis, I feel deeply the cultural and political incongruence and dissonance of my academic world, suggesting that I still do culture differently than “mainstream” academics.

Certainly, the research questions I pose, my focus on Latino communities, and my additive approach to language and cultural production are examples of the ways in which people of color impact research. But culture is in the doing, in the everyday acts that so often come to us unconsciously and uncensored, in the
moments that make us pause and in the gut-wrenching feeling that something isn’t quite right.

Ethnography has served me well in providing a context within which to examine my interactions in the field. Through very careful analysis and much reflection I have begun to uncover some of the ways in which my work serves a different purpose and looks and feels different than it might among those who do not have my particular “cultural intuition” (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The excerpt above is one such example. Rooted in Chicana Feminist Theory (Anzaldúa, 1987, 1990; Calderón, Delgado-Bernal, Pérez Huber, Malagón, & Vélez, 2012) and the work of other theorists of color (Hill Collins, 2000; Dillard, 2000), as well as in my mother’s teachings of como ser en la vida (how to be in the world), I examine, here, how my cultural and community-based knowledge and values colored my way of doing ethnography with eight Latino immigrant families. I would argue that reclaiming our diversity is, in itself, critically important for Latinas, because all people should have every right to retain their ways of knowing and to draw upon these in any institution. However, I also argue here that using our own epistemologies and allowing these to guide our research, without fear of doing research the “wrong” way or apologizing for caring, may lead to important understandings that may not be accessible to those who do not share similar cultural understandings with participants or have the same level of commitment (stemming from shared histories) to the communities with whom we study.

This is especially important in research with Latino immigrant communities who have historically been studied through objective approaches that have served only to essentialize them according to the white dominant gaze. Elsewhere (Monzó, 2013), I have argued that research that merely seeks to “know” Latinos is a colonizing project, an approach aimed at commodifying for the purposes of owning. This approach necessitates distance. An approach that attempts to transform our communities toward our own liberation is one that decolonizes through respect, reciprocity, and placing primacy on relationships. Distance in this approach is rejected. The Latino immigrant families with whom I worked are ones that are difficult to access because they live guarded lives, either because they are undocumented, speak little or no English, and/or are distrustful of outsiders being fully aware of their social positioning within current anti-immigrant legislation and ideologies. It takes shared experiences, shared language, commitment to community, and a willingness and deep engagement to make oneself as vulnerable as they are in the research context to develop the relationships that allow us deep enough into their lives to really understand and witness how they live their lives. I cannot stress enough the importance of prolonged time in the field. Time was key to the relationships we built where my cultural intuition alone would not have sufficed. The two years of “being there” were essential in getting to know the participants and the social contexts within which they lived. It was also essential for building the trust that allows people to share painful memories and difficult living conditions without being asked about them directly since asking directly may feel both intrusive and inappropriate (e.g. asking about legal status).

Ethnography with one’s own community is a philosophically and methodologically different exercise than studies with communities that one can hold, to some degree, at arm’s length, whether that be the goal or not. Shared cultural understandings and sociopolitical positioning defined our work of making sense of our lives and constructing data. My studies in ethnography served me well as an initial
introduction to the study of culture and method. However, my work with these Latino families clearly put many of these starting points into question and eventually I had to move beyond their limitations to uncharted terrain as a researcher, to what has been called “undisciplined ethnography” (Russel y Rodríguez, 2007) because the rules were made up by the actors themselves, negotiated in a dance of cultural complexity, identity politics, and my desire to, in some small way, advance the cause of liberation (theirs and my own). I use the concept of liberation to infer a process of self-empowerment. I recognize that actual liberation cannot occur within a capitalist political economy that produces unequal social and material conditions, including racism, poverty, sexism, and other antagonisms (McLaren, 2009). However, an important step is the understanding that our communities’ lack of educational achievement and other ills are a result of a societal structure that limits opportunities for the working poor and for people of color, among others, rather than a result of some individual or cultural flaw. In addition, an important first step toward liberation is taking action (parents and myself) on behalf of our children and our community.

I can only truly know that this work was very beneficial to me because it raised the level of commitment to my work and taught me new ways of valuing and understanding the Latino community and my own family and provided the spaces for me to integrate my academic and personal selves that have most often felt fragmented. I don’t know how it helped the families or the students, except that with those whom I spent the greatest time the relationships have continued well beyond the specific research project and through the years these students have sought my advice on career pathways. In my view some of the specific examples I provide below of my participation, because of my knowledge of educational contexts, resulted in what I believe to be positive immediate outcomes. Because some researchers have found that participants do not always appreciate the ways in which researchers portray them, I made a point of sharing the findings I was constructing and the interpretations I was making with participants and I actively sought for them to rectify what they disagreed with and to help me see their lives through their eyes.

Thus, this ethnography involved (1) constant attention to and reflection of my own and their narratives in order to make sense of how our common and different social positions shaped our understanding and interpretations of reality; (2) dialogue that brought forth forgotten memories, painful testimonios, and sometimes regrets that help to create deep rapport and an honest depiction of our subjectivities; (3) the development of relationships that helped me “find myself” when so much of my life is culturally fragmented or in constant struggle; and (4) a quest to develop through reciprocal interactions my and their voice, agency/advocacy, and liberation.

While some may question the “objectivity” of my research, I would respond that the rigor of my method lies in the subjective presence I inhabit and the reflexivity I engage in which allows for authentic interactions and honest personal stories as well as a collective sense that we are doing this together for the betterment of our community. I would, in turn, ask, “Who is it that defines research as the antithesis of action and who benefits from that definition?” I would also ask that if we, Latinas, are truly sought for the different perspectives that our particular histories develop then where in academia are the spaces for our ways of being and doing? I would also echo the wisdom of others (Anzaldúa, 1987; Dillard, 2000; Hurtado, 2003) that we must be our own champions in this fight by constructing our own theories and
our own ways of engaging that sustain who we are, how we come to know, what we believe and value, and, yes, what feels right to us.

**Borderlands consciousness: producing Latina ways**

The work of Anzaldúa (1987, 1990), and the work of those who have extended her ideas (Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 2001, 1998; Hurtado, 2003) have had a profound effect on my understanding of my place in the world, in academia, and in my work as an ethnographer, in particular. Concepts such as “borderlands consciousness,” “nepantla,” and “el mundo zurdo,” speak to me as a Latina because they reflect my own ways of being in the world, ways that prior to finding this literature, I enacted without clear awareness of the roots of such performances.

Borderlands consciousness (Anzaldúa, 1987) refers to identities produced in multiple and often contradictory physical, social, cultural, and political spaces – spaces that are inhabited by both dominant and non-dominant forms of feeling, seeing, and doing. Anzaldúa (1987) beautifully and poetically depicts her borderlands consciousness through her struggles moving from the corners of English dominance and academia to the marginalized spaces inhabited by Chicanos and lesbians. Her work stretches us to conceive of borderlands consciousness as multiple, shifting from moment to moment, always in process. An important aspect of borderlands consciousness is that it depicts identities in conflict through its multiple forms of positioning. For the Latina this positioning may include dominant identities as students or academics, English fluent, Christian, US-born and/or “acculturated” and marginalized identities as Spanish fluent or pocha, Latina/Chicana, immigrant, and culturally outside the mainstream. Thus, Latina ways of seeing and doing are always produced in internalized conflict, living out tensions defined by difference in power and status and contradictions in desire.

These tensions, however, embodied in everyday doing, offer important insights into the structure of oppression and its manifestations as well as an understanding of privilege and power (Dillard, 2000). Painful as they sometimes are, rather than attempting to eradicate these contradictions, embracing our fragmentation is one way to become empowered, realizing that in these spaces we can envision possibilities for equity and liberation (Dillard, 2000). Those who live out these multiple and often contradictory material, social, and political spaces learn to use these multiple lenses simultaneously, thriving through the new and transformative insights that these spaces provide. Anzaldúa terms this space “nepantla” (Anzaldúa, 1987).

This fragmentation occurs as a product of engaging in both dominant and subaltern spaces, spaces that sometimes are fundamentally contradictory in their ways of understanding the world and in which we are only ever partially valued. This breakage of our whole selves occurs at multiple levels. Our languages, our cultures, our bodies, our intellect, and our hearts are heard, seen, valued, differently across contexts. As we strive to carve spaces for ourselves in academia, we encounter the “epistemological racism” (Scheurich & Young, 1997) that interprets our “ways of knowing and engaging” as “soft” and other presumed “objective” “methods” as “scientific.” In such spaces, the parts of us that have been learned in our homes and communities and felt part of us – our Spanish and Spanglish, our right and our responsibility to feel and care, our values – are considered obstacles rather than resources. Conforming to Eurocentric and masculine knowledge systems breaks us into pieces and in the process robs us of our full humanity. This is the colonizer’s
greatest strength against the Other, the dismembering of the parts of us, a dehumanizing project that leaves us literally in pieces (Calderón et al., 2012). We know, however, that we draw on more than our minds to make sense of the world. Our spirit guides and sustains us in the face of oppression and our bodies carry pain, love, excitement, and all sorts of emotions that we often cannot put into words.

For me, embracing this fragmentation involves a quest to understand what it is that I have lost conscious thought about in my attempt to navigate in dominant spaces. This is a quest to understand that which makes my work a product of my social positionings as a Latina immigrant of working-class background, an academic, and my mother’s daughter, influenced by her teachings and the socialization in households and communities (Moll & Greenberg, 1990). It involves critical reflection of the tensions in living as a member of the oppressed but having the cultural capital, financial means, and social status of an academic. It also involves a constant vigilance of my own potential as a “researcher” to name and/or appropriate the realities of the families with whom I wish to learn, perhaps even exploit them, because my life may now differ from theirs more than I would like to admit (Villenas, 1996).

Delgado Bernal (1998) has discussed the notion of “cultural intuition” as an essential aspect of a Chicana feminist epistemology. Cultural intuition is a “sixth sense” that draws on one’s personal experience, including community memory and collective experience, professional experience, and the analytical research process (Calderón et al., 2012). This concept is one that attests to us as whole persons, what Anzaldúa (1990) depicted as “mindbodyspirit” and serves to acknowledge our body and our spirit as forms of knowing equally as valid as mental functions. Cruz (2001) contends that a Chicana/Latina Feminist Theory must recognize the brown body as central to our histories and our identities. She points out that our brown bodies hold knowledge related to the ways our bodies have been and continue to be oppressed, forced into dominant frames of acceptance, and made to quiver with pain and anger. Our bodies are said to rejoice within “el mundo zurdo” (the left-handed world), a social space where people can come together in solidarity to be who they are, where social stigmas cease, ambiguities are accepted, even sought, and our bodies engage in the ways that feel natural and appropriate to them (Anzaldúa, 1983). This concept has been primarily utilized by Chicanas/Latinas that seek to challenge heteronormativity. However, the body can be utilized to manifest power, empathy, love, and caring. The ways we use our bodies and the ways our bodies respond to others in the research process can have important consequences for the research. Our bodies hold knowledge that sometimes can elude our conscious thoughts and understandings. It can be an important source of knowledge if we learn to listen to our own bodies and to watch bodily performances of those with whom we study.

A Chicana/Latina epistemology also recognizes the value of the spirit, which may inform our understandings of the research context and participants, especially when certain intersubjectivity exists that makes us feel emotionally tied to participants. The notion that spirituality is antithetical to the research process is related to the idea of objectivity. Only when we believe that traditional forms of data sources are objective do forms related to spirituality seem “blasphemous” to the goals of research (Dillard, 2000). Spirituality is a concept that can encompass different things for different people. It is not necessarily tied to religion. Our spirit can be anything that moves us in ways beyond what our intellect supports. Dillard contends that it is the spirit that has given the Black community the sense of purpose to act on behalf
of their own and each other’s liberation, to know just how to teach and care for Black children and that relationships are the basis of a spiritual pedagogy (Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, & Tyson, 2000). This has had a profound impact on my understanding of my epistemology as a Latina for as you will see in later sections in this paper, my work was all about relationships. Something beyond my cognitive understanding of our community and our political and economic positioning moved us to spend the kind of time and energy that I did with them and they with me.

Tied to this notion of reclaiming our various ways of knowing is a project both personal and political that empowers and liberates us from the confines of the colonizers. It is not only a project of acknowledging and reclaiming forgotten ways of knowing but also of disclosing and reconfiguring new understandings by telling our stories as Chicanas and Latinas, our stories that have rarely been told in our own words and with our own meanings.

Much used toward this end is the use of testimonios, which tell the stories of the subaltern, not through the voice of the academic or the writer – those with the power to be heard – but in their own voices and for their own purposes. In this way, testimonios provide the space to self-author (Beverley, 2005). To use one’s voice and know it will be heard is liberating and empowering (Beverley, 2005). For testimonios to have this empowering impact they require not just “interviewing” but “listening with [a] raw openness (Keating, 2005)” that moves us to action. To me, this means that testimonando is a social engagement in which the listener is moved to feel what the testimonialista feels, to share their own painful stories in support and solidarity with the testimonialista, and to validate their experiences and their interpretations. For those of us who engage in research with our own communities, testimonios are likely to bring forth memories of similar instances of oppression and along with the memories the feelings of pain and anger that we share collectively for our positioning in society and these shared experiences support a solidarity that requires action for ourselves, each other, and our community. Beverley argues that the subaltern ceases to be such the moment their voice becomes a source of someone’s interest, something to be heard. This pedagogy of testimonio can help transcend pain toward a space for healing and societal transformation:

Listening to, sharing, and transcending struggles, pain, hopes, and dreams yields a type of interdependent solidarity, or in lak’ech — a Mayan philosophy that can be translated as, “Tu eres mi otro yo” or “You are my other me.” This type of interdependent solidarity allows people to connect across social positions, across differences, across language, across space, and across time (Flores Carmona & Delgado Bernal, 2012). (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012, p. 368)

**Ethnography with whom? Ethnography for whom?**

This paper tells a story about a Latina who in many ways found a “home” amidst eight Latino immigrant families. I am this Latina. Home, for me, is a place where my whole self, with the many contradictions I inhabit, can feel at ease, accepted. For me, this is a place where my strengths as a Latina woman (the virtues I learned from my mother and those I learned but chose to reject), my academic knowledge and skills, and my thirst for social justice can co-exist.

In writing this particular paper, I went back to examine the ways in which I engaged in research with these families, combing through the data, my researcher’s journal, and reflecting on the feelings and interactions that defined my work then
and which led, in some cases, to relationships that have lasted over a 10-year period of deep friendships based on mutual caring, respect, and shared understandings of each other’s lives, our shared and individual histories, and our commitment to our families and the Latino community.

These families were in many ways representative of the many Latino families that have joined us in the US in the past decade when the economic downturn has been especially brutal on the working poor across the globe, including in Mexico and Latin America. These were families rich with home and community resources that rarely got recognized or picked up in school contexts (Monzó, 2009; Faulstich Orellana, 2009; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) but they struggled economically, with English-only contexts, and lacked instrumental knowledge about schools or social networks who could provide this type of support (Rueda, Monzó, & Arzubiaga, 2003).

This study was a very personal endeavor for me from the start. I used my ethnographer’s skills, instinctively transformed to engage with community in ways that felt right to me. The research question initially explored in this study was how eight immigrant families negotiated the sometimes-opposing ideologies and cultural practices that children and youth encountered in homes and schools. Specific findings related to this question have been published elsewhere (see Monzó, 2005, 2009; Monzó & Rueda, 2009). In retrospect, it was a personal quest to learn how to negotiate my own various identities and to come to terms with the painful experiences of my own youth.

I spent two years with these families, at home, at school, and in the community, with over 200 visitas with families and weekly visits to the schools to observe the children and youth. In many ways these families became my family as I learned to know and care for the children and their mothers deeply. I was privy to the children’s pains and struggles in schools and in homes, pains of growing up in the middle of two cultures, pains of first love, pains of rebellion against perceived parental control, pains of shame and humiliation as English learners and racial minorities, pains of fear for their futures, pains of anger for a world that seemed so unfair.

I was consistently reminded that they were living my life (or a very similar one). Their pains, their shame, their fears were the same ones I had experienced 20 years earlier and in many ways still experienced today but at a different level. I was caught in the middle of parent–child and school–home conflicts often and negotiated to the best of my ability my desire to support and advocate for them and myself (for their issues were my own — only displaced in time and place).

While I saw the children in me, I also saw their parents in my own parents, and I continually felt the need to share with them my own experiences as an immigrant child growing up in the US so that they could understand what their children were going through, as I believed my own parents never did or could. And I found myself empathizing with my own parents in ways that I had not done before.

We also laughed a lot, watched TV together, went shopping, ate many, many meals together, teased each other playfully, exchanged cooking recipes, make-up and diet tips, and shared our hopes and dreams. How does objectivity come into play in this type of research context? It doesn’t nor would I ever want it to. My subjectivity lent rapport that went beyond the ability to converse openly about a topic. It gave me insights into their lives and my own life in ways that I cannot measure. I don’t know how it enhanced their lives but it brought me the wonder of youth, the wonder of friendship, and the wonder of hope.
Ethnography in this case was not a method of studying a culture but rather the practice of developing collective understandings of our own experiences and their variations and developing relationships that enriched our lives and empowered us all in different ways. It became a study in which both their and my stories of pain and hope and strength were put forth for all of us to hear and analyze and make sense of together. In this section I describe us – the participants of this ethnography – and some of the details about the study (for a more extensive and traditional understanding of the study, see Monzó, 2005; Monzó & Rueda, 2009).

Although contextualized through community and schools, the bulk of this study is based on eight families who were immigrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. All of the parents had lived in the US for at least 10 years and all but one of the families had immigrated as adults married and/or with children. The exception was a family in which both parents had arrived as teenagers in the US. Three families were transnational, meaning that they had left children behind in their countries of origin. These families’ lives involved a great deal of talk and activity around those children left behind, including looking for reunification paths. Of the eight families, four were undocumented but one of these families obtained legal residence during the course of the study. Of the children, only one, aged 14, was undocumented.

All of the families spoke predominantly Spanish at home, although children were often heard speaking to each other in English. Most fathers spoke some English, whereas only one of the mothers spoke sufficient English to communicate in English-only contexts. The families were predominantly working class, holding jobs that involved construction, house cleaning, factory work, and one father was a truck driver. All but one of the families rented apartments that were small by middle-class standards and often cramped. Some of these were one-room units that doubled as living room and bedroom. One family owned a large home but rented out various rooms to three other families, keeping only one room for the parents and one room for their three children. Most parents’ education levels ranged between having completed fifth grade and having had no formal schooling at all. All had little understanding of the US education system and none of the families could point to anyone in their social networks that could orient them toward educational issues or college access. However, these families developed rich resources for learning for their children and attempted to foster academic identities among them (Monzó, 2009).

I am a Latina immigrant woman. I define myself this way culturally, linguistically, socially, politically. Born in Cuba, I immigrated with my family at the age of four and settled in Miami, Florida until the age of 14, when we moved to Los Angeles. As a young child in Miami, my differences did not seem as stark to me as they did when I arrived in Los Angeles. I am not certain if this was due to age, my arrival to a new school in a new city at such a difficult age when social relationships define one’s existence, or if indeed I experienced fewer instances in which my difference was marked. As I think back, I recall my understanding in elementary school that I was not white, humiliating comments in reference to my family’s working-class status, and the many ways in which my parents did things differently than others (even though the others that I knew were also mostly Cuban, but expectations were set forth by dominant culture).

In Los Angeles, my position as a working-class young woman living in a predominantly working-class Latino community was crystallized. As I became more aware of my surroundings as a teen it was clear that we were not part of the
dominant majority. In Los Angeles my friends were mostly Mexican and as I remembered nothing of my life in Cuba, I began to see my identity rooted in the similarities of experiences with other Latinas and Latinos. Our position as racial and linguistic minorities and the shared experiences this positioning supported became the basis of my perspective on the world. As an undergraduate at UCSD and later a graduate at USC, it became evident to me that my whole world had previously been isolated from dominant spaces, and more so than ever I understood my difference and my social, political, cultural marginality in the US.

Like most of the parents in this study, my parents did not speak English as I was growing up. Today, although my father understands some English, he is far from fluent and often mixes up information he is given in English contexts. My mother does not speak any English. Like the families in my study, I too grew up working class. My father, who completed school up to third grade, worked painting houses and work was often scarce. My mother, who completed the sixth grade, began working when I entered middle school, doing factory work in the garment industry, first in Miami and later in Los Angeles. I recall engaging in brokering practices as early as I can remember when we were able to read labels at the supermarket. Today, my sister and I are still called upon to broker for our parents in most English-only contexts, including those that involve mailed documents to their home. In addition, as our literacy skills increased, we were also called upon to manage most literacy tasks that were in Spanish.

Although there are many differences among Latino immigrant groups in the US (country of origin, age of arrival, class, method of social incorporation, city of settlement) that should prevent us from treating Latinos as a monolithic group (Curwen, 2009), there are also important similarities and a certain cultural, economic, and political affinity that allows for a shared sense of struggle and purpose within the social spaces of ethnography that perhaps leads to a certain “cultural intuition” (Delgado Bernal, 1998) between the researchers and the participants or a sixth sense, if you will, about “what’s really going on here?” And this shared affinity had, I believe, important implications methodologically. It is these methodological implications that I explore in this paper.

Using my cultural intuition

In preparing this manuscript, I sought out to recognize, in the data and through memories, my own cultural intuition, that combination of homegrown epistemologies, knowledge about ethnography, and my knowledge of Latino communities gleaned through personal experience and the literature. I sought to document the ways the youths, mothers, and I interacted that differed from traditional conceptions of research. Three themes stood out to me that clearly reflected aspects of my mother’s teachings, my positioning as an immigrant and a racial and linguistic minority in the US, and a Latina woman in search of a path toward my own and my community’s liberation.

Engaging en familia: redefining research relationships

The concept of family, for me, invokes a sense of caring and mutual trust (even though most people likely have family members that may not seem trustworthy). It also conjures up notions of responsibility to support each other when possible.
“Estamos en familia” (“We are among family”) is a phrase I heard often growing up. It was often used to encourage the sharing of sensitive or personal information or to put someone at ease if they felt embarrassed or awkward. In the Latino community, family is not an exclusive term defined by blood or even marriage ties. The affiliation is commonly extended to close family friends. I grew up with many tías and tíos who were not directly related to us but earned this affiliation through their close friendships with our parents and their children became our primas and primos.

For me, en familia is a context in which pretenses can be dropped. Where one is accepted as they are. This is an important context for me because so much of my time is spent in circles where I have to be conscious of what I say and how I behave, lest I interact in ways that are immediately detected as “different” and “inappropriate” for an academic by our society’s Eurocentric normalizing mechanisms. I recognize being en familia in bodymindspirit for I actually breathe easier, my body relaxes, and I think freely without the confines of saying the “right” thing. En familia there are of course judgments of right and wrongdoing, but not of belonging or acceptance.

My time with the families, especially the children and mothers, was characterized by being en familia, not immediately but upon having spent extended time together, learning each other’s struggles as Latino immigrants of working-class background, bonding over foods and laughter. As we learned to care and trust each other, our relationships became the primary reason to continue the work and the formal purpose of “collecting data” became secondary. I would argue, however, that this is the stronghold of my work because without these relationships of caring and trust, the “data” – the many stories and activities in which we engaged – would not have been constructed.

Caring for the children meant that I strove to be their friend and their ally by intervening when I thought they might get into trouble at school, helping them with homework, tutoring, and making sure they understood class assignments. Once I learned that they attempted to “pass for English fluent” to preserve their sense of dignity (Monzó & Rueda, 2009), I would wait for the teacher to explain assignments in English and then run around explaining it to the children in Spanish to support their content area knowledge. For many of them I believe I was their friend and their confidant and, perhaps, someone who was an adult but also in touch with their realities. They often shared with me complaints about their parents, fears about school and their futures, and questions about dating and college. I attempted to advise in the best way possible. I shared my mistakes but also worried at length about how to protect them from making the ones I had made (although I knew that was not possible). I felt their pain as if it were my own and felt helpless in situations when there was nothing I could do. The following excerpt of an incident with Lucia (15 years old), taken from my researcher’s journal, which logged my feelings and emotions during the research, shows that my relationships to the youths were far from that of a dispassionate researcher striving for “objectivity.”

Yesterday at Lucia’s home, I observed an argument between Lucia and her father. He was angry, complaining about her volunteer work, planting gardens in the community. He seemed to think that she was wasting her time and that instead she should be home studying. I wanted to interject and say that she wasn’t wasting her time, that not only was it a wonderful way to support her community but it was also something that may help her in college applications. But he was too angry, ranting. I didn’t think it was my place at that particular moment. Perhaps I should have done something but what? I’m...
not sure I should be telling the parents how to raise their child or intervening in family arguments.

Lucia was quiet for the first few minutes looking down at her lap. Later, she just ran into the bathroom and slammed the door. Mrs. Pérez, who was sitting on the bed that doubled as their couch, had tears in her eyes. She attempted to calm Mr. Pérez down, “Ya deja de discutir. Mira que se angustia mucho la niña cuando le gritas. Ya lo hablamos mañana con más calma (Stop arguing. You know it upsets her very much when you yell at her. We will talk it over tomorrow more calmly).” Everyone was quiet for a few minutes and then he left.

I asked Sra. Pérez, “¿Quiere que me vaya? No hay problema. Yo entiendo que las discusiones ocurren pero si usted se sentiría mejor me voy y mañana le hablo (Would you like me to leave? There’s no problem. I understand that arguments happen but if you would feel better I’ll leave and call you tomorrow).” But she said, “No, de todas formas ya escuchó todo (No, you already heard everything anyway),” and laughed sadly. She then went to see if Lucia would open the bathroom door and let her in but she would not. She went on to say, “Es que el aveces no sabe como hablarles. Ya le he dicho que no hay que gritarles, ya están muy grande para eso. Pero no me entiende (It’s that he sometimes doesn’t know how to talk to them. I’ve already told him that we don’t have to yell at them, that they are too old for that already. But he doesn’t understand me).”

I told her that I could relate because my father too had never really known how to talk to my sister and me and shared some similar stories. I think she felt relieved because she then continued to talk a little more relaxed. Lucia came out of the bathroom but then went into the hall closet where they have a small TV set. This small closet doubles as both a place to hang their clothing as well as a place where they can have a little privacy. I left a little later, going into the little closet to say goodbye to her. I hugged her and touched her cheek. She seemed sad and a little embarrassed.

I felt so bad. I wish I had been able to escape somehow so that they would not have to feel embarrassed that I had seen the argument. I will call them tomorrow to see how Lucia is doing.

Tomorrow I will start to tell Sra. Pérez about the importance of being involved in after school programs and volunteer activities, how these are viewed positively in academia and the opportunities they provide for other kinds of learning. Hopefully I will get the opportunity to bring it up to Lucia too so that she can understand that her father just wants the best for her even though it doesn’t show through all the screaming. But I’m not sure how. Lucia is so sensitive. If she thinks I’m taking his side she will clam up and then she may feel more alienated. It’s like replaying so many incidents in my own life and yet I don’t really know what to do to fix it for her. I feel so useless.

The excerpt above shows how my extended time with the family put me sometimes in situations in which I was not always certain how to respond. But it was this deep involvement that allowed me access to learn deeply about participants’ lives, their interactions, their values and the conflicts that occurred due to generation and cultural conflict between school and home. Lucia had learned that community involvement was something that was important as an aspect of development and college access. Parents, faced with a desire for their children to succeed academically and having little knowledge of the US educational system, sometimes attempted to isolate them from experiences that they were afraid might take too much time from their schoolwork. Mothers and fathers often also had very different types of interactions with both school contexts and their own children and they often brought in
different experiences and understandings to mediate how they sought to support their children’s education and development. In this particular case, Sra. Perez was more familiar with student participation in after-school programs and community activities. She had been working for years as a housekeeper to various upper-middle-class families and saw that the children in these households supplemented their regular school hours with other clubs and other projects. An important realization is that without this level of depth or the relationships that were fostered the family would likely have not had this argument in my presence and thus I would not have learned that this information was both lacking and a potential source of friction in the family. Had a researcher with less in-depth knowledge of the family been privy to the scene, they may have erroneously interpreted the family as highly conflict-ridden. Certainly the family over the years have had their share of conflicts as all families tend to do but they are also a very close-knit family who love each other and support each other and enjoy doing things together.

My relationship with the mothers was equally intimate, especially with the mothers that I visited most often. Our bonds were based on working together to support their children’s success. But we also bonded as women. Even though they had more traditional female roles and were often surprised at and maybe even disapproving of my more “liberated” ways, I felt accepted and valued by them in the same way that I accepted and valued them. I was a window into their children and they were a window into my parents. This had nothing to do with age. I was actually older than some of the mothers. It had to do with our experiences as immigrants in the US and with our understandings of class and cultural differences.

But my bond with those mothers with whom I spent the most time grew into friendships. We shared diet tips, talked about the latest soap opera, and chatted about each other’s husbands as friends often do. We knew that we were doing a research project and that I would go home and write notes after each visit but we also knew that we enjoyed doing things together and that we did not really know how our interactions added or did not add to the focus of the research project. It was not always on our minds. The research got done in the process of engaging in relationships. Indeed our relationships were reciprocal. They asked for my opinion and assistance on educational matters but they also offered advice and suggestions regarding my own problems with my family and my husband. Indeed it was Sra. Perez whom I turned to when I faced a personal crisis and whose caring and supportive comments and hugs saw me through a very difficult time then, and again, years later. These relationships built out of mutual sharing were ones that transcended time, distance, and changes in our lives.

Collective remembering and sense-making

Along with participating in the many activities that the families engaged in throughout the two years I spent with them, an important aspect of our work together was conversations. These conversations, what are often called interviews, were really characterized as dialogues in which participants and I both contributed our own stories and beliefs and these in turn contributed to further thought processes, and new memories, perhaps long forgotten, that we each shared, allowed us both to know the other in a way that went beyond knowing facts about a person’s history or even their beliefs regarding a particular incident. These were shared moments into each other’s souls and through these conversations, a silent pact of commitment was fostered in
me, a commitment to them and to a greater we, the “we” who endures painful experiences as working-class Latina women. The following excerpt shows what these conversations were like:

Sra. Pérez
(with sadness): Nuestra idea siempre fue regresar a México [a Mexico] ya que las niñas terminan sus estudios. Yo el pendiente que tengo es que las niñas ya sepan cuidarse. Ellas yo sé que no van a regresar con nosotros. Ya van a estar acostumbradas a aquí. Yo lo que no quisiera es que un día se me vayan a querer ir de mi lado, que se rompa la familia. Lucía dice que se va a mudar cuando vaya al college. Yo sí mis hijas se quieren ir de mi lado a mi se me va a romper el corazón. Yo quiero que ellas no pierdan eso que es de nosotros, ese calor de nosotros (Our thought was always to return [to Mexico] when the girls finished their schooling. What worries me is that the girls know how to take care of themselves. I know they are not going to return with us. They will already be accustomed to here. What I do not want is for them to one day want to leave my side, that the family will be torn apart. Lucía says that she will move away when she goes to college. If my daughter wants to leave my side, my heart will break. I don’t want them to lose that which is ours, that warmth of ours).

Lilia: Yo dejé mi casa para ir a la universidad pero regresaba todos los sábados (I left my home to go to the university but I returned every Saturday).

Sra. Pérez: Pero no es igual (But that isn’t the same).

Lilia
(with sadness): No, no es igual. Y créame que a veces hubiera deseado no irme porque es difícil estar sola a esa edad. Pero a la vez yo siempre les digo a los jovencitos que ese tiempo fuera me ayudó a encontrar a mi misma. Es cierto que la separación a la familia y el estar en el contexto de la universidad les puede hacer olvidar un poco sus raíces a los jovencitos pero yo veo que llega el punto, cuando uno madura, uno recobra ese valor por la cultura y por la familia. Para mí así fue, es que hay mucha discriminación en este país y uno quiere no sentirse rechazado pero llega el momento que se da cuenta uno que nuestra comunidad es la que nos acepta. Sí es cierto que al irme o al mejor el estudio, me aisló mucho de mis padres. Ellos en realidad no saben mucho de mi trabajo o de mi vida. Yo podría ser más abierta con ellos y hablarles de mis cosas (No, it isn’t the same. And believe me that sometimes I would have wished I had not left because it was difficult to be away from my family at such a young age. But at the same time I always tell young kids that that time away helped me find myself. It is true that being away from the family and the university context sometimes makes young kids forget their roots but at some point, when we mature, we recapture our value for culture and family. It was like that for me. It’s that there is much discrimination in this country and one wants not to be rejected but the time comes when we realize that our community is the one that accepts us. It is true that going away, or perhaps my education, isolated me from my family. In reality, they don’t know much about my work or my life. I could be more open with them and talk about my things with them).

My own story above reveals that higher education can be both empowering and alienating to a first-generation Latina college student (perhaps to all first-generation college students). It is my hope that sharing these sentiments with Sra. Pérez, although difficult for myself to share and for her to hear, may have prepared her for
some of the pitfalls of higher education so that she could mediate that process with her own family when the time came. While programs that teach the college admissions process can be found, it is doubtful that they get at the personal nuance that I shared in the excerpt above. It is also doubtful that I would have shared this experience had it not been for the *confianza* that we developed through the many hours of time spent together.

Zavella (1993) heeds an important warning that being of the same community or having similar experiences does not always lead to insider knowledge or working *en familia*. I do not claim to generalize my own experiences to other researchers and believe that each researcher faces both an insider and an outsider status and that this status may be perceived differently by different participants in the same study and is likely to shift depending on the particular context. I shared many points of common experience with the families but also many points of differences. My own way of understanding culture as highly dynamic and subject to individual agency led me to use my cultural intuition as a guide to ask questions but not as a source from which to presume to know.

The excerpt above shows the reciprocal exchange process of sharing our experiences and our beliefs with each other. An important aspect of this and many conversations I had with families is that there were no “expert” voices. Indeed the issue under discussion was not resolved, as it could not be for the question of identity is complex. Sra. Perez’s concerns were real and had to be honestly validated. My comments clearly drew on personal as well as professional experience, but my own ambivalence about what I may have lost in return for “finding myself” is also evident. We did not come up with any solutions but I believe our comments provoked each other’s thoughts in ways that made evident the complexity.

**Libratory pedagogy: advocating for me by advocating for them**

I am today a Latina woman with a PhD. I live in an upper-middle-class community and although I would not say I am wealthy, I do not have to worry about financial matters. Some may question whether the families with whom I study are really my community anymore, as I am so far removed in terms of class, language, and opportunity. Indeed, I have often asked myself this question and sometimes feel an outsider in the contexts in which I study, indeed in the contexts in which my own parents still live. In those moments I see that I no longer do things in the ways I used to. I now enjoy luxuries (the opera, the symphony) that many working-class Latinos do not have access to; I also see that I reject practices that I once lived by and that are part and parcel of working-class communities because much of our lives are structured by what we have access to. Yet in these moments of questioning I remember the stories that have defined who I am and that for me provide the cultural intuition that allows me to connect with the Latino community and to keep our interests at the forefront.

I remember painfully how I was once ashamed of my family for not speaking English. I remember the humiliation in my father’s face the time he was told that he should learn English by a police officer and the time my mother was ignored, and rendered invisible, by a bus driver when she asked for a bus transfer because she could not ask for it in English. I remember my fear of speaking out in a university classroom that was filled with White dominant students because I doubted my own intelligence and, perhaps, even my right to speak. I also recognize that the opportu-
nity to access higher education and to move up the social ladder is not afforded to all. I have been privileged to have opportunities that other Latinas, as smart and as resourceful as myself, perhaps more so, were denied. This for me means that it is a responsibility “de no desperdiciar lo que me han dado” (to not waste what has been given to me) and to make it count for more than just myself.

While the Latino community has many resources that support their continued development amidst a racist and capitalist society, they also lack the cultural capital that counts in the US, specifically academic instrumental knowledge that may increase their achievement in schools. With my knowledge in the field of education and as a former teacher, to not use this knowledge to support their needs as they arose was unthinkable. I translated between parents and teachers on numerous occasions, accompanied families to Back to School and Open House nights and attempted to facilitate their understanding of what was discussed. I advised students with respect to taking college placement classes, after-school programs, and how to communicate with teachers. I helped students with homework, read with students who were having difficulty, encouraged reading and advised on books and materials. I took students to local libraries and to the university. I stepped in on some occasions when I felt parents’ or students’ rights were not being met in support of the families.

An important aspect of this part of my work is that it was not just something I did to “help” families. Supporting families to negotiate the system to their benefit was a liberatory practice for me. It was therapeutic to know that although I was not able to do anything about my own experiences as a child and youth and although it was too late to act or speak up against those injustices that I had experienced, I could speak up now and support these families to address the same or very similar issues.

For example, my experience in my youth of feeling shame for my parents’ lack of English fluency and my perceived inability at the time to act or speak out against the perpetrators who discriminated against them or made us feel inferior, has left a strong need and desire to speak against nativist attitudes that fail to acknowledge the richness of the Spanish language and the resourcefulness of the Latino community. Bilingual programs, when endorsed in a school, offer students and community the opportunity to see the language as a resource and a window to new world views. In this sense, to speak in favor of bilingual education and to offer families an understanding of the various program placements, their pros and cons, is a way of honoring their decision-making rights and making the tools accessible for them to make their interests known. It is also a way that supports my own need to be agentic on an issue on which I did not feel I had a voice as a youngster. Thus, I attempted to orient each of the families to the issues related to bilingual education, the programs available at their schools, the programs that their children had been placed in. I learned none of the families had a clear understanding of the language and literacy programs available at their schools and some were mistaken about the programs that they believed their children were placed in. Although this information did not translate to positive changes for the focal children because it would not have been productive to change students’ language programs in fifth grade, it did support their decisions for placements of their younger children.

A related concern had to do with reading program placements. The district had adopted the use of “Breaking the Code,” an intervention program designed for
English-fluent students who were reading two years below grade level. I had noted that many of the better readers in the class were pulled out daily for this intervention program, whereas struggling readers were staying with the regular fifth-grade program, Open Court. I decided to make parents aware of this problem. What follows is the fuller story from which the excerpt at the outset of this paper was pulled:

I asked Sr. and Sra. Ruiz if they knew that Marco had been placed in the Breaking the Code program for reading instruction? They said that they did not know much about it. I explained to them briefly what the program was about. “Es un programa de intervención para los estudiantes que están leyendo 2 años bajo las expectativas del grado (It’s an intervention program for students reading two years below grade level expectations).” “¿Les explicaron algo de esto? ¿Les mandaron información? (Did they explain anything about that to you? Did they send you information?)”

Sra. Ruiz: A nosotros no nos dijeron nada. Yo sabía que estaban cambiando de clase porque el Marco nos cuenta (They didn’t tell us anything. I knew that they were switching classes because Marco tells us).

I explained that the program was highly structured and phonics-based and that it was developed for English-fluent speakers, not English Learners like Marco. I also explained that reading in the program consisted of reading lists of words or very short passages. They did not use real books in the program.

Lilia: En mi opinion, Marco no debe estar en este programa. Han puesto a los alumnos equivocados en este programa. Marco decifra las palabras bastante bien y ademas comprende mucho de lo que lee. Yo veo que él lee mucho mejor que los otros niños que no los pusieron en el programa (In my opinion, Marco should not be in this program. They have mismplaced students in the program. Marco decodes quite well and also comprehends much of what he reads).

I asked Marco to find something for him to read to us. He came back from his room with a short picture book in Spanish and a science textbook in English. The kids said the science book was one they used in sixth grade at the local middle school. He read first in Spanish and then in English. He read quite well, smoothly. He did not miss any words in Spanish and only two words in English.

Lilia: (to Marco) ¿Te gusta esa clase? (Do you like that class?)
Marco: No. I hate it. Hay otras clases que no hacen eso (There are other classes where they don’t do that). [He was visibly upset, his voice antagonistic. He was looking down like he might start crying. Everyone was quiet for a few seconds while he composed himself]. Nosotros somos los más inteligentes y nos han puesto en ese Breaking the Code y los otros están en Open Court. Yo veo que algunos niños no saben casi nada y están en Open Court (We are the most intelligent ones and they’ve put us in that Breaking the Code and the others are in Open Court. I see that some kids don’t know almost anything and they are in Open Court).

Sr. Ruiz: ¿Y yo no puedo ir y decir que no quiero que él este en ese programa? (And can’t I go and say that I don’t want him in that program?)
Lilia: Sí, claro que sí. Vaya con la coordinadora del programa bilingüe y le pregunta que porque lo han puesto en ese programa. Yo le acompañó si usted quiere (Yes, of course. Go with the bilingual coordinator and ask her why they have placed him in that program. If you would like, I will accompany you).
At the school I started asking questions of the teachers and was told that the kids whose parents signed waivers to be placed in the bilingual program were automatically placed in “Breaking the Code.” Later, I learned from the Reading Program Coordinator that they were “scrambling to make-up the classes at the last minute,” resulting in “many misplacements.” Soon thereafter, the classroom teacher assessed these placements and Marco, along with other misplaced students, was removed from the Breaking the Code program.

Here students who had been part of the bilingual program were assumed to be deficient in reading abilities. Because these students had previously received reading instruction in Spanish, they had become strong readers in their primary language, which transfers more easily to strong reading in English (Cummins, 2001). Thus, students like Marco had been misplaced because they were assumed to have poor reading abilities in English and had been placed in the program without an initial assessment of their reading skills.

Note the various knowledges juxtaposed in this scenario, not only my own but also the knowledges of each member of the Ruíz family, that are utilized to make sense of the situation and to move in the direction of action on behalf of Marcos. Here my researcher skills are in evidence as I recount what I have noticed in the literacy contexts of Marco’s class and the broader school. My knowledge of teaching and literacy development is in evidence as I proclaim Marco to be inappropriately placed and employ the strategy of listening and watching him read aloud both to feel secure in my initial assessment and to demonstrate the validity of my assessment to his parents. My homegrown epistemology to view Latino families as diverse and to, above all, recognize and value their experiential-based knowledges and rights to decision-making as valid plays a crucial role in managing this conversation with care and respect. It provided me with a lens toward the research literature as a starting place for interactions and further learning about specific families and the individuals within them rather than a basis for determining their values and beliefs. My interactions with the Ruíz family up to this point had led me to understand that Mrs Ruíz was often vocally resistant and aware of injustices, but that she had few opportunities to show this aspect of herself in dominant spaces because her job kept her almost invariably within the private and familial spaces of her home. I knew that Mr Ruíz was successful within this community context, making an above-minimum wage salary and having some flexibility with his employment. He was the one who attended school functions and parent–teacher meetings but having accompanied him to these before, I knew that he felt limited by not speaking English and would have to see the injustice and the pain that it caused his son to be spurred to action. Marco’s knowledge and values here are most important in this context. While I may know his literacy strengths from an academic perspective, what he can tell us about his own feelings and his own sense of literacy development is as important. Mr Ruíz has, essentially, the last word in this scene, as he should, being Marco’s parent and the primary parent involved with his schooling. Mr Ruíz is the one who makes the shift to action with his question, “¿Y yo no puedo ir y decir que no quiero que él este en ese programa? (And can’t I go and say that I don’t want him in that program?).” This is a moment of significance for the entire family as they register their own agency, their ability to act on what they have learned. Note that my overwhelming desire to scream at the system and its deficit framing of Latino families and bilingualism took a back seat to my overwhelming desire to navigate a conversation in which Sr. and Sra. Ruiz and Marco are able to maintain their dignity.
and their sense of control over their own lives. This is a potential moment of liberation that would have been lost if I had come into the conversation with “my” plan of action, telling the parents what they “should” do.

An important point of clarification is that all of the educators involved here, including the classroom teacher and administrators, were acting on their “best instincts” in light of the constraints of a bureaucratic system functioning within a racist school policy context. That knowledge about best practices for bilingual students does not trickle down to the level of practice in schools is a serious problem, one that can only be understood when researchers spend enough time in the context really understanding the constraints.

The integrated ethnographer
My goal in this paper has been to present three important ideas. First, I documented how the in-depth and prolonged nature of this ethnography, specifically two years of work that included over 200 home visits and community outings, produced important opportunities for personal and community growth – growth that intimated at some elements of liberation in that it allowed participants and myself to think critically about various important community concerns. These included the alienation that first-generation Latina college students experience from family, the importance of bilingual education, and the development of agency to advocate for our children in schooling contexts, even though this may involve seeking the support of someone with greater school-based cultural capital. It helped participants and myself gain a greater understanding of how our positioning as linguistic and racial minorities of working-class background created misunderstandings between parents and children. These learning opportunities created through deep relationships en familia likely would not have been possible in studies in which the researcher did not bring a Latina cultural intuition and studies of lesser duration and less open-ended approaches would in some cases have produced erroneous interpretations. Second, I contend that ethnography is a perfect context for creating opportunities in which research serves a greater purpose than that of commodifying communities by rendering them “known” (Lidchi, 1999). Rather, ethnography that involves advocacy and intervention developed strategically from the onset of a study and without apology is called for to support more equitable conditions among marginalized communities. Finally, I have shown that becoming an integrated ethnographer in the lives of participants is an approach that unifies our broken selves as racial and linguistic minorities with a borderlands perspective – integrating our academic knowledge, methodological skills, and cultural understandings of community – and pays tribute to epistemologies of bodymindspirit (Calderón et al., 2012). The charge for ethnographers here is to challenge the exclusivity and dominant status of traditional research practices and to create spaces for subaltern epistemes in the academy, such that Latino immigrant communities may be better served through our cultural intuition and our commitment to creating paths of liberation.

Notes
1. These concepts are discussed below. However, in the tradition of Keating (2005), these concepts are meant to defy specific definitions. Rather, it is expected that they likely look different for different people who experience these social spaces.
2. Although it may seem redundant to use Latina woman when the Spanish language is
genderized, my personal sense is that gender is sometimes lost when invoking culture.
Thus, throughout the paper, I use the term Latina woman to signify the equal importance
of race and gender to my identity.

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